

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Academic, Personal and Mental Health Needs of Undergraduate Students at University of Zambia, Ridgeway Campus: A Phenomenological Study

Namayipo Wamukankamba Stella Nankamba¹, Sebean Mayimbo², Brenda Sianchapa³, Martha Mbewe⁴, Kestone Lyambai⁵, Phadaless Sinkamba⁶, Catherine Ngoma⁷, Dorothy Chanda⁸

^{1,2,3,7} University of Zambia, School of Nursing Sciences, Ridgeway Campus, Department of Midwifery, Women's and Child Health, P.O Box 51010, Lusaka, Zambia.

⁴ University of Zambia, School of Nursing Sciences, Ridgeway Campus, Department of Basic and Clinical Nursing, P.O Box 51010, Lusaka, Zambia.

^{5,6} University of Zambia, School of Nursing Sciences, Ridgeway Campus Department of Psychiatry and Mental Health Nursing, P.O Box 51010, Lusaka, Zambia.

⁸ University of Zambia, School of Nursing Sciences, Ridgeway Campus, Department of Public Health Nursing, P.O Box 51010, Lusaka, Zambia.

ABSTRACT

Background & Aim: University students experience a wide range of challenges in their academic and personal lives which can later escalate to mental stress and anxiety disorders, ultimately preventing them from reaching their milestones. This study therefore aimed to explore the academic, personal and mental health needs of students at ridgeway campus of the University of Zambia.

Methods: The researchers utilized Qualitative research method that used an interpretive phenomenological study design. It involved face to face interviews with Nine (9) students admitted in various schools at Ridgeway Campus of the University of Zambia. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

Results: The themes derived from the data included: Campus Adjustment Challenges, Study logistical constraints, need for adequate infrastructure and proposed solutions to management. Students mentioned the need for money, electronic devices such as laptops and smartphones for academic purposes; accommodation, counselling services, enhanced support from lecturers and increased psychological stress which leads to depression as the main mental condition. Participants suggested encouraging entrepreneurship ventures for students, as well as having a support unit in the school with improved student communication as ways for the University to assist them.

Conclusion: Addressing student needs at the University of Zambia will enhance student performance and mental health wellbeing.

Corresponding Author:

Namayipo Wamukankamba Stella Nankamba

(<https://orcid.org/H1k1791913160000-0002-6846-267X> [H1k179191316](https://orcid.org/H1k179191316))

Email: namayipo.nankamba@unza.zm

Keywords: Academic needs, Mental Health Needs, Personal needs, Student wellbeing Zambia, Higher Education, University Students

This article is available online at: <http://www.mjz.co.zm>, <http://ajol.info/index.php/mjz>, doi: <https://doi.org/10.55320/mjz.53.2.844>
The Medical Journal of Zambia, ISSN 0047-651X, is published by the Zambia Medical Association

© This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.



INTRODUCTION

Globally, children's milestones and goals focus on achieving tertiary education in-order for them to reach their full potentials in life. Tertiary education becomes the aim of every student from the time they are enrolled in primary school such that gaining admittance to a university or college becomes the pinnacle for this achievement. University education ensures that the individual gains knowledge, attitudes and skills that will make them better versions of themselves; not only academically but socially as well^{1,2}. Enrolment into a university is a great achievement and every family celebrates this great achievement.

Once enrolled, students are faced with a new social environment with more freedom and less supervision from a spouse or parent. The student may feel a sense of independence for the first time, as well as feelings of homesickness, adaptation difficulties, isolation, inadequacy and loneliness³. Furthermore, students are expected to adapt to their new role quickly leading to added stress, anxiety, depression and a feeling of being overwhelmed as they try to navigate this new experience on their own^{4,5,6}.

In addition, Mallman and Lee in 2017⁷ discovered that even though older students have problems as well, young adult students aged between 20 and 30 feel the isolation more strongly than other students. This was attributed to the fact that these students do not feel as though they are part of the university culture, thereby making it difficult for universities to find ways of meeting and supporting the needs of these young adult students.

Students also experience socio-economic hardships due to inadequate funds to meet their daily social needs such as food, clothes, recreation and accommodation. These socio-economic hardships result in poor academic performance due to split concentration towards their academic pursuits due to poor study skills and class attendance. They may also have feelings of inadequacy and lack of social support which will negatively affect their ability to

achieve a good university education and have good psychological or mental health during the period of training^{8,9,10,11}

These negative feelings and problems cause direct effects on students' ability to succeed at the University. Those students who are experiencing various academic problems such as examination stress, anxiety during tests, problems with continuous assignments, unrealistic expectations about academic success or failure or an inability to understand the subjects they are taught¹² may also have problems with time management¹³

Students who are unable to meet the demands of university education may further experience, social isolation and psychological distress due to poor academic performance. When all these factors are put into a context that meet students' individual needs, the end result will be a greater product and the solutions created will be more effective.

It is, therefore, important for students to have access to social networks including study groups. Dryer et al., (2016)¹⁴ noted these social networks at learning institutions inevitably lead to improved learning outcomes and self-efficacy beliefs.

Another study conducted by Goodman in 2017⁴ in the United States of America (USA) concluded that the university period presents the best developmental context to equip students with lifelong skills for good mental health and wellbeing.

There has been growing evidence indicating that mental health disorders are at an increase among university students worldwide, especially among women^{15,16}.

