Exploring Mental Health Challenges and Counseling Needs in an Open University Context: A Case Study of Open University Malaysia (OUM)

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Abstract
This study investigates mental health challenges and the role of counseling services at Open University Malaysia (OUM), focusing on the distinct needs of students and staff in an open university environment. Using a qualitative phenomenological method, 23 participants, including undergraduate students, master's students, administrative staff, and academic staff, were selected for semi-structured focus group interviews. Thematic Analysis was employed to analyze the data. The study reveals that students' counseling needs fall into three main areas: navigating academic demands, career development, and personal challenges. Meanwhile, the counseling needs of academic and administrative staff are centered on academic workload, communication, and administrative demands. Students identified two primary factors affecting their mental health: challenges related to Online Distance Learning (ODL) and personal issues. Academic and administrative staff pointed to four key factors: academic management, student management, academic workload, and the work environment. To improve counseling services, participants suggested three key areas: proactive mental health awareness campaigns, enhanced service accessibility, and dedicated counseling services for staff. These findings emphasize the necessity for specialized mental health support in open universities to effectively meet the specific challenges faced by students and staff, ensuring a more supportive learning and working environment at OUM.
Keywords: Counseling Needs, Mental Health Factors, Counseling and Mental Health Services, Open Distance Learning, Open University.

Introduction
The growing recognition of mental health as a critical foundation for academic and workplace success underscores the importance of studying this area. With research showing that stress levels among academic staff and students are rising significantly (Williams et al.,

2017; Kumaran et al., 2022), it is evident that addressing mental well-being is essential for sustaining productivity, engagement, and overall quality of life within academic environments. Understanding and mitigating these stressors, particularly in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions, is paramount to ensuring students and staff succeed without compromising their mental health.

This study is crucial because it addresses the unique challenges faced in ODL settings, where students and academic staff experience intensified stressors, such as time management struggles, isolation, and increased technological demands (Zainal, 2023; Kirin et al., 2022). For ODL students, feelings of disconnection and the dual burden of academic and household responsibilities can hinder their educational attainment and overall well-being (Fensie et al., 2023). Similarly, staff members often experience high expectations for availability and need help adjusting to online platforms, which can lead to burnout (Inegbedion, 2017). These insights underscore the critical need to develop targeted mental health interventions that cater specifically to the ODL context.

By exploring and addressing the mental health challenges specific to ODL environments, this study aims to significantly benefit a wide range of stakeholders. First, it provides institutions with actionable insights for developing support systems and mental health programs tailored to the needs of ODL students and staff. Furthermore, it guides policymakers to allocate resources more effectively, improving access to mental health support in higher education. Ultimately, this research has the potential to profoundly transform the educational experience within ODL institutions by fostering a healthier, more supportive environment, ensuring that students and staff alike can achieve their personal and professional goals without compromising their well-being.

Problem Statement
Currently, the discourse on mental health has gained significant attention, emphasizing its critical role in academic success, personal well-being, and the overall campus environment. While studies by Kelloway et al. (2023), Kamaruzaman et al. (2021), and McMaster et al. (2021) have explored various aspects of this issue, the specific mental health challenges faced by the diverse student and staff population at Open University Malaysia (OUM) remain relatively underexamined. As OUM works to enhance its support systems through their four strategic pillars which are growth, visibility, sustainability and harmony, there is an urgent need for a comprehensive investigation into the unique mental health concerns, individual needs, and the effectiveness of current counseling services. This research seeks to fill the gap in understanding the complexities of mental health within the OUM community, enabling the development of targeted interventions and policies that foster a more supportive and nurturing environment for the holistic well-being of all its members.

Research Objectives
a) To explore the counseling needs of students and staff at OUM.
b) To analyze the contributing factors to mental health issues among students and staff at OUM.
c) To propose policy enhancements for counseling and mental health services at OUM.

Research Questions
a) What are the specific counseling needs of students and staff at OUM?
b) What are the contributing factors to mental health issues among students and staff at OUM?
c) What policy enhancements can be proposed to improve counseling and mental health services at OUM?

Literature Review
Specific Counseling Needs of Students and Staff in ODL Institutions

Students in ODL institutions face academic, social, and emotional pressures that differ from those in traditional universities. Research shows that ODL students often juggle work, family, and academic responsibilities, leading to high stress levels and burnout (Deng et al., 2022). Their counseling needs encompass time management, coping with stress, and managing academic expectations. Since many ODL students are adult learners, issues such as career counselling, financial management, and family conflicts are also prominent (John, 2021). Additionally, ODL students may experience isolation, which heightens feelings of loneliness and anxiety (Ng and Lee, 2022). The lack of in-person interaction with peers and faculty members further exacerbates these challenges. Therefore, counseling services in ODL institutions must provide mental health support that addresses these specific issues, including fostering social connections and building resilience.

University staff, including academic and non-academic personnel, face different pressures. They must balance the expectations of facilitating a quality education while managing administrative tasks, and often face job insecurity (Awang et al., 2021). The mental health challenges faced by staff members often include stress, anxiety, burnout, and work-life imbalance (Chakraborty, 2024). Moreover, faculty members who are tasked with supporting students in an ODL environment often experience role overload, leading to feelings of helplessness and emotional exhaustion. This suggests that the counseling services for staff must focus on stress management, professional development, and mental health literacy.

