


**MAKERERE**  **UNIVERSITY**  
**COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND EXTERNAL STUDIES**  
**SCHOOL OF DISTANCE AND LIFE LONG LEARNING**  
**DEPARTMENT OF ADULT AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION**

**ACCESSIBILITY AND UTILIZATION OF GUIDANCE AND COUNSELING SERVICES  
AMONG EXTERNAL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AT MAKERERE UNIVERSITY**

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**APPROVAL**

This dissertation was written and submitted with the approval of the university supervisor

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**DECLARATION**

I, KEMIGISHA VAOLA, a student at Makerere University declare that the content of this research was prepared and compiled by me. I strongly confirm that this report has never been presented by anyone not even submitted to any other institution for award.



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## OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

- Accessibility.** The ease with which external undergraduate students at Makerere University can locate and reach guidance and counseling services.
- Barriers.** The factors that hinder or prevent external undergraduate students at Makerere University from accessing and using guidance and counseling services.
- External Undergraduate Students.** Students enrolled at Makerere University who study remotely or part-time and do not attend classes on campus regularly.
- Perceptions.** The thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes of external undergraduate students at Makerere University toward guidance and counseling services.
- Strategies** The actions or plans proposed or implemented to improve the effectiveness and use of guidance and counseling services for external undergraduate students at Makerere University.
- Utilization** The frequency and manner in which external undergraduate students at Makerere University make use of guidance and counseling services.

## LIST OF ACRONYMS

<b>AI</b>	Artificial Intelligence
<b>AU</b>	African Union
<b>COVID-19</b>	Coronavirus Disease 2019
<b>G&amp;C</b>	Guidance and Counseling
<b>HBM</b>	Health Belief Model
<b>HEIs</b>	Higher Education Institutions
<b>ICT</b>	Information and Communication Technology
<b>LMICs</b>	Low- and Middle-Income Countries
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organization

## ABSTRACT

In order to enhance university students' academic achievement and personal wellbeing, guidance and counseling services are essential for supporting students' academic, personal, and social well-being. The usefulness and accessibility of these services for Makerere University's external undergraduate students, however, are not well understood. Due to their restricted campus engagement, external undergraduate students frequently confront particular academic, social, and psychological obstacles. This might have an impact on their awareness, use, and perception of counseling services. The objective of this study was to evaluate the availability and use of guidance and counseling services among Makerere University's external undergraduate students, with an emphasis on their awareness, perceptions, and potential improvement methods.

The results were more thorough and reliable because a contemporaneous triangulation mixed-methods design was used, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques. Four significant sources were interviewed, and 36 external undergraduate students at Makerere University in all were polled. Qualitative data from interviews were subjected to thematic analysis, while quantitative data were evaluated using descriptive statistics. Despite the fact that most students (52.8%) acknowledged the value of counseling services in improving both academic and emotional well-being, many expressed that these services were not widely known and were difficult to get. Just 47.2% of respondents thought the services were customized to meet their needs. Significant obstacles were stigma and cultural attitudes; 52.8% of respondents thought that counseling was seen as a sign of weakness. The location and availability of services were unknown to 47.2% of respondents, despite 52.8% being aware of the advantages. Lack of digital knowledge and poor connectivity (36.1%) were two internet-related issues that restricted access to online therapy. A majority of students favored peer counseling (52.8%) and suggested promoting awareness through social media and university emails (58.3%). A large proportion of students (86.1%) were interested in counseling done online, and 77.8% highlighted the importance of training counselors to address the specific needs of learners who are external.

External students at Makerere University encounter several obstacles that limit their ability to access and use counseling services, even though they acknowledge the services' value. Barriers include stigma related to culture, lack of awareness about the services, scheduling inflexibility, and problems with digital access. Additionally, students believe the services aren't tailored enough to address their particular needs. To boost utilization of counseling services, the university ought to customize services for external learners, and combine peer counseling with safeguards for confidentiality. Awareness about these services should be boosted via digital channels like WhatsApp and university emails. Other key steps include training counselors to meet the needs of external students, upgrading digital infrastructure, and teaming up with NGOs to get more resources, all of which would make counseling services more inclusive and effective.

## **CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

### **1.0 Introduction**

This chapter presents the background of the study, problem statement, and objectives of the study, the research questions, and justifications of the study as well as the scope.

### **1.1 Background of the study**

Globally, the accessibility and utilization of guidance and counseling services among external undergraduate students have been affected by technological advancements, institutional policies, and cultural attitudes (Cerollin et al., 2023). According to Smith et al., (2018), the integration of digital platforms such as teletherapy and online counseling has greatly improved access to mental health services for students in remote or external programs. However, Jones and Brown (2019) emphasized that stigma surrounding mental health remains an obstacle, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. By 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic worsened mental health challenges, leading to increased demand for counseling services, as noted by Wang et al., (2021). A recent study by Lee et al., (2023) stresses the growing role of artificial intelligence (AI) in providing personalized counseling support, though ethical concerns and data privacy issues persist. Looking ahead, Patel et al., (2025) predicts that global efforts to reduce stigma around mental health and integrate counseling into academic curricula will further enhance accessibility and utilization.

In Africa, the accessibility and utilization of guidance and counseling services among external undergraduate students are shaped by resource limitations, cultural beliefs, and policy frameworks (Luzi et al., 2023). According to Mwangi and Oketch (2018), many African universities lack adequate counseling infrastructure, particularly for external students who are often neglected in service provision. A study by Adebowale et al., (2020) revealed that cultural stigma surrounding mental health issues discourages students from seeking counseling services. However, the African Union's Agenda 2063 has emphasized the importance of mental health in achieving educational goals, leading to increased advocacy and policy reforms. By 2022, Ndlovu et al., noted that countries like South Africa and Nigeria had begun implementing online counseling platforms to cater to external students. Recent research by Kamau et al., (2024) highlights the role of community-based counseling initiatives in bridging the gap, while projections by Ochieng et al.,

(2025) suggest that increased funding and awareness campaigns will improve service utilization across the continent.