Mental distress is one of the commonest mental health issue affecting students in universities characterised by an amalgamation of symptoms that include complaints of feeling sad, worried, tense or angry¹⁷. There is, therefore, a great need for universities to increase the number of students who access help especially if the services are offered and available.

In the United Kingdom (UK) and USA, studies show that the commonest causes of mental health distress among students included loneliness, academic stress and childhood traumas which become evident after beginning university training¹⁸; most likely as a result of increased academic pressure. This may lead to one of the commonest psychiatric disorders found among college students which is also known as alcohol use disorder. The increase in the number of students suffering from alcohol use disorder forces universities to emphasise on prevention strategies such as creating counselling units that are manned by qualified Psychosocial Counsellors. These counsellors will provide adequate counselling and guidance to the students within university environments¹⁹.

A study was conducted in 2016²⁰ to assess counselling needs of medical students at the Ahvaz Jundishapur University of Medical Sciences in Iran where they found that the most important counselling needs included educational, personal, mental/emotional, family/marriage and occupational needs, depending on the gender and age of the student²⁰. If students' needs are not attended to adequately, they affect students' educational performance, scientific levels and proficiency; including their efficiency in practice and consequently this will create problems in their service delivery on completion of their studies. This demonstrates that guidance and counselling plus meeting students' needs should be considered as an essential component of a student's life at universities²¹.

Furthermore, researchers have suggested that all interventions developed to meet students' needs should be targeted at individual student needs and personality traits²². Those counsellors who are given an opportunity to counsel students should all use the gathered information during the sessions to regulate student's behaviour depending on individual traits^{23,24}. The drawback found with guidance and counselling is that most students may not want to seek assistance when dealing with their problems²⁵.

In a study performed in the UK¹⁸ on students' mental health: some answers and more questions; authors established that reducing stigma increases health seeking behaviour among students; which may encourage students to seek help when they need it.

Sub regionally, in Ethiopia, authors²⁶ conducted research to assess the prevalence of mental distress among undergraduate students. The authors discovered that in most universities there is a higher prevalence of students with mental distress and that barriers exist which affect students' access to professional mental health care even when it is available.

The research has further identified that students have different needs that may need different and appropriate advice to solve. Universities therefore, should endeavor to make and implement strategic plans to provide care that is aimed at training students to the fullest degree in all aspects of their lives.

Advising students in their personal and group relationships assists them to identify their talents, interests, future learning styles and to further educate them on how to develop their problem-solving skills for all their future decision-making opportunities²⁰.

Research has shown that most of the educational programs focus on their own needs and that university curricula often ignore students' needs; making any attempt by the university to care for students to be inaccurate and ineffective.

Higher institutions such as universities use test scores as a good indicator of student's success but in 2022, Moussa and Ali²⁷, suggested that universities should also emphasise on the student's psychological wellbeing, including their level of satisfaction with their life and school, as measure of their academic success. This produces a more rounded indicator of academic success among students²⁸; as psychological wellbeing and life satisfaction form a foundation for educational growth. It also forms the students' over-all

psychological modification during all their university years²⁸. Universities could also come up with other interventions such as having a faculty advisor. This person becomes the first point of contact for the student in order to encourage open communication between the school and the individual students. The advisors would be specifically available to assist students identify their interests, talents and to identify ways for students to adjust to university environment so that they reach their goals¹⁹.

The advisors should be easily accessible to foster good student-advisor relationship with open content sharing and communication channels.

It has been found that when the faculty support is provided adequately, there is a reduction in attrition rates of students²⁹. Future interventions and policies could therefore be targeted towards universities being able to provide all students with all their basic needs for them to succeed academically³⁰. Nationally, at the University of Zambia (UNZA) researchers have identified different challenges that affect students' which university staff should be able to identify and solve. UNZA students have identified lack of supervision and guidance during teaching practice³¹, help with use of social media as a tool for lifelong learning³² and the need for vocational or career counselling³³ as vital to a student academic wellbeing. Researchers further discovered that, the use of social media does assist UNZA students to enhance social interactions among themselves.

On the other hand, there still exist glaring policy gaps in Zambia which prevent effective implementation of set plans by universities. The hinderances include poor provision of funding, human resource and infrastructure needed to enhance support of student's mental health, academic and personal needs^{34,35}. The lack leads to most schools having no staff to counsel students to assist them cope with academic, personal and mental challenges which affect their ability to achieve academic goals set. It is therefore important

that guidance and counselling needs are met to enhance students' understanding of campus life, as well as how to prioritise their time in order to ensure that their non-academic pursuits do not distract them from their academic studies³⁶.

Different types of students require different assistance from university faculty. Other researchers found that at the University of Zambia, female students need assistance with sexual harassment issues³⁷; while male students require support with combating betting addiction disorders³⁶ which is on the rise at the institution. It is therefore of vital importance for students' needs assessment and demands to be carried out to better understand how to care for students in order for them to attain their full potential²⁰.

Thus far, there is no study conducted at the University of Zambia, Ridgeway Campus to assess academic, personal and mental health needs of students.

Materials and Methods

Study Design

The study design was a cross-sectional qualitative design, using the phenomenological approach were researchers attempted to understand the lived experiences of students at the University of Zambia, Ridgeway campus.