Contributing Factors to Mental Health Issues Among Students and Staff in ODL Institutions

One of the most significant factors contributing to mental health issues among ODL students is the intense workload, particularly for working adults. The pressure of balancing academic responsibilities with employment and family duties often leads to stress, anxiety, and burnout. While the flexibility of ODL offers some advantages, it can also intensify these pressures by demanding a high level of self-discipline and effective time management (Bellare et al., 2021).

Similarly, university staff face mounting challenges in adapting to the growing demands of digital education. The need to learn new technologies and provide continuous support to students in a virtual environment adds to job-related stress. Academic staff also struggle to maintain a work-life balance due to the competing demands of research, teaching, and administrative duties (Bezuidenhout, 2015).

Both students and staff in ODL settings experience social isolation, particularly those studying or working remotely. For students, the lack of face-to-face interaction with peers

and instructors can lead to feelings of loneliness, increasing the risk of depression and anxiety (Liu and Lin, 2024). Similarly, staff working in decentralized or online environments may suffer from professional isolation, which negatively impacts their mental well-being (Tobia et al., 2024).

Financial strain is another major stressor for many ODL students, especially working adults. Juggling the costs of education with family and career responsibilities can create a significant financial burden, exacerbating anxiety and emotional distress (Archuleta et al., 2013). Additionally, personal challenges such as marital stress, parenting, and caregiving responsibilities further contribute to the mental health struggles faced by both students and staff.

Policy Enhancements to Improve Counseling and Mental Health Services in ODL Institutions
Given the geographically diverse and dispersed nature of ODL students, expanding access to online mental health services is crucial. This can be achieved through virtual counseling sessions, online mental health workshops, and the creation of digital platforms for peer support groups (Mohamad, 2023). Additionally, offering mental health apps, online self-help resources, and teletherapy services can play a pivotal role in improving the well-being of both students and staff.

The integration of peer support groups within university online platforms is a key strategy for reducing feelings of isolation. Research indicates that peer mentoring and student support groups can significantly alleviate loneliness, enhancing both academic and personal outcomes (Collings et al., 2014; Pointon-Haas et al., 2023). Policies that promote peer interaction and provide training for peer counselors can foster a more supportive learning environment.

Addressing the mental health needs of university staff requires the implementation of policies that promote a healthy work-life balance. Flexible working hours, access to professional counseling services, and mental health training for supervisors and managers are essential. Moreover, setting clear expectations and managing workloads can help reduce burnout among academic and administrative staff (Celik and Kose, 2022; Md Shah et al., 2024).

Finally, mental health literacy programs for both students and staff are vital for increasing awareness and reducing the stigma associated with mental health issues (Gumus and Avci, 2024). These programs should focus on educating the university community on recognizing mental health symptoms and seeking timely assistance. Regular workshops on stress management, coping mechanisms, and building mental health resilience are necessary to provide ongoing support for all members of the university.

Research Methodology
In this study, the qualitative phenomenological approach was employed to collect data by focusing on the lived experiences of individuals at OUM regarding mental health issues. Participants were asked to share their personal experiences and perspectives, allowing the researchers to gain a deeper understanding of how they perceive and make sense of their mental health challenges. This approach aligns with the study's objectives of exploring

subjective experiences, and providing rich, qualitative insights into the participants' lives. The data collected was then analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) Thematic Analysis (TA) method, which helped identify common themes across these experiences.

Site, Research Participants and Data Collections
The study focuses on undergraduate and postgraduate students, as well as academic and non-academic staff, at OUM campus in Kelana Jaya.

Four focus groups were formed, consisting of two groups for students (undergraduate and postgraduate) and two groups for staff (academic and non-academic). They participated in the semi-structured interview sessions. The formation of four focus groups has facilitated data comparison and triangulation across different participant groups, thereby enhancing the credibility and reliability of the findings (Krueger and Casey, 2015).

When conducting focus group interviews, it is recommended to have at least five or six participants (Krueger and Casey, 2015). Thus, in this study, each focus group discussion involved five to six participants, resulting in 23 participants participating in the focus group discussions. The participants were selected through purposive random sampling based on the following criteria: i) They must be OUM staff or students; ii) Students must be in active status and at least in their second semester; iii) Academic and non-academic staff must have completed a six-month probationary period. Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 below provide a summary of the participants' backgrounds.

Table 1
Undergraduate Students

Participants' identifications	Alias	Gender	Age
UG Participant 1	UGP1	Female	32
UG Participant 2	UGP2	Male	28
UG Participant 3	UGP3	Female	33
UG Participant 4	UGP4	Male	35
UG Participant 5	UGP5	Female	34
UG Participant 6	UGP6	Female	35

Table 2
Master's Students

Participants' identifications	Alias	Gender	Age
MS Participant 1	MSP1	Male	38
MS Participant 2	MSP2	Female	45
MS Participant 3	MSP3	Male	53
MS Participant 4	MSP4	Female	47
MS Participant 5	MSP5	Female	54

Table 3
Academic Staff

Participants' identifications	Alias	Gender	Age
AS Participant 1	ASP1	Male	57
AS Participant 2	ASP2	Female	33
AS Participant 3	ASP3	Male	49
AS Participant 4	ASP4	Female	39
AS Participant 5	ASP5	Male	37
AS Participant 6	ASP6	Male	49

Table 4
Administrative Staff

Participants' identifications	Alias	Gender	Age
ADM Participant 1	ADMP1	Female	50
ADM Participant 2	ADMP2	Female	44
ADM Participant 3	ADMP3	Female	31
ADM Participant 4	ADMP4	Male	31
ADM Participant 5	ADMP5	Male	38
ADM Participant 6	ADMP6	Male	54

During the focus group interviews, participants were asked to respond to 10 structured questions, along with additional spontaneous follow-up questions posed by the researchers. Their feedback was recorded and carefully transcribed verbatim for further analysis.