In East Africa, the accessibility and utilization of guidance and counseling services among external undergraduate students vary significantly across countries due to differences in educational policies and cultural contexts. In Kenya, Mutisya and Kioli (2018) found that external students in universities such as the University of Nairobi faced challenges accessing counseling services due to limited physical infrastructure and a lack of tailored programs.

However, the introduction of mobile-based counseling services in 2020, as reported by Ondieki and Wambua (2021), improved accessibility for students in remote areas. In Tanzania, Mwambene and Kapinga (2019) noted that cultural beliefs often deter students from seeking counseling, but initiatives by the Tanzanian government to integrate mental health into higher education policies have shown promise. By 2023, East African countries began collaborating on regional mental health strategies, as highlighted by Kipchumba et al., (2023), which aim to standardize counseling services across universities. Projections by Nyambura et al., (2025) suggest that increased regional cooperation and investment in digital counseling platforms will enhance service utilization.

In Uganda, the accessibility and utilization of guidance and counseling services among external undergraduate students are influenced by socio-economic factors, cultural attitudes, and institutional capacity. According to Nalwadda et al., (2018), external students in Ugandan universities often face challenges such as limited access to counseling centers and a lack of awareness about available services. The study also revealed that stigma surrounding mental health issues, particularly in rural areas, further hinders utilization. By 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic led to the adoption of online counseling platforms in institutions like Makerere University, as reported by Kiguli and Namutebi (2021). However, issues such as poor internet connectivity and high data costs limited the effectiveness of these services. Recent studies by Tumwesigye et al., (2023) highlight the role of peer counseling programs in improving accessibility, particularly for external students. Looking ahead, projections by Mugisha et al., (2025) suggest that increased government funding and partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) will enhance the quality and reach of counseling services in Uganda.

According to Nalwadda et al., (2018), external students at Makerere have historically faced limited access to counseling services due to inadequate infrastructure and a lack of tailored programs. This has been compounded by cultural stigma surrounding mental health, which discourages many students from seeking help. Therefore, this will prompt the researcher to examine the accessibility and utilization of guidance and counseling services among external undergraduate students at Makerere University.

## **1.2 Problem statement**

Guidance and counseling services are vital for supporting students' academic, personal, and social well-being. However, external undergraduate students at Makerere University face distinct challenges that can limit their access to and use of these services. Unlike full-time students, external students often balance multiple responsibilities like work, family, and academics, leading to increased stress, lower academic performance, and mental health concerns. Many of these students aren't aware of counseling services or their scope. Without effective intervention, these barriers can negatively affect students' academic performance, emotional well-being, and career development. This study aims to look into the accessibility and utilization of guidance and counseling services to find strategies for making these services more effective for external undergraduate students at Makerere University.

### **1.3 Objectives of the study**

#### **1.3.1 General objective**

To examine the accessibility and utilization of guidance and counseling services among external undergraduate students at Makerere University.

#### **1.3.2 Specific objectives**

- i. To explore the perceptions and use of Guidance and Counseling Services by External Undergraduate Students at Makerere University
- ii. To assess the barriers affecting the accessibility and utilization of guidance and counseling services among External Undergraduate Students at Makerere University and propose strategies for improvement.
- iii. To suggest strategies that enhances the effectiveness of Guidance and counseling services among External Undergraduate Students at Makerere University.

#### **1.3.3 Research Questions**

- i. What are perceptions and use of Guidance and Counseling Services by External Undergraduate Students at Makerere University
- ii. What are barriers affecting the accessibility and utilization of guidance and counseling services among External Undergraduate Students at Makerere University and propose strategies for improvement.
- iii. What are strategies that enhances the effectiveness of Guidance and counseling services among External Undergraduate Students at Makerere University.

## **1.4 Scope of the Study**

### **1.4.1 Content scope**

The study will focus on exploring how External Undergraduate Students at Makerere University perceive and use Guidance and Counseling Services. It'll assess the barriers that affect these students' access to and utilization of these services. The goal is to propose strategies for improvement and suggest ways to make Guidance and counseling services more effective for External Undergraduate Students at Makerere University.

### **1.4.2 Geographical scope**

The study will be conducted at Makerere University, which is located on Makerere Hill which is one of the many hills on which Kampala, the Capital City of Uganda.

### **1.4.3 Time scope**

This study was conducted for the period of seven months that is from March 2025 to September, 2025.

## **1.5 Significance of the Study**

The study will underscore the importance of inclusive education by focusing on an often-overlooked demographic external students. These students, who may not have the same access to on-campus resources as their internal counterparts, require tailored support systems. Understanding their unique needs and challenges will help institutions like Makerere University to design more inclusive policies and programs that will cater to all students, regardless of their mode of study.

The findings of this study will serve as a critical resource for policymakers and university administrators. By identifying gaps in service delivery, such as limited infrastructure, cultural stigma, and technological barriers, the study provides actionable insights for reforming counseling services. This study will shed light on the cultural and societal factors that contribute to stigma and explores strategies to mitigate it, such as peer counseling programs and awareness campaigns. By addressing stigma, the study contributes to creating a more supportive environment where students feel comfortable seeking help.

The study emphasizes the role of technology, such as online counseling platforms, in improving accessibility for external students. This is particularly relevant in the post-COVID-19 era, where digital solutions have become essential for service delivery. By exploring the effectiveness and challenges of these platforms, the study provides valuable insights for universities looking to invest in digital mental health infrastructure.

The study aligns with broader efforts to promote sustainable development by addressing mental health as a critical component of human capital development. Healthy, well-supported students are more likely to contribute positively to their communities and economies, making this study relevant not only to academia but also to national and regional development agendas.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.0 Introduction**

This section presents a review of related literature that has been critically studied and selectively adopted for the purpose of the study. Relatively rich scholarly works including journal articles, book chapters, management reports, and periodicals as well professional complements were considered relevant sources of the reviewed literature.