Study setting and population

The study population consists of students enrolled in the various programmes in Schools within the Ridgeway Campus. These programmes include Environmental Health Science, Public Health Sciences, Physiotherapy, Medicine and Pharmacy. The study excluded postgraduate students as their needs may differ from undergraduate students as most are recent school leavers who are still dependants.

Sample Size

A total of Nine (9) students were included in this study based on data collection. The researchers noted saturation when they identified that collection of

more data provided no new information to explore students' needs at UNZA. At this stage researchers further understood that they had collected enough data to answer the research question as no new information was coming from the students.

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was used to select participants and the researchers' targeted students enrolled at Ridgeway campus to discover their academic, personal and mental health needs.

Data Collection

The collection tool was an in-depth interview guide developed by the researchers and it was validated through continuous review by experts in qualitative research. The researchers asked participants to describe their academic, mental health and personal needs and responses were coded and data repeatedly compared with responses from the various individuals to prevent shift in meaning. Face to face in depth interviews were conducted using an in-depth interview guide. A total of 9 participants were selected until data saturation was reached indicating that no new themes were emerging. An appointment was made with the student, and a private room was chosen for the interview. The students' responses were recorded using an audio recorder.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted manually and thematic analysis was used to analyse the data using the Braun and Clarke method³⁸. The researchers transcribed data verbatim in a word document, familiarised themselves with the data, generated codes, identified themes, reviewed the themes, defined and renamed the themes, before finally presenting the findings based on the stated themes. Interpretation and synthesis of information was also employed during the analysis process.

Positionality

As researchers working at UNZA as lecturers in the school of nursing sciences, with backgrounds in most areas of health specialities, we approached this

study on student's needs at UNZA, ridgeway campus, with a focus on the identification of specific academic, mental and personal needs.

Our experiences, gained through observing student welfare practices of those we teach, while not completely similar to those of the participants in this study, shaped our view of the possible needs we could identify from our participant. We were aware that our experiences and observations within the university as a result of our interactions with the students, could have led us to making assumptions on what students need and therefore we actively strived to ensure that our experiences and observations did not overshadow those of the participants.

Research Rigor

The researchers ensured rigor through continuous reflection and peer debriefing done throughout the research process. They ensured that all the individuals were involved in the collection of data and detailed records of the research process were maintained to ensure transparency. Transferability, dependability and confirmability were also followed to ensure trustworthiness of the research findings.

Ethical Considerations

This research sought ethical approval from the University of Zambia Biomedical Research Ethics Committee and the National Health Research Authority (NHRA) before having any contacts with the respondents. Clearance was further sought from the Deans of the Schools in order to gain access to the selected students. Participants were informed of the nature and purpose of the study both orally and in written so that they can make informed decisions regarding their participation. Written informed consent was also obtained from all participants. The right to withdraw from participation if the participants felt like it was explained to participants throughout the data collection processes.

Confidentiality regarding the information obtained was maintained and no names of participants were recorded anywhere for the purpose of confidentiality.

RESULTS

A total of 9 participants were successfully recruited and interviewed at Ridgeway Campus, at the University of Zambia, until data saturation was reached.

Table 1: Participants Demographic Information

Code	Age	Marital Status	Gender	Programme of study	Year of Study	Family Composition
1	20	Single	F	Physiotherapy	3 rd Year	Brother, sister, parents
2	25	Single	M	Environmental Health	5 th year	Extended Family
3	24	Single	M	Environmental Health	3 rd Year	Nuclear family of 5
4	22	Single	F	Environmental Health	3 rd Year	Only child, Extended
5	21	Single	M	Pharmacy	2 nd Year	Extended Family
6	19	Single	F	Biomedical Sciences	2 nd Year	Average Family
7	22	Single	F	Biomedical Sciences	2 nd Year	Extended Family
8	22	Single	F	Pharmacy	2 nd Year	Extended Family
9	31	Single	M	Environmental health	3 rd Year	Extended Family

Table 1 shows that majority of the interviewed students were in the second year of study and they belonged to a family set up which was extended in nature.

Table 2: Themes, Sub Themes and Quotes

Main Theme	Sub Themes	Quote
Campus Adjustment Challenges	High Student academic self - reliance	<i>"... they can also introduce tutorials like we had at main campus. At least this gives you chance to interact with your lecturers and your tutors in case maybe you don't understand anything in class since here we are a lot and not everyone is free to ask questions" (P5)</i>
	Lack of recreation facilities	<i>"..... recreation, I guess. You can't be studying all the time. We need at least a free time to hang out with your friends and watch some tv and everything and like that. The other thing I have noticed is that we don't have a lot of recreation here" (P3)</i>
	No support system for transition into the campus	<i>"I think students really need, like a support system. More especially like aah mostly the second -year students during the transition" (P1, P9)</i>
	Isolation and Segregation	<i>"There is this sort of subtle segregation like some are more important in hospital than others so you tend to try to sort of build a community among yourselves" (P1)</i>
Resource Shortages	Gadgets to use for studying	<i>"Like the laptops and important phones, maybe for those that don't have laptops phones can help them study effectively" (P1, P2, P9)</i>
	Good student spaces for study	<i>"..... need like places of study, you find that the library is too far. Also, here you find that the classes are locked ----you don't have anywhere to study from so you end up studying from a room where there is noise" (P3, P4, P6, P7)</i>
	Financial Challenges	<i>"You know there is a saying that money answers all things. So even as am a student, on campus I need clothes, I need to eat properly. coz you can't be studying without eating properly." (P2)</i>
	Need for adequate student accommodation	<i>"I need to pay rentals. Coz I am 'squatting' I need to pay rentals. So, it is quite difficult even to buy certain things" (P2)</i>
Solutions to campus management	Student involvement	<i>"Ask students questions like what their needs are so that you can know how well you can help them. Ask them also, in what way they want to be met. Because if you ask them that they will bring their ideas. And if they bring their ideas and you follow their ideas, they would be happy as well" (P4)</i>