Ethical Consideration

Prior to participating in the interview sessions, all participants were required to give their consent. Each participant was given a unique code name during the preparation phase of the research report. Transcriptions and records are carefully encrypted and stored in a secure file.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the focus group interviews were analyzed using the TA method, which consists of six iterative and reflective processes (Nowell et al., 2017). These processes include: first, familiarization; second, generating initial codes; third, identifying themes; fourth, reviewing the themes; fifth, defining the themes; and finally, the sixth phase, which involves composing reports.

Trustworthiness of Data

In qualitative research, the term trustworthiness refers to the validity and reliability of the data presented. This can only be accomplished if the data sources are gathered through various approaches or mechanisms (Shenton, 2004). To fulfill the criteria for trustworthiness—namely, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985)—the researchers analyzed the data through careful

arrangements, discussions, and documentation. Table 5 below outlines how the trustworthiness criteria were addressed during each phase of TA in this study.

Table 5
Building Trustworthiness Throughout Every Phase of the TA Method

Phases of TA	Means of Establishing Trustworthiness
Phase 1: Familiarization	Prolong engagement with data
	Store raw data in well-organized archives
Phase 2: Generating initial codes	Researcher triangulation
	Audit trail of code generation
	Documentation of all team meetings
Phase 3: Identifying themes	Researcher triangulation
	Diagramming to make sense of theme connections
	Documentation
Phase 4: Reviewing the themes	Researcher triangulation
	Themes vetted by all team members
Phase 5: Defining the themes	Researcher triangulation
	Team consensus on themes
	Documentation
Phase 6: Composing reports	Final checking
	Report on reasons for analytical choices throughout the entire study

Research Findings

The recorded and transcribed verbatim from the focus group interviews were analyzed using the TA method. The process began with the researchers immersing themselves in the data by repeatedly listening to the recorded audio, reading the verbatim transcriptions, and reviewing the written responses to grasp the whole meaning of the conversations.

In the second phase of the TA method, the research team members received copies of the transcriptions to identify potential codes. The exercise focused on recognizing words or short phrases that capture the meaning of specific quotes. After some thorough discussions, several codes were identified and arranged in a consistent pattern to form a variety of themes (phase three).

For the first research question (*what are the specific counseling needs of students and staff at OUM?*), the codes and themes were organized as shown in Tables 6, 7, 8, and 9 below.

Table 6

Codes and Themes of Master's Students for the First Research Question

Transcribed verbatim	Codes	Themes
Because when I can't manage or fail to control that time, I will neglect my child... or I will neglect my classes at OUM, or sometimes at work I become unproductive (MSP1) *Maybe time management and how to juggle between my work and also my study at OUM (MSP2)*	Time management	Academic management reconstructed to <u>Navigating academic demand</u>
Because of work... the uncertain hours. Sometimes I work at 2-3 a.m.… during class time, I'm also working…(MSP1)	Balance work and studies' pressure	
My stress level is higher when I am rushing for my assignment, especially during preparation of doing the assignment (MSP2) *Yeah, probably sometimes when we talk about assignments right… (MSP3)*	Submitting assignments	
Maybe when I go for my Internship and practicum, I might face with this situation… (MSP4)	Internships	
I may need counseling to support me in terms of the career side… the career counseling and not so much on mental health (MSP5)	Career path	<u>Career development</u>
I think I may need to have counseling to support in the initial phase of the study…Because during that time maybe I am still in a dilemma… whether I want to continue studying or not (MSP2)	Uncertainty about further studies	

Table 7

Codes and Themes of Undergraduate Students for the First Research Question

Transcribed verbatim	Codes	Themes
It's difficult to divide my time because I'm a housewife. So, I need to allocate time for my family, for my husband, and for my mother. I take care of my mother... (UGP1) *I think the most uh serious challenge to me is mainly how to manage time… (UGP2)* *The first one is time management since I'm studying part-time and working full time… (UGP3)*	Time management	Academic management reconstructed to <u>Navigating academic demand</u>
My working hours are more than 10 hours… I need to travel from home to the office, so it almost takes uh 11 to 12 hours per day. It's really hard to cope up with the	Balance work and studies	