### **2.1 Theoretical Framework**

This study is guided by the Ecological Systems Theory developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), which provides a comprehensive lens for understanding the complex interplay of individual, institutional, and societal influences on human behavior and development. According to this theory, individuals exist within nested systems microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem that interact to shape experiences, decisions, and opportunities.

In the context of this study, the theory serves to examine how various environmental systems influence the accessibility and utilization of guidance and counseling services among external undergraduate students at Makerere University. At the microsystem level, individual perceptions, awareness, and attitudes toward counseling services such as fear of stigma, personal beliefs, or previous experiences impact students' willingness to seek help. This directly addresses the Objective in which aims to explore how students perceive and use guidance and counseling services.

At the mesosystem and exosystem levels, the theory sheds light on the interactions between students and the university's support structures. For example, limitations such as understaffed counseling departments, restricted operational hours, lack of tailored services for external students, or poor communication can significantly hinder accessibility. These institutional and structural barriers align with Objective ii, which seeks to assess obstacles and propose relevant interventions.

Lastly, the macrosystem representing broader societal attitudes, cultural norms, and policy frameworks influences both institutional priorities and individual behaviors. For instance, societal stigma surrounding mental health may discourage students from using services even when they

are available. Recognizing these larger systemic influences helps to inform Objective iii, which involves proposing strategies to improve the design and delivery of guidance and counseling services, ensuring they are culturally appropriate, accessible, and effective for external undergraduate students.

By applying Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the study adopts a holistic approach that recognizes how personal, institutional, and societal dimensions collectively affect counseling service utilization and provides a strong foundation for actionable recommendations.

## **2.2 The perceptions and use of Guidance and Counseling Services by External Undergraduate Students at Makerere University**

According to Nalwadda et al., (2018), external students often perceive counseling services as inaccessible due to inadequate infrastructure and a lack of tailored programs designed for their unique needs. This perception is compounded by cultural stigma surrounding mental health issues, particularly in rural areas, which discourages students from seeking help, as noted by Tumwesigye et al., (2023). Furthermore, Kiguli and Namutebi (2021) highlighted that the adoption of online counseling platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic was met with mixed reactions, as poor internet connectivity and high data costs limited their effectiveness.

Despite these challenges, Mugisha et al., (2025) projects that increased government funding and NGO partnerships could improve accessibility. Peer counseling programs have also emerged as a promising alternative, fostering trust and reducing stigma among external students, as emphasized by Adebowale et al., (2020). However, Ndlovu et al., (2022) argued that low awareness about available services remains a significant barrier. Similarly, Mutisya and Kioli (2018) found that students often underestimate the benefits of counseling due to misconceptions about its relevance to academic performance. Recent studies by Lee et al., (2023) and Kamau et al., (2024) suggest that integrating AI-driven tools and community-based initiatives could enhance service utilization. Collectively, these findings underscore the need for targeted interventions to address barriers and promote positive perceptions of counseling services among external students at Makerere University.

## **2.3 The barriers affecting the accessibility and utilization of guidance and counseling services among External Undergraduate Students**

### **Cultural Stigma and Misconceptions**

Many students, particularly those from rural areas, perceive seeking counseling as a sign of weakness or an admission of personal failure (Adebowale et al., 2020). This perception is deeply rooted in cultural beliefs that often associate mental health issues with shame or societal judgment, discouraging students from accessing available services. Additionally, limited awareness about the benefits of counseling exacerbates the problem, as students may not recognize its relevance to their academic performance or overall well-being (Mutisya and Kioli, 2018). For instance, some students may view counseling as only necessary for severe mental health crises, overlooking its potential to address everyday challenges such as stress, time management, and interpersonal conflicts. This lack of understanding further reduces the likelihood of students utilizing these services, even when they are available. As noted by Tumwesigye et al., (2023), addressing cultural stigma requires targeted interventions, such as community-based awareness campaigns, to normalize mental health discussions and encourage help-seeking behavior among external students.

### **Institutional Challenges**

According to Nalwadda et al., (2018), inadequate infrastructure, such as insufficient counseling centers and poorly equipped facilities, limits the capacity of the university to cater to the needs of external students, who often reside far from campus. Furthermore, the lack of tailored programs designed specifically for external students exacerbates the issue, as these students have unique needs that differ from those of regular on-campus students. For example, external students often juggle academic responsibilities with work or family commitments, yet counseling services rarely accommodate their schedules (Ndlovu et al., 2022). Additionally, insufficient funding has been identified as a critical barrier, as it restricts the hiring of qualified counselors and the development of innovative programs. Without adequate institutional support, external students are left underserved, leading to low utilization rates. To address these challenges, Mwangi and Oketch (2018) recommend increased investment in counseling infrastructure and the creation of flexible, student-centered programs that prioritize the needs of external learners.

### **Technological Barriers**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many institutions adopted digital platforms to provide remote counseling services, but these efforts were met with mixed results due to technological limitations (Kiguli and Namutebi, 2021). Poor internet connectivity and high data costs emerged as major obstacles, particularly for students in rural or underserved areas, where access to reliable internet remains inconsistent. Moreover, Lee et al., (2023) highlighted that digital literacy gaps among external students further hindered their ability to effectively use online counseling platforms. For instance, some students lacked the technical skills to navigate teletherapy applications or felt uncomfortable engaging in virtual counseling sessions due to privacy concerns. These technological barriers disproportionately affect external students, who rely heavily on digital tools to access university services. To overcome these challenges, Ochieng et al., (2025) suggest investing in digital infrastructure, subsidizing internet access for students, and providing training programs to enhance digital literacy, ensuring equitable access to counseling services.