"P1-P9" – Participant 1 to Participant 9

Theme 1: Campus Adjustment Challenges

Most of the students interviewed are those that had started their studies at the Great East Road Campus of the University of Zambia and only moved to Ridgeway campus after their examination results for the second years. As most of the interviewed students were those who started from great east campus, they compared the two in their descriptions on what was needed.

Subtheme 1.1: High Student academic self-reliance

Students mentioned that lecturers need to provide guidance in students' academic learning more than what is provided during lectures and clinical practice demonstrations.

They felt that Ridgeway campus had bulky workloads which caused excessive fatigue. Furthermore, they felt that the lack of tutorials which work better to improve close interactions between lecturers and students are lacking thereby leading to reduction in the enhancement of learning experiences.

“.... they can also introduce tutorials like we had at main campus. At least this gives you chance to interact with your lecturers and your tutors in case maybe you don't understand anything in class since here we are a lot and not everyone is free to ask questions” (P5)

Subtheme 1.2: Lack of recreation facilities

Participants mentioned a lack of places for recreation and relaxation at the campus. They mentioned a need for such areas as the campus seemed more focussed on academic learning affecting students' general psychological wellbeing. As participant 3 stated:

“..... recreation, I guess. You can't be studying all the time. We need at least a free time to hang out with your friends and watch some tv and everything and like that. The other thing I have noticed is that we don't have a lot of recreation here”

Students reported a lack of recreation facilities where students can go to as the campus does not have many restaurants or drinking facilities catering to students.

Subtheme 1.3: No support system for the transition into the campus

Furthermore, students reported experiencing distress psychologically after being admitted into their various programs at the campus. This is because they needed assistance in dealing with the disappointment of failure in getting into their first chosen field:

“I think students really need, like a support system. More especially like aah mostly the second-year students during the transition” (P1, P9)

The students suggested increasing provision of counselling services in the campus support system units which need to be set up as well. These would assist student to express themselves and be able to manage their frustrations better because sometimes the home environment does not have adequate support systems in place for them.

“And I feel that more counselling services should be done to students.....yes. because many are the times that people fall into depression due to failing to handle their mental health needs very wellso I would say, counselling services should be a bit high up. So that we are able to express ourselves more freely” (P6, P9)

Theme 1.4: Isolation and Segregation

Students also noted that the campus lacked a general community mind-set which could be transferred to students thereby preventing issues of isolation and segregation which happens. As one the participants mentioned:

“There is this sort of subtle segregation like some are more important in hospital than others so you tend to try to sort of build a community among yourselves” (P1)

The university should therefore enhance opportunities for students from different programs

to work together so that they understand their individual roles within the team.

Additionally, students mentioned differences in backgrounds, personality and habits as one of the contributing factors to increased isolation among the students. Some of it is even self-imposed by the students themselves.

“I have actually been a victim of those people who are segregated.....just to avoid certain things” (P3)

Participants stated that segregation, isolation and the pressure of school leads to marked psychological and mental distress such as depression. They reported that as there are no resources for dealing with these issues within the campus, students continue to act strong even when they are not well.

Theme 2: Study Resource Shortages

Subtheme 2.1: Gadgets to use for studying

The absence of access to vital digital learning resources like computers and cellphones was one of the main issues mentioned by participants. Since the majority of academic resources were available in digital formats, accessing lecture notes, e-learning platforms, and research databases became extremely difficult for students without these devices.

“Like the laptops and important phones, maybe for those that don't have laptops phones can help them study effectively” (P1, P2, P9)

They mentioned that the classrooms also need projectors to be installed as well.

Subtheme 2.2: Good student spaces for study

Students thought that more spaces need to be identified to use for studying purposes. They mentioned that the library was too small to cater for all students and far away from Ridgeway campus for students. They stated that they need better places to study within the campus with adequate electric outlets with good internet.

“..... need like places of study, you find that the library is too far. Also, here you find that the classes are locked ----you don't have anywhere to study from

so you end up studying from a room where there is noise” (P3, P4, P6, P7)

Students also expressed the need for aesthetically pleasing outdoor spaces within the campus environment where they can study, relax and socialize in.

Theme 2.3: Financial Challenges

Participants mentioned lack of money as one of the major constraints affecting them during their study at the campus. They stated poor family situations, a lack of adequate accommodation and delays in payment of bursaries as reasons for this problem. Students mentioned that they needed the money to pay their rents, buy food, transport cost and even buying new clothes to meet the demands for the formal attire required at the campus. As participant number 2 stated:

“You know there is a saying that money answers all things. So even as am a student, on campus I need clothes, I need to eat properly. coz you can't be studying without eating properly.”