studies and manage the time for studies and everything. Um uh and assignment some more… I mean it's taken more time for me to finish (UGP3) *Honestly, I haven't started working on the assignment yet because, in the past month, I've been quite busy with work and the responsibilities entrusted to me at the company (UGP4)*		
Okay… university environment… because now it's fully online study… like UGP5, I used to attend classes before the lockdown because, before the lockdown, everyone had face-to-face classes (UGP4)	Study mode	
I'm not really positive... I'm not, uh, how should I put it, motivated to take, uh, I don't believe in myself to take three more courses (UGP5) *I need this motivational guidance because sometimes, as UGP4 said earlier, I feel the same way… I haven't done any assignments, so when we are in the middle of the semester, I hope there's someone who can motivate us (UGP5)* *It's really hard to keep motivating yourself uh to continue because of the added stress and yeah this is the time that I feel hard and I need some support (UGP6)*	Low self-motivation	
Semester May and September last year were the most difficult in my life since um uh I've lost my father uh due to heart failure (UGP2)	Personal difficulties	<u>Personal challenges</u>
Sometimes we have work, family problems, or sometimes accidents happen… so sometimes from that point, actually… I also have a case where my grandmother was admitted to the hospital for two weeks… so I had to go back and forth from work and then to the hospital… so from that, studying became out of the question (UGP4)	Family issues	
Also, financial…since uh as you know I'm a working adult… working person uh (UGP2) *Finance issue…like myself… I don't have PTPTN… so I pay the tuition fee… so I need to cover everything (UGP3)*	Financial constraint	

Table 8

Codes and Themes of Academic Staff for the First Research Question

Transcribed verbatim	Codes	Themes
One of the challenges for academic members is the Final Year Project paper (ASP3)	Students' assignments	Academic management reconstructed to <u>Academic workload</u>
Personally, I don't feel the need to see a counselor, but it's more about the burden of the routine that we have to face every semester (ASP1) I don't really need to see a counselor, but if we're talking about the workload, it's more about the never-ending deadlines—when one ends, another one begins (ASP2)	Nonstop deadlines	
My problem was a long time ago… When I was transferred to another department, I was left alone without any assistance… There was no instruction… no nothing (ASP4) The pressure and challenge for me is the miscommunication between departments (ASP3)	Communication breaks down	<u>Communication</u>
In my experience of 20 years working, I find that we lack clarity… not understand the job scope… not know the do's and don'ts (ASP6)	Lack of clarity	
There are department heads who do not understand our SOP (ASP3)	Unfamiliar with the standard procedures	

Table 9

Codes and Themes of Administrative Staff for the First Research Question

Transcribed verbatim	Codes	Themes
We have heard from some staff who complained to HR that their boss is bullying their subordinates, but no appropriate action was taken; they only changed the department. HR needs to find the root of the problem (ADMP1)	Conflict with the 'bosses'	Work demands reconstructed to <u>Admin work demands</u>
One stress comes from the workload. We cannot escape from doing work (ADMP6) I feel that sometimes the workload is too much. There was a time when I felt fed up, stressed, and overwhelmed with too much work (ADMP6)	Heavy workload	
If it's me… because I deal with students. Sometimes I get stressed managing the students (ADMP5) Stressed with students…It's normal that our students are working adults… we need to handle students in different ways because everyone has different attitudes (ADMP6)	Stress with students' demands	

In the third step of the process, the researchers identified several key themes to better understand the counseling needs of both students and staff at OUM. To ensure the themes were both meaningful and accurately represented the data, the researchers conducted a thorough review. Some themes were refined to enhance their clarity and connection to the participants' quotes. For example, academic management (for master's and undergraduate

students) was revised to navigating academic demands, academic management (for academic staff) became academic workload, and work demands (for administrative staff) were redefined as admin work demands.

After completing the review, the researchers concluded that the counseling needs of master's and undergraduate students fell into three main categories: navigating academic demands, career development, and personal challenges. Meanwhile, the counseling needs of the academic and administrative staff were grouped into three key areas: academic workload, communication, and admin work demands.

For the second research question (*what are the contributing factors to mental health issues among students and staff at OUM)?*), the codes and themes were organized as depicted in Tables 10, 11, 12 and 13 below.

Table 10
Codes and Themes of Master's Students for the Second Research Question

Transcribed verbatim	Codes	Themes
My stress level is higher when I am rushing for my assignment, especially during preparation for doing the assignment…Because this semester I took 3 subjects. So now I feel the stress (MSP2)	Assignment submission - deadline	ODL challenges
Definitely stressful for me especially on the assignment dateline. Because we also have our work…we have to juggle our work, family affairs, and travelling. Because I am from outstation, my parents are from Malacca, so I have to travel (MSP3)		
I think I encountered a great challenge last semester, because I took 3 subjects where 2 of which were statistics and techniques in counseling. So, I was like… almost die. I can't imagine how I did it. But I have to submit late, because I really don't have time. So that was the peak of my mental health challenge, rushing to submit my assignment on the dateline (MSP5)		
Another one is the exam time. I don't mind sitting there for many hours as I need to, but I don't find enough time to finish all 5 questions. So, I hope that for those 5 questions, I should have been given 10 hours. If less than 5 hours, I prefer to take only 3 questions. Because I have to type really fast. And then it was tiring (MSP5)	Final exam	
During my learning sessions…the time I feel critical is during exams. Exams are a crucial time…for example, today there is one paper, tomorrow there is another paper, and then a day later there is yet another paper. It's quite difficult for me to manage the time (MSP1)		