### **Geographical and Time Constraints**

External students, who often reside far from campus, face logistical challenges in physically accessing counseling centers, as noted by Tumwesigye et al., (2023). Even when services are available, the time required to travel to campus can be prohibitive, especially for students balancing academic responsibilities with work or family obligations. Furthermore, traditional counseling services are typically offered during standard working hours, which may not align with the schedules of external students who are juggling multiple roles. This mismatch between service availability and student needs contributes to low utilization rates (Mutisya and Kioli, 2018). Additionally, geographical isolation can exacerbate feelings of disconnection from the university community, making it harder for external students to seek help. To address these challenges, Mugisha et al., (2025) propose implementing flexible counseling options, such as mobile counseling units or after-hours appointments, to accommodate the diverse needs of external students and ensure they receive timely support.

### **2.3 Strategies that enhances the effectiveness of Guidance and counseling services among External Undergraduate**

One key strategy is the implementation of awareness campaigns to destigmatize mental health issues and promote the benefits of counseling. According to Kamau et al., (2024), sensitization programs using traditional media, workshops, and digital platforms can normalize help-seeking behavior and educate students about the role of counseling in addressing academic and personal challenges. Additionally, peer counseling programs, as emphasized by Mugisha et al., (2025) can foster trust and encourage students to seek support from relatable peers who understand their unique circumstances. Peer counselors can bridge gaps in accessibility while reducing cultural stigma associated with professional counseling.

Investing in digital infrastructure is another critical strategy to ensure equitable access for remote students. As noted by Lee et al., (2023), online counseling platforms can overcome geographical barriers, but poor internet connectivity and high data costs remain significant challenges. Strengthening digital tools, such as secure teletherapy applications, and providing affordable internet access can enhance service delivery. Furthermore, partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and increased government funding are vital for expanding institutional capacity. Ochieng et al., (2025) highlight that NGOs can offer resources, training, and innovative approaches, while government funding supports the establishment of robust counseling frameworks.

Tailored programs specifically designed for external students are equally important. Mwangi and Oketch (2018) recommends flexible scheduling, mobile counseling units, and culturally sensitive approaches to address the diverse needs of these students. Similarly, Tumwesigye et al., (2023) suggests integrating community-based initiatives to reach underserved populations. Collaboration with stakeholders, as noted by Ndlovu et al., (2022), ensures sustainable improvements in service quality. Finally, training counselors to handle external students' unique challenges, as advocated by Adebowale et al., (2020), enhances service relevance. Collectively, these strategies awareness campaigns, peer counseling, digital investments, partnerships, tailored programs, and counselor training can significantly improve the effectiveness of guidance and counseling services at Makerere University, ensuring equitable support for all students.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

### **3.0 Introduction**

This chapter explained the research methodology used to examine if guidance and counseling services are available to and utilized by external undergraduate students at Makerere University. The population, study setting, sample size calculation, sampling methods and techniques, selection criteria, variable definition, research instruments, data collection procedures, data management and analysis, ethical considerations, study limitations, and the strategy for sharing the findings were all covered.

### **3.1 Research Design and Rationale**

In order to collect and analyze both quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously, this study used a concurrent triangulation mixed-methods approach as given by Muslin I. S. (2009). This design was used with the intention of improving the findings' validity and depth by combining specific personal experiences and perspectives with numerical trends to paint a more complete picture of the phenomenon.

Structured questionnaires were given to a representative sample of participants as part of the quantitative component. This strategy sought to produce statistical information about the frequency, trends, and determinants associated with students' use of guidance and counseling services.

In-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with chosen participants, such as students were conducted concurrently as part of the qualitative component. The goal of these techniques was to investigate individualized experiences, viewpoints, and situational elements that the survey might miss. Triangulation was made possible by the simultaneous use of both approaches, which allowed the conclusions drawn from the quantitative data to be supported or contrasted with themes that emerged from the qualitative data. This method improved the study's results' validity, thoroughness, and interpretive depth. It was especially suitable for examining intricate social phenomena when a comprehensive grasp of the problem required both empirical data and firsthand accounts.

### **3.2 Study Setting and Rationale**

The largest and oldest public institution in Uganda, Makerere University, which has a sizable population of external undergraduate students, served as the study's site. Because of its emphasis on external degree programs, the University's College of Education and External Studies more especially, the School of Distance and Lifelong Learning offered the perfect environment for our study. The data gathered was enhanced by the researcher's ability to reach an external undergraduate population of students (BYDW) with different perspectives and experiences with guidance and counseling services.

### **3.3 The Population of Study**

The study's target audience was Makerere University's external undergraduate students, particularly those participating in the External Studies Program in the College of Education. The selection of this demographic was based on its distinct features, which include low physical presence on campus, flexible learning arrangements, and frequently limited access to support services like counseling and assistance.

In order to produce representative data on the trends and degrees of use of guidance and counseling services, the study's quantitative component included a larger sample of external students. In the case of external learners, this guaranteed statistical generalizability.

Four important informants participated in in-depth interviews for the qualitative component. This made it possible to investigate more in-depth information about the individual experiences of students, perceived obstacles, and recommendations for enhancing the efficacy and accessibility of counseling services. Because it enabled both a broad overview through surveys and a rich knowledge through narratives, this group was perfect for a mixed-methods study, offering a holistic viewpoint on the topic being studied.

#### **3.4.1 Sample Size Determination**

The sample size was determined using the formula for simple random sampling with a single proportion as given by Yamane (1999). The formula used was as follows:

Where:

- **n** = sample size

- **N** = Gross population (40, number of external program undergraduate students under the Education department)
- **E** = Level of precision, estimated to be 0.05 at 95% confidence level.

From the calculation,

$$n = \frac{40}{1 + 50(0.05)^2}$$

**n = 36.**

Therefore, 36 students were used as the sample for this study, in addition to 4 key informants selected from different classes.

### 3.4.2 Sampling Methods

Convenience sampling was used in the study to choose survey respondents. This strategy was used because it gave the researcher access to students who were available and eager to engage during the time frame for gathering data. Because of the short time span and the dispersed character of external students, convenience sampling was especially appropriate.

Convenience sampling was also used to choose key informants for the study's qualitative component. In particular, class representatives worked with students to find individuals who were personable and eager to express their opinions about guidance and counseling services. Students who were easily reachable were given preference in the selection process, but they also offered insightful information on the opportunities and difficulties related to guiding and counseling services for external students.