This sentiment was echoed to varied degrees by P3 and P8.

Theme 2.4: Need for adequate student accommodation

Participants mentioned that the campus lacked certain infrastructure which can be used by students to enhance their study experience. These include hostels for student accommodation, ablution blocks and a Library big enough to accommodate all students in the school who need to study. The students further felt that the money that they use for accommodation payments outside the campus could have been better used for purchasing materials for study instead.

“I need to pay rentals. Coz I am 'squatting' I need to any rentals. So, it is quite difficult even to buy certain things” (P2)

Additionally, participant number 8 went on to add that having hostels built would assist students access free services offered by the university such as internet, library services and study groups.

“You can easily access internet from here but when you are outside it becomes a challenge so we need as many as they can to be accommodated so that they are within the facility of the university.

The study revealed that most of the participants such as P2, P4, P5, P7 and P8, were accommodated outside the university premises where they pay exorbitant amounts monthly which they cannot afford, making the need for new hostel construction to be urgent.

“I can talk about accommodation. It's really a challenge because most of us don't have rooms and we have to get into boarding houses and its quite costly for our parents; and they have to pay for food and accommodation and we are never getting bursaries and never getting meal allowances that we can use to pay for ourselves.” (P2)

Theme 3: Solutions to campus management

Students proposed solutions to management on how they thought some of the identified needs could be met. These solutions included asking students what they need so that solutions can target student needs and would therefore be more effective. Participants also mentioned the need to lobby for funds in order for more hostels to be built in order to improve the accommodation deficits.

“Ask students questions like what their needs are so that you can know how well you can help them. Ask them also, in what way they want to be met. Because if you ask them that they will bring their ideas. And if they bring their ideas and you follow their ideas, they would be happy as well” (P4)

DISCUSSION

The study explored the academic, personal and mental health needs of undergraduate students at ridgeway campus, university of Zambia.

Results showed that students having difficulties to adjust to the learning and social environment which agrees with findings of an Ethiopian study by Esmael, Ebrahim and Misganew in 2018⁴⁰. The study confirmed that students, especially those in

the 1st year who experiences challenges with adjustments once enrolled at the University/College.

The study is similar to findings in the current study as most of the participants were in the 2nd year and had just transferred from great east campus to ridgeway. The failure of students to adjust can lead to poor performance in their academic works as students will not take their studies seriously because they will be focussed on other issues unrelated to studies⁴¹.

Furthermore, students reported feelings of isolation and segregation attributed to the differing study programmes offered at the institution. Isolation and segregation can have a negative effect on university students' ability to adjust to the university environment³⁹, and leads to increased instances of stress and anxiety, which ultimately cause mental conditions such as depression.

The authors discovered that personality and individual preferences do contribute to psychological distress states in students which could be attested by participants of the current study who preferred to be alone because of differing interests and backgrounds from students around them.

Students in the current study felt that the university management was too hands off in their academic teaching and therefore the learners felt unsupported with increased academic self-reliance. Mwale, Mwanza and Mweene (2024) conducted a similar study in a public University of Zambia in the Copperbelt province and found that improving student support by institutions of learning assists students to better cope with the pressures of student life⁴³. The authors used counselling to discover challenges faced by students and found that accommodation difficulties, lack of finances and lack of feeling of belonging were some of the highlighted challenges faced by students. Students in the same study also suggested adding counselling services for students as a way to address their needs. These findings are similar to those found in the current study.

In the current study students reported a need for gadgets such as laptops and advanced phones, contrary to findings from a study conducted elsewhere where students expressed appreciation for online education, they received⁴¹. The need for such equipment could have come about as a result of the new technological shift of universities to online teaching and provision of study materials using soft copies since the COVID-19 pandemic coupled with poor financial situations of the families where they are from. A situation contrary to findings reported in a Philippines' study most students reported being able to afford such gadgets⁴⁵.

On the other hand, when Lembani et al, in 2019, conducted their study, they discovered similar findings as the current study most likely because the because the researchers looked at differences in status between urban and rural areas of South Africa⁴⁶.

Zambia being a low-income country has many students who fall in a low-income bracket. From the demographic information of the current study, the researcher further found that most of the students fell into an extended family situation which would mean increased financial burden for those responsible for student sponsorship.

In the current study students also advocated for a need for spaces to be used for relaxation as well as for studying. It is evident that these spaces are needed and are vital for student wellbeing and success. If a university were to offer such spaces, students would accept to use them once offered. These findings differ from findings by Vetrivel, Vidhyapriya and Arun who encouraged creation relaxation and supportive spaces for students at the Universities to improve mental health, physical health, social connections and academic support of students⁴⁷. Additionally, university spaces should be visually pleasing and well-arranged for students to use as they please such as relaxation, study, rest or for passing time⁴⁵, thereby reducing stress and anxiety levels experienced by students⁴⁹.

CONCLUSION

The importance of investigating student needs cannot be overestimated as its through increased understanding of specific student needs that make it easier for the needs to be managed effectively and efficiently. University management should focus on meeting student needs a these keep students from concentrating on school work, thereby leading to under performance and failure. Not only this, but students may develop psychological and mental distress which would lead to lifelong sequelae especially if students have poor copying strategies.

It is hoped that the findings of this study will guide the University of Zambia Management to focus on increasing the number of relaxation and library spaces.