Table 11

Codes and Themes of Undergraduate Students for the Second Research Question

Transcribed verbatim	Codes	Themes
I had the opportunity to join face-to-face classes… so I think for me, the face-to-face classes are quiet, uh, more interesting to me… um, because we get to meet people… we build a good kind of relationship… but when it comes to online classes… yes, we get to know each other, but I'm not an extroverted person, so it's hard for me to blend in (UGP5) *Errr… the university environment because now it's fully online study (UGP4)* *When it's online, it's not stress but it's under stress because we don't have the urge to attend classes much… we don't feel like, 'Oh, today I have to go to this (inaudible)'; we don't have that feeling… even if I miss a class, I know I have the link (recording), something like that (UGP1)*	Online environment	ODL challenges
Uh, it's the same regarding the assignment (UGP1) *In between studying and also uh uh with to keep up with the assignment… I need to divide my time in terms of my family and also my work… (UGP2)* *Some more with the assignments mean it's taken more time for me to finish. Towards the end of the day, it makes me very depressed or either very tired (UGP3)*	Assignment submission	
From 2016 until now, it hasn't ended because of many extensions… many extensions because of work (UGP4)	Balance between studies and work	
This semester would be the time that I really need counselling and a lot of support because my husband just underwent a surgery and so I have to like take extra care of him you know and everything and right now he's in the recovery process and as we all know the due date for the assignment is like a few weeks away you know and it's really hard to keep motivating yourself uh to continue because of the added stress and yeah this is the time that I feel really hard and I need some support (UGP6) *I personally for few years back went through a lot of uh anxiety, stress and depression and literally there's no one will talk to me or guide me or motivate me. It's just by myself. I really feel very down until I have a suicidal thought (UGP3)*	Personal constraints	Personal issues
So this one is personally, it's uh the biggest for me and also financially since I'm not… what is it… eligible to apply for PTPTN, so I have to use my own… deduct part of my salary to pay for the tuition fees (UGP3)	Finance	

Table 12

Codes and Themes of Academic Staff for the Second Research Question

Transcribed verbatim	Codes	Themes
The academic challenge in dealing with student issues… I have experienced a student who wanted to harm herself (ASP3) *Student management is indeed challenging (ASP6)*	Managing ODL students	<u>Students' management</u>
The work related to preparing assignment questions and marking final exams… we can't just weigh it lightly… it requires careful consideration, especially for master's students… our time is limited (ASP1) *I agree with ASP1. Preparing assignment questions and marking final exams is indeed challenging (ASP2)* *Marking and preparing assignment questions is indeed challenging, especially for someone like me who is quite meticulous (ASP5)*	Academic workload	<u>Academic management</u>
Managing tutors presents a challenge for me… Sometimes we call them, and they don't respond… unexpectedly, they don't follow the methods we've established (ASP3)	Managing tutors	
We were instructed to change department without our consent (ASP4) *No flexibility… nonstop working (ASP2)*	Work execution	Work management reconstructed to <u>Academic work challenges</u>
KPI is too rigid… no flexibility (ASP3)	KPI challenges	

Table 13

Codes and Themes of Administrative Staff for the Second Research Question

Transcribed verbatim	Codes	Themes
One of the things you need to know is that every company has a toxic environment. HR should know how to overcome the toxic environment. The shared values are also not properly instilled in the staff (ADMP1)	Unpleasant work environment	<u>Work environment</u>
We don't have any awareness campaign except the mental aiders (ADMP1)	No awareness of mental health	
HR does not help staff regarding mental health issues at all. For example, during KPIs, staff have performed well but are still cut down. If HR can't establish professional counselors, at least they should have a unit for this (ADMP2)	Unclear expectations between staff and HR	

Similar to the process described earlier, the constructed themes were reviewed again to ensure they were both meaningful and accurately reflected the data. As a result of the revision, the researchers agreed to retain all themes for the second research question, except for one. The theme initially labelled work management (for academic staff) was revised to academic work challenges. Following this review, the researchers determined that the key contributing factors to mental health issues among students and staff at OUM are: ODL challenges and personal issues (for students), and academic management, student management, academic work challenges, and work environment (for staff).

For the third research question (*What policy enhancements can be proposed to improve counseling and mental health services at OUM?*), the codes and themes were labelled as shown in Tables 14, 15, 16 and 17 below.

Table 14
Codes and Themes of Master's Students for the Third Research Question

Transcribed verbatim	Codes	Themes
For me this should be address during the introduction class itself, if there is such a thing available. OUM have many trainings, but nothing about counseling (MSP4) *In my opinion, OUM can promote and prioritize mental health as part of the university's overall policy by promoting it more extensively, similar to how OUM has implemented promotions for the OUM library, for example (MSP1)*	Campaign on counselling services	Proactive campaign reconstructed to <u>health awareness campaign</u>
OUM have the foundation and resources, and what we have for so many years, we can provide such awareness or promotions, and put it as a policy as well (MSP3) *We need to have the policy, and after that we can just do more (MSP4)*	Policy awareness	
To make it available and easily visible, maybe in MyOUM (portal) we can have 'help button' or counseling support button (MSP3)	Accessibility of counseling services	<u>Accessibility of counseling services</u>