### 3.4.3 Selection Criteria

**Inclusion criteria:** 36 external undergraduate students enrolled in the current academic year at Makerere University met the inclusion requirements.

**Exclusion criteria:** Students who chose not to participate or were unavailable throughout the data collecting period were excluded. The study population's relevance to the research issue and the findings' generalizability to the population of interest were guaranteed by these criteria.

### 3.4.4 Definition of Variables

**Dependent variables:** Accessibility and utilization of guidance and counseling services

**Independent variables:** Students' perceptions, barriers, and strategies for improvement

### **3.5 Data Collection Methods and Instruments**

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

#### *Quantitative Data Collection*

The primary instrument used to gather quantitative data was a structured questionnaire that participants self-administered. Given that every participant was literate and able to understand the language, the questionnaire was created in English. To allow for a certain amount of elaboration, it included both closed-ended and a few open-ended questions. There were four sections to the questionnaire. Students' sociodemographic traits (e.g., age, gender, and academic year) were evaluated in Section A; their attitudes and perceptions of guidance and counseling services were evaluated in Section B; their usage patterns and frequency were evaluated in Section C; and the obstacles preventing access to and use of these services were evaluated in Section D.

Five outside students from the Faculty of Commerce and Business who were not included in the study sample were used to pre-test the questionnaire in order to guarantee the items' validity, consistency, and clarity. Questions that were unclear were clarified, the wording was changed for easier comprehension, and the tool's logical flow was confirmed thanks to pre-test feedback. Small adjustments were made in response to the students' recommendations in order to improve reliability and guarantee that the instrument successfully recorded the desired data.

#### *Qualitative Data Collection*

In order to investigate the experiences, opinions, and recommendations of key informants concerning guidance and counseling services, in-depth interviews (IDIs) were employed for the qualitative component. Four important informants were chosen, and in-depth interviews (IDIs) with them were performed. These interviews gave the researcher the opportunity to delve deeply and privately into people's lives and viewpoints.

This sparked conversation and the sharing of ideas on topics like perceived utility, difficulties, and suggestions for enhancing service delivery. These were recorded on audio (with permission) and

notes were made. The process of gathering data persisted until topic saturation was reached. For uniformity, all interviews were done in English and followed a set of flexible yet organized prompts.

### **3.6 Data Quality Control**

Prior to being utilized for actual data collection, the questionnaire was pre-tested to guarantee its validity and reliability. To guarantee quality and consistency in data collection, research assistants received training. To reduce responder misunderstanding, the researcher made sure the data gathering tools used terminology that was plain and simple. To guarantee accuracy and completeness, data validation and verification were carried out during the data collection period. These steps made sure that the information gathered was accurate, legitimate, and pertinent to the study question.

### **3.7 Data Analysis**

The study utilized both quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques to comprehensively interpret the findings.

#### *Quantitative Data Analysis*

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 was used to code and analyze quantitative data obtained from questionnaires. Descriptive statistics like frequencies and percentages were used to examine the data in order to characterize the demographics of the students as well as their goals with relation to perceptions, obstacles, and recommended improvement measures. Tables presenting the data were followed by succinct narratives explaining the key findings.

#### *Qualitative Data Analysis*

Using theme content analysis, qualitative information gathered from focus groups and in-depth interviews was examined. Verbatim transcription of the audio recordings, repeated reading of the transcripts to become familiar with them, coding of the data into meaningful units, and the identification and classification of emerging themes and sub-themes pertaining to students' experiences, obstacles, and perceptions of guidance and counseling services were all part of this

process. Initially, manual coding was used, and themes were continually improved to make sure they appropriately represented the opinions of participants. Important quotes were included to bolster the main ideas and enhance the way the quantitative results were interpreted.

### **3.8 Anticipated Limitations of the Study**

Both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the study have a number of limitations: The study's reliance on self-reported information from interviews and questionnaires raised the possibility of response bias, in which participants might have underreported sensitive topics or overreported socially acceptable activities. This might have had an impact on the information's completeness and accuracy.

The results of the study may not have been as broadly applicable to other institutions or student groups because it was limited to one institution (Makerere University) and especially involved external students.

Due to their non-residential status and varied study schedules, external students were occasionally challenging to reach on a regular basis, which may have had an impact on response rates and focus group or interview participation.

Because the study was cross-sectional, it was unable to record how students' attitudes and use of counseling services changed over time, which limited the ability to draw conclusions about causality.

The researcher's interpretation of the data may have had an impact on the topic analysis in the qualitative component. This was addressed by using member checking and several coders to increase trustworthiness.

Because of stigma or a fear of being judged, some participants might have been reluctant to share personal experiences pertaining to counseling or mental health. This difficulty was addressed through the use of rapport-building techniques and confidential settings. When interpreting the data, these constraints were recognized, and methodological rigor, ethical considerations, and careful planning were used to try to reduce their impact.

### **3.9 Ethical Considerations**

Prior to data collection, participants were given information about the study's goals, risks, and rewards, and their consent was acquired.

Data were anonymised to avoid identification, and participant identities and responses were kept private.

At any point, participants might leave the research without incurring any fees or losing any benefits.

Throughout the study, the participants' autonomy was maintained and they were treated with respect and dignity.

### **3.10 Plan of Dissemination of Results**

A written report outlining the methodology, conclusions, and suggestions of the study that was turned in to the university.

Copies of peer-reviewed journal publications and conference presentations aimed at conferences centered on student development, education, and counseling were still in the researcher's possession.