Furthermore, the institution can provide adequate accommodation for students, aid in students accessing financial aid and ensure that all students are able to access learning materials for study. Once these needs are met students will be able to adjust well to university environment and achieve their academic goals in the University.

What is already known on this topic:

1. Importance of meeting student needs in order to ensure that effective academic performance for students
2. Students experience anxiety and psychological distress when they enter a university community for the first time
3. Higher educational institutions need established student support systems in place which are comprehensive and all-inclusive in nature.

What this study adds:

1. Specific insights on the needs of university students from the University of Zambia, Ridgeway Campus
2. Identification of students' needs such as finances, accommodation, students' support systems, and study spaces and materials.

3. The realization that students' need support in adjustment to campus life as lack of adjustment affects their overall academic performance
4. Identification of psychological distress experienced by students which usually leads to depression as a mental health disorder.

Study limitations

As the researchers worked at the university of Zambia teaching the students, there may have been researcher biases which could have influenced the data interpretation. The researchers attempted to reduce this through involvement of multiple researchers being involved in the coding and analysis of the data.

Recommendations

1. University of Zambia management should ensure to conduct periodic assessments of students' needs in order to identify and meet them thereby guaranteeing academic success among students
2. University Management should target provision of the identified needs as this improves students' satisfaction and may improve enrolments.
3. Spaces specific for relaxation and entertainment should be set up by university management to prevent feelings of segregation and isolation felt by students.
4. Student support units should be enhanced at Ridgeway Campus which also provides effective counselling services by qualified professionals.
5. UNZA management should train faculty as peer advisors who act as 1st line contact with students who attend to students needs.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the University of Zambia management and students for providing permissions and information for the study respectively.

Conflicts of interest

Authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Funding statement

The study received no external funding from any organization or institution.

Author Contribution

All authors contributed to the conception and design of the study, while MB and NN participated in the collection of data. NN analysed and interpreted the collected data and drafted the manuscript. SM, PS, DC and NN reviewed the manuscript critically for important intellectual content. All authors read and approved the final manuscript and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

REFERENCES

1. Ryan MFO, Pio RS, Jesli JTG, Princess LBJ, Princess NM, Krishna TP. Guidance Needs of Nursing Students in Iloilo City, Philippines. *PEERS Inc. Multidisciplinary Research Journal*. 2017; 1(2):35-47. DOI:[10.17613/f4gt-az80](https://doi.org/10.17613/f4gt-az80)
2. Ryan G, Marley I, Still, M, Lyons Z, Hood S. Use of mental-health services by Australian medical students: a cross-sectional survey. *Australas Psychiatry*. 2017; 25(4): 407-410. DOI: [10.1177/1039856217715990](https://doi.org/10.1177/1039856217715990)
3. Pinto CJ. Psychological counseling in Portuguese higher education: What are the students' needs? *Universitas Psychologica*, 2019; 18(5): 1-15. DOI:[10.11144/Javeriana.upsy18-5.pcph](https://doi.org/10.11144/Javeriana.upsy18-5.pcph).
4. Goodman L. Mental Health on University Campuses and the Needs of Students They Seek to Serve. *Building Healthy Academic*

- Communities Journal*. 2017; 1 (2):31. DOI:[10.18061/bhac.v1i2.6056](https://doi.org/10.18061/bhac.v1i2.6056).
5. Dickson JM, Gullo MJ. The role of brief CBT in the treatment of anxiety and depression for young adults at a UK university: A pilot prospective audit study. *The Cognitive Behaviour Therapist*. 2015; (8) 1–9. DOI:[10.1017/S1754470X15000240](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1754470X15000240).
 6. Kreider CM, Bendixen RM, Lutz BJ. Holistic needs of university students with invisible disabilities: a qualitative study. *Physical and Occupational Therapy in Paediatrics*. 2015; 35(4):426–441. DOI: 10.3109/01942638.2015.1020407
 7. Mallman M, Lee H. Isolated Learners: Young Mature-age Students, University Culture, and Desire for Academic Sociality. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*. 2017; 36(5):512–525. DOI: [10.1080/02601370.2017.1302012](https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2017.1302012).
 8. Raskind GI, Haardorfer R, Berg JC. Food insecurity, psychosocial health and academic performance among college and university students in Georgia, USA. *Public Health Nutrition*. 2018; 22(3):476–485. DOI: [10.1017/S1368980018003439](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980018003439).
 9. Hagedorn LR, Olfert DM. Food Insecurity and Behavioral Characteristics for Academic Success in Young Adults Attending an Appalachian University. *Nutrients*. 2018; 10(3):361. DOI: [10.3390/nu10030361](https://doi.org/10.3390/nu10030361).
 10. Martinez MS, Frongillo AE, Leung C, Ritchie L. No Food for Thought: Food Insecurity Is Related to Poor Mental Health and Lower Academic Performance among Students in California's Public University System. *Journal of Health Psychology*. 2018; 25(12):1930–1939. DOI: [10.1177/1359105318783028](https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105318783028).
 11. Clercq DM, Galand B, Frenay M. Transition from High School to University: a person-centred approach to academic achievement. *Eur J Psychol Educ*. 2016; 32(1): 39-59. DOI:[10.1007/s10212-016-0298-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10212-016-0298-5).
 12. Stankovska G, Dimitrovski D, Angelkoska S, Ibraimi Z, Uka V. *Emotional Intelligence, Test Anxiety and Academic Stress among University Students. Bulgarian Comparative Education Society*. 2018.
 13. Alias A, Asmaliza NM, Mohamad NB, Ariffin K. (eds.). Student Learning Time: A Needs Analysis for University Students' Time Management Skills. Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd. *Proceedings of the Regional Conference on Science, Technology and Social Sciences*. (RCSTSS 2016). 2019; 125-134. DOI:[10.1007/978-981-13-0203-9_12](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-0203-9_12).
 14. Dryer R, Henning MA, Tyson GA, Shaw R. Academic Achievement Performance of University Students with Disability: Exploring the Influence of Non-academic Factors. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 2016; 63(4):419-430. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1034912X.2015.1130217>.
 15. Ross A, Kelly Y, Sacker A. Time trends in mental well-being: the polarisation of young people's psychological distress. *Soc Psychiatry Psychiatr Epidemiol*. 2017;52(9):1147-1158. DOI:10.1007/s00127-017-1419-4.
 16. Lessof C, Ross A, Brind R, Bell E, Newton S. Longitudinal study of young people in England cohort 2: Health and wellbeing at wave 2. *ResearchGate*. 2016. [https:// www.researchgate.net/publication](https://www.researchgate.net/publication). Accessed 25 July 2025.
 17. Patel V, Hanlon C. *Where there is no Psychiatrist*. 2nd Edition. RCPsych Publications. London. UK. 2018. ISBN 978-1-909726-83-3. <https://www.cambridge.org/zm>. Accessed 28 July 2025.
 18. Brown JSL. Student mental health: some answers and more questions. *Journal of Mental Health*. 2018; 27(3):193-196. DOI: [10.1080/09638237.2018.1470319](https://doi.org/10.1080/09638237.2018.1470319).
 19. Fatemy E, Mohamadi R, Ghorbani R, Sadollahi AS. Counseling and Guidance Needs of Students in Rehabilitation School of Semnan University of Medical Sciences. *Journal of Medical Education Development*. 2019; 12(36):1-8.