Table 15

Codes and Themes of Undergraduate Students for the Third Research Question

Transcribed verbatim	Codes	Themes
The open day for mental health means that when students have any problems or issues, they can directly walk in on that day to meet with the person in charge (UGP4) *Uh, okay, if I… make sure the policy is known… right now, there is a policy; I'm sure there is a policy, but it is not known or publicized (UGP5)*	Policy awareness	Proactive campaign reconstructed to <u>health awareness campaign</u>
Perhaps OUM could provide a platform where we can take tests... like... the tests that are available now, so actually, these tests can also help with mental health (UGP5) *Uh for me I will say we can do uh some survey or mental health test… We just like do uh some survey to test a few students to check their mental level, how they currently being or is there really affected their studies and everything (UGP3)*	Proactive Mental Health Screening	
Providing an online platform is also possible as long as we know who to refer to, but online options are more budget-friendly and easier (UGP1) *Alright uh I think um the university can actively promote and prioritize mental health as part of its institution policies and practices by uh doing a short term seminar that is uh fun, engaging you know… uh we can talk about like how to de-stress or how to manage your time uh anything related to mental health and do it more uh in a fun way so that people would love to come to the seminar every time uh they organize it (UGP6)*	Accessibility of Information	<u>Accessibility of counseling services</u>
Uh, marketing, uh, then social media is now, uh, modern, right? (UGP1)	Use of social media	

Table 16

Codes and Themes of Academic Staff for the Third Research Question

Transcribed verbatim	Codes	Themes
Counseling services need to be introduced to all staff (ASP3) *Establish counseling services for staff as well (ASP3)* *It's very urgent… it needs to be established immediately (ASP5)* *It is the role of HR to create this service for staff who need it (ASP6)*	Establishment of counselling services for staff	Counseling services for staff
We need comprehensive counseling services that consider the needs of lecturers (ASP2) *We need inclusive services (ASP5)*	Comprehensive and inclusive counselling services	
Increase accessibility so that everyone knows about the existence of counseling services for staff (ASP2)	Accessibility of counselling services	

Table 17

Codes and Themes of Administrative Staff for the Third Research Question

Transcribed verbatim	Codes	Themes
By conducting ongoing campaigns about mental health. Or create a channel for you to share about mental health. It doesn't need to be large-scale, but start small (ADMP1) *Sometimes we are just stressed, not necessarily having mental problems. People don't know that overstress can lead to overthinking and affect mental health. There needs to be a campaign to correct perceptions related to mental health (ADMP3)*	Continuous campaign regarding mental health	Proactive campaign reconstructed to <u>health awareness campaign</u>
For the bigger picture, HR can hold talks related to mental health every month. Invite speakers from anywhere to make the talk light and easy for staff to understand. HR should be the main driver for us. So, there needs to be an initial initiative from HR (ADMP2)	HR roles to promote mental health	
Management needs to go down to the field and hold talks or any activities face-to-face with the staff (ADMP6)	Conduct talk	
Like my previous office. Every week, they would pick somebody to share about certain issues. Maybe we could start within the department. Our department is like a family. Sometimes, when we know a friend is unwell, we hesitate to ask (ADMP2)	Sharing sessions among staff in the department	
We must always conduct regular awareness campaigns related to mental health issues. Usually, staff won't share mental health issues because they feel threatened (ADMP6)	Conduct campaigns regularly by Management	
The management can also try conducting a mental health survey to assess the mental health needs of the staff (ADMP4)	Conduct survey	

For the third research question, the researchers decided to transform the original "proactive campaign" into a "mental health awareness campaign" while keeping the other two themes, as they accurately reflect the data. These themes were developed in response to the inquiry about policy improvements to enhance counseling and mental health services at OUM. The identified themes (for students and staff) are: mental health awareness campaign, service accessibility, and counseling services for staff.

Step 5 in the TA method involves defining the themes. This step requires a detailed review of the themes identified in earlier stages to ensure they are coherent, meaningful, and sufficiently distinct. It's essential to clearly define what each theme represents and how it relates to the research question.

The first research question of this study was formulated to identify the specific counseling needs of both students and staff at OUM. Through the analysis conducted in steps 1, 2, 3, and 4 of the TA method, the counseling needs of OUM students (both undergraduate and master's level) were categorized into three key themes: navigating academic demands, career development, and personal challenges. The meaning of the constructed themes is described in Table 18.

Table 18

Definition of Themes for the First Research Question (Undergraduate and Master's Students)

The themes	Definitions
Navigating academic demands	Navigating academic demands highlights ODL students' struggles with time management, self-discipline, and meeting academic expectations, emphasizing how academic stress, workload, and technological barriers uniquely affect them (Hart, 2012).
Career development	Career development encompasses students' concerns about aligning their studies with future career goals. It is important to explore how adult learners return to school, and what motivates them to take on the additional role of being students while balancing numerous other roles and responsibilities (Chu et al., 2007).
Personal challenges	This theme highlights the unique emotional and psychological challenges faced by students juggling multiple roles in their daily lives, emphasizing the need for tailored support from counsellors (Kember, 1995).

The counseling needs of academic and administrative staff are categorized into three key themes: academic workload, communication, and administrative work demands. The definitions of the themes are shown in Table 19.

Table 19

Definition of Themes for the First Research Question (Academic and Administrative Staff)

The themes	Definitions
Academic workload	Academic workload refers to the heavy demands on academic staff, including teaching, grading, mentoring, and research (Razalli et al., 2021). In an ODL context, this workload is intensified by the need to adapt to online teaching, provide continuous student support, and manage large remote cohorts.
Communication	Effective communication is essential in ODL institutions, where much of the interaction between staff, students, and colleagues occurs online (Ahmad Khateeb et al., 2020). Poor communication can lead to misunderstandings, inefficiency, and stress, especially when dealing with remote students or coordinating with other departments.
Administrative work demands	Administrative work demands include non-teaching tasks like paperwork, student registrations, and compliance with policies. In ODL institutions, these tasks are more time-consuming due to additional technological platforms, increasing pressure on staff to manage both academic and administrative duties efficiently (Tait, 2004).