## CHAPTER FOUR: DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

### 4.0 Introduction

The results of the study on the availability and use of guidance and counseling services among Makerere University's external undergraduate students are presented, examined, and interpreted in this chapter. 36 students in all, chosen using purposive and random sample methods, as well as four key informants chosen from various academic programs and administrative positions, provided the data. The study's goals and the themes that emerged from the quantitative and qualitative data provide the foundation for how the results are presented. For ease of comprehension and comparison, quantitative data gathered from students is presented in descriptive form utilizing tables, frequencies, and percentages. To complement and offer more in-depth understanding of the quantitative findings, thematic presentation of qualitative data from key informant interviews is used. With this mixed-methods approach, a more thorough understanding of the accessibility, utilization, and perceived efficacy of guidance and counseling services among external students is guaranteed.

### 4.1 Demographic characteristics of the participants

**(n=36)**

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
	20–24 years	25	69.4
	25–29 years	9	25.0
	30–34 years	2	5.6
Gender	Male	14	38.9
	Female	22	61.1
Year of Study	Year 1	1	2.8
	Year 2	6	16.7
	Year 3	5	13.9
	Year 4 and above	24	66.7
Home District or Region of Residence	Central	15	41.7
	Eastern	6	16.7
	Northern	5	13.9
	Western	9	25.0

Of the participants, 25 (69.4%) were between the ages of 20 and 24, while 2 (5.6%) were between the ages of 30 and 34.

The majority of respondents 22, or 61.1% were female, while the minority 14, or 38.9% were male. Year 1 students were the least represented group, with only 1 (2.8%) participant, while the majority, 24 (66.7%), were in Year 4 and above.

The majority of students, 15 (41.7%), who were asked about their home district or region of residence, were from the Central region, while the fewest, 5 (13.9%), were from the Northern region.

#### 4.2 Perceptions of guidance and counseling services

The objective of this section was to assess the perceptions of External students at Makerere University in regard to the accessibility and utilisation of guidance and counseling services.

(n=36)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Guidance and counseling services at Makerere University are tailored to meet the unique needs of external students.	Strongly agree	10	27.8
	Agree	17	47.2
	Disagree	5	13.9
	Strongly disagree	4	11.1
Cultural beliefs and stigma surrounding mental health make it difficult for students like me to seek counseling support.	Strongly agree	14	38.9
	Agree	13	36.1
	Disagree	5	13.9
	Strongly disagree	4	11.1
I think online counseling platforms are effective in supporting external students.	Strongly agree	12	33.3
	Agree	12	33.3
	Disagree	9	25.0
	Strongly disagree	3	8.3
Aware of the availability and location of guidance and counseling services provided by the university.	Yes	19	52.8
	No	17	47.2

Counseling services are important for improving both academic performance and personal well-being	Strongly agree	19	52.8
	Agree	14	38.9
	Disagree	1	2.8
	Strongly disagree	1	2.8

The majority of students, 17(47.2%), agreed that guidance and counseling services at Makerere University are tailored to meet the unique needs of external students, while the minority, 4(11.1%), strongly disagreed with this statement.

Regarding the influence of cultural beliefs and stigma on seeking counseling support, the majority, 14(38.9%), strongly agreed that such factors make it difficult for students to seek help, whereas the minority, 4(11.1%), strongly disagreed.

On the effectiveness of online counseling platforms in supporting external students, the majority responses were tied, with 12(33.3%) students each strongly agreeing and agreeing. In contrast, the minority, 3(8.3%), strongly disagreed.

Concerning awareness of the availability and location of guidance and counseling services, the majority, 19(52.8%), reported being aware, while the minority, 17(47.2%), were not aware.

Most students, 19(52.8%), strongly agreed that counseling services are important for improving both academic performance and personal well-being, while the least number of respondents, 1(2.8%), each disagreed and strongly disagreed.

The majority of participants believed that guidance and counseling services were significant and pertinent to students' overall wellbeing. According to the respondents, these services are meant to support students in maintaining their mental stability, handling social and academic stress, choosing the right career path, and overcoming personal obstacles including addictions, family problems, and poor self-esteem. "*Counseling is meant to ensure that students are stable and go through their academics without mental issues,*" one participant clarified. According to another, "*it keeps students healthy by guiding them in career pathways and preventing challenges like addictions.*" Others emphasized that "*counseling is meant to help students with issues from home,*

*work, and school issues like tuition," and that "it enables students to boost self-esteem and freely share their experiences."*

In spite of these favorable impressions, there was little actual use of the services. Due to ignorance, skepticism, or embarrassment, some respondents particularly male students admitted that they had never used the services. One male student, for example, clarified that *"I cannot open up to seek counseling because it is shameful for a man to show weakness."* *"I didn't see any reason to use them, and even if I had, I wouldn't because I don't trust anyone,"* said another. But according to one participant, *"I wanted to see what takes place there, who is in charge, and how counseling is conducted."* This participant said that they had used the services out of curiosity.

There were differing opinions about other external students. Because *"they think at least a student can be helped through counseling services,"* some students were characterized as hopeful. However, preconceptions and myths were pervasive. While some participants felt that *"it is only important in white communities, but a black African doesn't need counseling,"* others pointed out that *"many students believe counseling is for the weak and that it is better to confide in peers rather than counselors."*

In terms of appropriateness, participants believed that the services offered now were inadequately planned for international students. They underlined that outside students spend most of their time working or online and are rarely on campus. *"If they were tailored for us, they would be following up to keep us engaged,"* said one participant. Another pointed out that *"these services are rarely targeting us; external students cannot reach them at all."* All participants, however, concurred that by offering emotional support, lowering stress, and fostering resilience, counseling services can help both academic and personal achievement. *"These services play a role in academics because they help students to push harder,"* as one student said.

#### **4.2 Barriers to guidance and counseling services**

Objective three was to tell the reader what issues or challenges affect Makerere External students from seeking guidance and counseling services although they are designed to support students issues like academics, social wellbeing and also provide emotional support. Below are the results

from students in accordance to issues that stop them from seeking these services.