20. Shakurnia A, Khajeali N. Counselling Needs of Medical Students at the Ahvaz Jundishapur University of Medical Sciences, Iran. *The Online Journal of Counselling and Education*, 2016; 5(1): 1-13.
21. Ebizie EN, Enajedu EE, Nkechi E. The Role of Guidance and Counselling in Effective Teaching and Learning in Schools. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, 2016; 1(2): 36-48.
22. Fiveable. "Targeted interventions – Curriculum Development." Edited by Becky Bahr, Fiveable, 2024. <https://library.fiveable.me/key-terms/curriculum-development/>. Accessed 25 July 2025.
23. Mitra N, Syahniar S, Alizamar A. Consumptive Behaviour of Students in Shopping Online and Complications in Guidance and Counselling Services in Universities. *International Journal of Research in Counselling and Education*. 2019; 3 (2) : 120 – 124 . DOI:[10.24036/00132za0002](https://doi.org/10.24036/00132za0002).
24. Nasir A, Hashmi MA, Siddique JA, Adnan M, Kanwal Z. Perception of Secondary Students regarding Guidance and Counselling in Quetta. *Bulletin of Education and Research*. 2017; 39 (1): 265-274.
25. Getachew A. Assessment of Psychological Counselling Service for Higher Education Institution Students. *International Journal of Education & Literacy Studies*. 2019; 7 (4):53-61. DOI:[10.7575/aiac.ijels.v.7n.4p.53](https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijels.v.7n.4p.53).
26. Negash A, Khan MA, Medhin G, Wondimagegn D, Araya M. Mental Distress, Perceived Need, and Barriers to Receive Professional Mental Health Care among University Students in Ethiopia. *BMC Psychiatry*. 2020; 20:187. DOI:[10.1186/s12888-020-02602-3](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-020-02602-3) .
27. Moussa NM, Ali WF. Exploring the Relationship Between Students' Academic Success and Happiness Levels in the Higher Education Settings During the Lockdown Period of COVID-19. *Psychol Rep*. 2022;125(2):986-1010. DOI:[10.1177/0033294121994568](https://doi.org/10.1177/0033294121994568).
28. Gutiérrez M, Tomás JM. The role of perceived autonomy support in predicting university students' academic success mediated by academic self-efficacy and school engagement, *Educational Psychology*, 2019; 39 (1): 1-20. DOI:[10.1080/01443410.2019.1566519](https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2019.1566519).
29. Walker VR, Zelin IA, Behrman C, Strnad R. Qualitative Analysis of Student perceptions: “Some Advisors Care. Some Don't.” *NACADA Journal Volume*. 2017; 37(2):44-54.
30. Martinez SM, Esaryk EE, Moffat L, Ritchie L. Redefining Basic Needs for Higher Education: It's More Than Minimal Food and Housing According to California University Students. *American Journal of Health Promotion*. 2021; 35 (6) : 818 - 834 . DOI:[10.1177/0890117121992295](https://doi.org/10.1177/0890117121992295).
31. Manchishi CP, Mwanza SD. The University of Zambia School Teaching Experience: Is It Effective? *Excellence in Higher Education* 4. 2013; 4(2): 61-77. DOI: [10.5195/ehe.2013.84](https://doi.org/10.5195/ehe.2013.84).
32. Wahila R, Mwape L, Lyambai K, Kabinga-Makukula M. Use of Social Media to Support Nursing Students' Learning in Zambia. *Creative Education*. 2018; 9 (8): 1237-1251. DOI: [10.4236/ce.2018.98092](https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2018.98092).
33. Hayajneh WSY, Alhamad AFN, El-Omari HA, Yassien BO, Alhassan AA. Factor Analysis: Exploratory and Confirmatory of Developed Scale of Vocational Counselling Needs for Undergraduate Students. *International Journal of Education and Research*. 2020; 8 (1). DOI: [10.1080/1034912X.2015.1130217](https://doi.org/10.1080/1034912X.2015.1130217).
34. Munakampe, M.N. Strengthening mental health systems in Zambia. *Int J Ment Health Syst* 14, 28 (2020). DOI: [10.1186/s13033-020-00360-z](https://doi.org/10.1186/s13033-020-00360-z).
35. Chanda, T. Student Retention in Higher Learning Institutions of Zambia. *International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews*. 2024. 5. (6) 433-441.
36. Akakandelwa A, Walubita G. Students' Social Media Use and its Perceived Impact on their Social Life: A Case Study of the University of Zambia. *The International Journal of Multi-Disciplinary research*. 2017; ISSN: 3471-7102. Conference ID : CFP / 359 . <https://dspace.unza.zm>. Accessed 28 July 2025.