The second research question aimed to explore the factors contributing to mental health issues among students and staff at OUM. Analysis revealed that master's and

undergraduate students had identified two key themes: ODL challenges and personal issues. Meanwhile, academic and administrative staff highlighted four main themes: academic management, student management, academic work challenges, and the work environment. Tables 20 and 21 explain the details.

Table 20
Definition of Themes for the Second Research Question (Undergraduate and Master's Students)

The themes	Definitions
ODL challenges	ODL challenges refer to difficulties that contribute to students' mental health issues, including lack of face-to-face interaction, isolation, time management struggles, and the need for self-discipline in independent study (Aboagye et al., 2021).
Personal issues	Personal issues include financial stress, family responsibilities, and health issues. For ODL students juggling multiple roles like work or caregiving, these factors can intensify academic stress (Bok, 2021).

Table 21
Definition of Themes for the Second Research Question (Academic and Administrative Staff)

The themes	Definitions
Academic management	Academic management involves overseeing curriculum, course delivery, and performance, often placing staff under pressure from tight deadlines and high expectations. Poor management can lead to excessive workloads and stress, increasing the risk of burnout (Van Droogenbroeck et al., 2014).
Student management	Student management involves addressing student needs, providing timely feedback, and resolving conflicts, which is challenging in an online setting with primarily digital communication. The high volume of inquiries can lead to stress, frustration, and emotional exhaustion (Tait, 2004).
Academic work challenges	Academic work challenges—such as adapting teaching methods for online platforms, ensuring academic integrity, and managing large virtual classrooms—further increase the workload. These challenges can overwhelm staff, contributing to anxiety, stress, and mental health issues (Kgabo, 2021).
Work environment	Work environment plays a crucial role, as a poorly structured or unsupportive environment, characterized by inadequate communication and limited resources, can intensify stress and lead to burnout (Kinman and Wray, 2018).

The third research question was constructed to examine policy enhancements that can be proposed to improve counselling and mental health services at OUM. For this reason, students and staff have given their views, which were formulated as the following themes: mental health awareness campaigns, service accessibility, and counseling services for staff. Table 22 explains the meaning of the constructed themes.

Table 22

Definition of Themes for the Third Research Question (Undergraduate Students, Master's Students, Academic Staff and Administrative Staff)

The themes	Definitions
Mental health awareness campaign	Mental health awareness campaign refers to organized, ongoing efforts to raise awareness, promote mental health resources, and encourage the early utilization of counseling services among students and staff (Bugshan et al., 2022).
Service accessibility	Accessibility of counseling services pertains to how easily students and staff can access mental health support, including physical locations and virtual platforms, along with timely appointments, multilingual support, and confidentiality. Enhanced accessibility allows individuals facing mental health challenges to seek help without barriers, improving overall well-being (Rickwood and Thomas, 2012).
Counseling services for staff	While student counseling services are important, mental health support for academic and administrative staff is equally essential due to unique stressors like workload pressures and isolation in remote settings. Targeted counseling for staff enhances their mental health, job satisfaction, and productivity, benefiting the overall institutional culture (Kinman and Wray, 2018).

The first five steps of the TA method led to the conclusion that students' counseling needs can be categorized into three domains: navigating academic demands, career development, and personal challenges. In contrast, the counseling needs of the academic and administrative staff were identified within three areas: academic workload, communication, and administrative work demands.

Students reported two main factors contributing to their mental health issues: challenges associated with ODL and personal issues. Meanwhile, academic and administrative staff highlighted four key factors: academic management, student management, academic work challenges, and the work environment. To enhance counseling and mental health services at OUM, both students and staff provided suggestions, which can be summarized as follows: mental health awareness campaign, improved service accessibility, and dedicated counseling services for staff.

Discussion

The findings from the research on the counseling needs and mental health issues among students and staff at OUM reflect key challenges that align with existing literature. This discussion synthesizes the research findings with insights from the literature review, examining the counseling needs, contributing factors to mental health issues, and policy recommendations for enhancing mental health services at OUM

Counseling Needs
Students

The research findings highlight that students at OUM need counseling support to navigate academic demands, career development, and personal challenges. This aligns with Deng et al. (2022) who found that ODL students often struggle to balance their academic workloads with work and family responsibilities. Students face unique pressures from their dual roles as learners and working adults, necessitating counselling services that offer strategies for managing time, coping with stress, and improving academic performance. Moreover, the findings on career development as a counselling need are consistent with John (2021), who identified that many adult learners require guidance on career transitions, financial management, and personal growth.

Personal challenges such as managing family responsibilities, relationships, and financial stress are also significant, reinforcing the need for holistic counselling services that go beyond academic guidance. ODL students may experience feelings of isolation and lack of peer support (Ng and Lee, 2022), which necessitates counseling interventions that foster social engagement and peer support networks to alleviate these emotional burdens.