(n=36)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Cultural beliefs or attitudes that discouraged students from seeking counseling services at Makerere University	Counseling is viewed as a sign of weakness	19	52.8
	Mental health is associated with shame or embarrassment	8	22.2
	Counseling is only for people with serious problems	9	25.0
	None of the above affect me	5	13.9
How familiar are you with the benefits of guidance and counseling services	Very familiar	15	41.7
	Very familiar	17	47.2
	Not familiar	6	16.7
Institutional challenges have made it hard for you to access counseling services	There are too few counseling centers or facilities	14	38.9
	The services are not tailored to external students' needs	17	47.2
	There is a shortage of trained counselors	9	25.0
	Others unspecified	3	8.3
How internet-related issues affect your ability to access online counseling services	Poor internet connectivity prevents me from attending sessions	13	36.1
	High data costs make it difficult to participate	10	27.8
	I have reliable internet and do not face issues	9	25.0
	I do not trust online counseling, it doesn't feel like it is counseling.	6	16.7
Academics workload allow flexible utilization of counseling	Yes	21	58.3
	No	15	41.7
Which of these factors limits your physical access to counseling services on campus	I live far from campus	13	36.1
	I have work or family responsibilities during counseling hours	11	30.6
	Travel time or transport costs make it difficult	7	19.4
	None of the above	5	13.9

Among the cultural beliefs or attitudes that discouraged students from seeking counseling services at Makerere University, the majority, 19(52.8%), reported that counseling is viewed as a sign of weakness. In contrast, the minority, 5(13.9%), stated that none of the listed beliefs affect them.

Regarding familiarity with the benefits of guidance and counseling services, the majority of students, 17(47.2%), indicated they were very familiar with the benefits. On the other hand, the minority, 6(16.7%), reported not being familiar with the benefits of such services.

When asked about institutional challenges that hinder access to counseling services, the majority of respondents, 17(47.2%), identified that the services are not tailored to the needs of external students. The least reported challenge, mentioned by only 3(8.3%) respondents, fell under the “others specified” category.

In terms of internet-related issues affecting access to online counseling services, the most common barrier was poor internet connectivity, reported by 13(36.1%) of the students. Conversely, the least cited barrier was distrust in online counseling, with only 6(16.7%) indicating that they do not believe it feels like real counseling.

On whether academic workload allows flexible utilization of counseling services, the majority of students, 21(58.3%), agreed that it does. The minority, 15(41.7%), reported that their academic workload does not allow them to utilize counseling services flexibly.

Concerning factors that limit physical access to counseling services on campus, the majority of students, 13(36.1%), said that living far from campus was the main barrier. The least cited limitation, reported by 5(13.9%) of the students, was that none of the listed options affected their access.

### **4.3 Assessing Barriers and Proposing Improvements**

The study identified institutional/technological and cultural/personal constraints that impede usage. From a cultural standpoint, participants saw that social norms and familial upbringing hinder emotional expression and openness, especially in men. *"Starting from parents, they believe in punishments rather than sitting down to talk, and boys are not allowed to cry because it is taken as weakness, so they better keep quiet,"* one student noted. *"Counseling is basically considered to be needed by those with mental health issues but not healthy people,"* another person underlined.

Another powerful deterrent that surfaced was stigma. One participant clarified that *"people don't want to be used as examples when counselors are talking in public,"* while another stated that *"there is social labeling as weak, especially when you open up seeking counseling." Stereotypes were also found to be reinforced by peer pressure and social media; one student said that "many students undermine counseling services because of social media."*

Students identified poor publicity and a lack of awareness as the main issues at the institutional level. According to one participant, *"lecturers do not encourage students to use the services; they only discuss counseling when teaching about the topic."* Another said that *"the main problem is that the location of services is visible, but the advertisement is sub-optimal."*

Barriers posed by technology were also mentioned. Accessing resources was challenging for out-of-campus students who don't spend much time on campus. *"I am not sure whether these services are offered because they have no schedule on university activities,"* one participant stated. *"Honestly, they are hard to access online,"* another person added.

### 4.3 Strategies for improving guidance and counseling services

The objective of this section was to tell the reader that despite the challenges and barriers to seeking guidance and counseling services by External Undergraduate students at Makerere University, there are also possible solutions that can help improve the situation. These strategies were meant to make the services accessible and effective for the students. Below are the possible strategies for improving guidance and counseling services.

(n=36)			
Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Which of the following would best help raise awareness about the benefits of counseling among external students	Social media campaigns and university emails	21	58.3
	Radio programs and community sensitization workshops	14	38.9
	Posters and flyers at learning centers	1	2.8
How effective students think peer counseling would be in encouraging external students to seek help	Very effective	19	52.8
	Somewhat effective	13	36.1
	Not effective	4	11.1
	Free or subsidized internet data packages	21	58.3

What would improve access to online counseling services for external students	Training sessions on how to use online platforms	22	61.1
	Providing devices like smartphones or laptops	5	13.9
Which partnerships could help strengthen guidance and counseling services	Collaboration with NGOs for funding and resources	18	50.0
	Increased support from government for hiring staff counselors	17	47.2
	Engagement with community leaders for outreach to students	6	16.7
What program features would make counseling more suitable for external students	After-hours or weekend sessions	11	30.6
	Mobile counseling units for remote learners	6	16.7
	Programs that address both academic and personal issues	19	52.8
How important is counselor training focused on the unique needs of external students	Very important	28	77.8
	Somewhat important	8	22.2
Would you be interested in online counselling services	Yes	31	86.1
	No	5	13.9

When asked which method would best help raise awareness about the benefits of counseling among external students, the majority, 21(58.3%), selected social media campaigns and university emails as the most effective strategy, while the minority, 1(2.8%), preferred posters and flyers at learning centers.

In regard to how effective students think peer counseling would be in encouraging external students to seek help, the majority, 19(52.8%), viewed it as very effective, whereas the least number of students, 4(11.1%), believed it would not be effective.

To improve access to online counseling services, the majority of students, 22(61.1%), felt that training sessions on how to use online platforms would be most helpful. In contrast, the minority, 5(13.9%), suggested that providing devices like smartphones or laptops would be more beneficial. When considering partnerships that could help strengthen guidance and counseling services, most students, 18(50.0%), recommended collaboration with NGOs for funding and resources. The least favored option, reported by 6(16.7%) of the respondents, was engagement with community leaders for outreach.