37. Menon A, Shilalukey N, Siziya S, Ndubani P. University Students' perceive of Sexual harassment: A case study at the University of Zambia. *Medical Journal of Zambia*. 2010; 36(2). DOI:[10.4314/mjz.v36i2.56060](https://doi.org/10.4314/mjz.v36i2.56060)
38. Byrne, D. A worked example of Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive thematic analysis. *Qual Quant*. 2022; 56, 1391–1412 (2022). DOI: [10.1007/s11135-021-01182-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-021-01182-y).
39. Sakala C, Paul R, Dalal N, Sheikh WA. Prevalence of Sports Betting Addictive Disorder among the Medical Students at the University of Zambia in Lusaka, Zambia. *Medical Journal of Zambia*, 2019; 46 (4): 329–334. DOI: [10.55320/mjz.46.4.242](https://doi.org/10.55320/mjz.46.4.242).
40. Esmael A, Ebrahim J, Misganew E. Adjustment problem among First Year University Students in Ethiopia: Across Sectional Survey. *Journal of Psychiatry. J.Psychiatry* 2018; 21 (5). DOI:[10.4172/2378-5756.1000455](https://doi.org/10.4172/2378-5756.1000455).
41. Omer S. Social adjustment Challenges of First year Students: peer Influence, Misuse of Freedom, Ignorance of Life Skills Management, Living in Anxiety and Guilt. Handbook of research on Copping mechanisms for First Year Students Transitioning to Higher Education. 1st edition. 2023. DOI: [10.4018/978-1-6684-6961-3.ch010](https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-6961-3.ch010).
42. Kural AI, Ozyurt B. Why Some Students Adjust Easily While Others Can Not? Stress and Adjustment to University: Personality as a Moderator. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*. 2021; 25 (3). DOI: [10.1177/15210251211002179](https://doi.org/10.1177/15210251211002179).
43. Mwale G, Mwanza N, Mweene DL. Students' Adjustment to University life: Evidence from lived Experiences. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science (IJRISS)*. 2024; 8 (10): 1394-1406. DOI:[10.47772/IJRISS.2024.8100119](https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2024.8100119).
44. Chakraborty P, Mittal P, Gupta MS, Yadav S, Arora A. Opinion of Students on Online Education during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies*. 2020; 3 (3): 357-365. DOI:[10.1002/hbe2.240](https://doi.org/10.1002/hbe2.240).
45. Baticulon RE, Sy JJ, Alberto NRI. Barriers to Online Learning in the Time of COVID-19: A National Survey of Medical Students in the Philippines. *Med Sci Educ*. 2021; 31:615–626. DOI: [10.1007/s40670-021-01231-z](https://doi.org/10.1007/s40670-021-01231-z).
46. Lembani R., Gunter A, Breines M, Dalu MTB. The same course, different access: the digital divide between urban and rural distance education students in South Africa. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*. 2019; 44 (1): 70–84. DOI:[10.1080/03098265.2019.1694876](https://doi.org/10.1080/03098265.2019.1694876).
47. Vetrivel Sc, Vidhyapriya P, Arun VP. Psychological Patterns and Lifestyle Influences in Academia Experience Creating Supportive Environment for Students in Universities: Mental Health Matters. 2025:19-50. DOI: [10.4018/979-8-3693-8709-2.ch002](https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-8709-2.ch002).
48. Alnusairat S, Ayyad Y, Al-Shatnawi Z. Towards Meaningful University Space: Perceptions of the Quality of Open Spaces for Students. *Buildings*. 2021; 11(11): 556. DOI: [10.3390/buildings11110556](https://doi.org/10.3390/buildings11110556).
49. Koo, F. Let's relax: A room concept and tangible artifact for stress relief for Malmö University students (Dissertation). 2024. <https://urn.kb.se/resolve>. Accessed 24 July 2025.