Staff

For OUM staff, the findings point to counseling needs related to academic workload, communication, and administrative demands. As Awang et al. (2021) and Razalli et al. (2021) discussed, university staff, especially in ODL institutions, face the challenges of balancing teaching responsibilities with administrative tasks, often leading to job-related stress and burnout. The literature also supports that role overload among academic staff is a common issue (Chakraborty, 2024). Communication issues, both within academic departments and between staff and students, further complicate their ability to manage tasks effectively, adding to their stress.

Counseling services for staff should thus address not only stress management but also professional development in communication and task delegation. Programs focused on improving time management and work-life balance can help staff navigate these challenges.

Contributing Factors to Mental Health Issues
Students

The research findings identify the dual challenges of ODL and personal issues as key contributors to mental health issues among students. This is consistent with findings by Liu and Lin (2024), who argued that the lack of in-person interaction in ODL settings increases feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression. The self-directed nature of ODL requires students to develop strong self-management skills, and the pressures to meet academic deadlines while balancing personal and professional responsibilities contribute to heightened stress levels.

The personal issues faced by OUM students, such as financial stress and family responsibilities, exacerbate these mental health issues. Archuleta et al. (2013) identified financial difficulties as a significant source of anxiety for students, particularly working adults who must balance education expenses with family obligations. Counseling services that address these personal and financial stressors are critical in improving the mental health and well-being of OUM students.

Staff

For OUM staff, mental health issues stem from a combination of academic management, student management, and work environment factors. As noted in the literature, the demands of managing both academic and administrative duties place a heavy burden on staff, leading to emotional exhaustion (Tait, 2004). The need to balance teaching, research, and student management can result in role overload and stress. The research findings also point to communication issues within the academic system as a stressor for staff. This aligns with previous studies that identified poor communication and unclear expectations between university administration and academic staff as contributors to workplace dissatisfaction and mental health challenges (Ahmad Khateeb et al., 2020). Effective communication strategies and mental health literacy programs could significantly alleviate these stressors.

Policy Enhancements to Improve Counseling and Mental Health Services

The findings suggest several policy enhancements that could improve counseling and mental health services at OUM. These recommendations are supported by the literature and include proactive mental health campaigns, improved service accessibility, and specific counselling services for staff.

Mental Health Awareness Campaign

The introduction of proactive mental health awareness campaigns, as suggested by the research, is consistent with the literature's emphasis on mental health literacy and awareness. Bugshan et al. (2022) advocated for mental health programs that educate students and staff on identifying symptoms of mental health issues and seeking help. Regular workshops on stress management, time management, and coping strategies can help reduce the stigma around mental health and encourage early intervention.

Service Accessibility

The research findings indicate a need to improve access to counseling services, particularly for students and staff who may not be physically present on campus. Rickwood and Thomas (2012) highlighted the importance of providing accessible counseling services will ensure that individuals facing mental health challenges can seek support without unnecessary barriers, contributing to improve overall well-being of geographically dispersed OUM population. By expanding digital mental health services, for instance, OUM can provide timely and flexible support to both students and staff, addressing their mental health needs more effectively.

Counseling Services for Staff

Finally, the research points to the importance of expanding counseling services for staff, which are often overlooked in favor of student-focused initiatives. As highlighted by Kinman and Wray (2018) staff mental health is a critical area that requires attention, particularly given the high levels of stress and burnout associated with academic and administrative workloads. Offering targeted counseling services, including professional development programs and workshops on work-life balance, could significantly improve staff well-being.

Conclusion

The findings from this study reveal that the counseling needs and mental health challenges faced by students and staff at OUM are deeply intertwined with the pressures of balancing academic, personal, and professional responsibilities, a dynamic inherent to the nature of being an adult learner. The primary counseling needs for students revolve around managing academic demands, career development, and personal challenges. These needs reflect adult learners' unique stressors in ODL environments, such as juggling work, family, and study commitments. For OUM staff, the counseling needs focus on coping with academic workloads, communication challenges, and the demands of administrative tasks. Staff members often experience role overload and stress due to the complexities of their roles in ODL settings.

The contributing factors to mental health issues for both students and staff are also well-established. For students, the dual pressures of ODL challenges—such as the need for self-discipline, time management, and coping with isolation—are significant contributors to mental health issues. Personal issues, including financial stress and family responsibilities, further exacerbate these predicaments. Similarly, staff members face mental health challenges related to academic management, student management, and the broader work environment, with stressors including role overload, management of various types of students, and complexity of communication within the institution.

To address these mental health challenges, the study proposes several policy enhancements. Proactive mental health campaigns are necessary to increase awareness and reduce stigma, with regular workshops and mental health literacy programs offering valuable support to students and staff. Improving accessibility to mental health services through digital platforms, including teletherapy and online peer support networks, is critical for OUM's geographically dispersed population. Finally, specific counseling services for staff are crucial to addressing their unique stressors, with professional development and work-life balance workshops offering a path to improved well-being.

In conclusion, the study underscores the importance of a comprehensive approach to mental health and counseling services at OUM. By addressing the specific needs of both students and staff and implementing targeted policy enhancements, OUM can create a supportive environment that fosters mental well-being across its community. The integration of proactive mental health initiatives, enhanced accessibility to services, and focused support for staff is vital for reducing the mental health burdens in ODL contexts, ultimately contributing to the overall success and satisfaction of the university's stakeholders.

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