Regarding which program features would make counseling more suitable for external students, the majority, 19(52.8%), suggested programs that address both academic and personal issues, while the least number, 6(16.7%), selected mobile counseling units for remote learners.

On the importance of counselor training focused on the unique needs of external students, the majority, 28(77.8%), stated it is very important, while the minority, 8(22.2%), considered it only somewhat important.

Lastly, when asked about their interest in online counseling services, a large majority, 31(86.1%), expressed interest, whereas only 5(13.9%) indicated no interest.

#### **4.4 (b) Suggesting Strategies to Enhance the Effectiveness of Services**

A range of tactics were put forth by the participants to increase external students' access to and use of guidance and counseling services. Integrating online counseling services like Google Meet, WhatsApp, or call centers was one of the main recommendations. *"Creating online guidance and counseling services would make it easier for external students to access help,"* one student proposed. Another even suggested that *"establishing a call center and training AIs in delivering these services could help."*

Raising awareness was another common tactic. Respondents underlined the need of aggressive marketing using posters, lecturers, class representatives, and social media. One participant suggested, for instance, that *"the university should increase outreach by having personal conversations with students and telling them the benefits of services."* Another emphasized that *"counselors should use student-to-student approaches instead of posters and files."*

Although opinions on peer counseling were divided, it was generally approved. While one respondent warned that *"peers may mock you instead of understanding you,"* the majority of respondents said that *"it is easier to open up to age mates who are facing the same issues."*

Consistent mentoring and follow-up were also suggested by the participants. While one respondent focused on *"carrying out surveys regarding what is affecting students,"* another recommended *"coming up with personnel responsible for reminding students of their appointments and following up."*

Lastly, students emphasized the value of using mixed strategies that combine in-person and online counseling. *"Counseling services should be offered both online and when external students are at campus, so they can catch up,"* one said in a summary.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATION**

### **5.0 Introduction**

This chapter presents a detailed interpretation and discussion of the study findings in relation to the objectives of the research, existing literature, and theoretical framework. The discussion is structured according to the study objectives and key themes that emerged from the data. It highlights the major findings, compares them with previous research, and explores possible explanations for any similarities or differences observed. Additionally, the chapter addresses emerging issues from key informant interviews responses. The discussion is guided by both quantitative and qualitative results, giving a balanced interpretation of the study's outcomes.

### **5.1 Discussion of findings**

#### **5.1.1 Perceptions of guidance and counseling services**

The study revealed that 17(47.2%) of the respondents agreed that the guidance and counseling services at Makerere University are tailored to meet the unique needs of external students, while only 4(11.1%) strongly disagreed. This suggests a moderate level of satisfaction among external students, possibly indicating that recent efforts such as outreach programs or flexible session timings have had some positive impact. However, the fact that over half of the students did not strongly agree reflects that gaps in customization and inclusivity of services remain. This finding contrasts with Nalwadda et al., (2018), who emphasized that external students often feel alienated from university counseling services due to lack of tailored programming. However, the partial improvement aligns with Adebowale et al., (2020), who highlighted the growing role of peer counseling programs in making services feel more accessible and relevant to students' specific contexts.

A substantial proportion, 14(38.9%) of students, strongly agreed that cultural beliefs and stigma hinder them from seeking counseling services, with only 4(11.1%) strongly disagreeing. This finding underscores the entrenched socio-cultural norms that associate mental health challenges with personal weakness or spiritual failure, especially among students from rural or conservative backgrounds. Such stigma likely contributes to low counseling utilization despite service availability. This supports findings by Tumwesigye et al., (2023), who reported that stigma, particularly in rural Uganda, continues to discourage help-seeking behavior. Similarly, Mutisya and Kioli (2018) observed that many students misinterpret counseling as irrelevant or shameful,

reinforcing avoidance due to societal pressure. The persistence of this barrier calls for culturally sensitive awareness campaigns aimed at normalizing mental health discussions.

An equal number of students, 12(33.3%), strongly agreed and agreed that online counseling platforms are effective in supporting external students, while only 3(8.3%) strongly disagreed. This suggests a generally favorable view of digital counseling, possibly due to its convenience for remote learners, although technological limitations may hinder full acceptance. The split in perception likely reflects variations in internet access, digital literacy, and students' prior experience with online support systems. This aligns with the findings of Kiguli and Namutebi (2021), who noted that while online platforms introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic were appreciated by some students, others faced challenges due to poor connectivity and data affordability. The favorable responses may also reflect optimism driven by digital integration in education, as advocated by Lee et al., (2023) and Kamau et al., (2024), who supported AI-driven and online tools as avenues for increasing access among hard-to-reach student populations.

Slightly more than half of the students, 19(52.8%), reported awareness of the availability and location of counseling services, while a close 17(47.2%) were unaware. This finding reveals a communication gap, possibly due to the limited visibility of counseling offices or inadequate information dissemination through platforms accessible to external students. External students may miss out on information given primarily during in-person events or internal campus communications. This is consistent with Ndlovu et al., (2022), who emphasized that low awareness remains a significant barrier to counseling utilization. Mugisha et al., (2025) similarly highlighted the role of partnerships and targeted outreach in bridging this awareness gap. The near-even split in this study indicates that while some progress has been made, significant improvements in information delivery and outreach strategies are still necessary.

The majority of students, 19(52.8%), strongly agreed that counseling services are vital for enhancing academic performance and personal well-being, with only 1(2.8%) disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. This strong consensus may reflect increased awareness of the interconnectedness between mental health and academic success, as well as a recognition of counseling as a preventive and supportive measure. It may also indicate that students have

observed or experienced improvements in coping, motivation, or performance through counseling interventions. This finding directly contradicts the earlier conclusions of Mutisya and Kioli (2018), who found that many students underestimated counseling's relevance to academic performance. Instead, the current result aligns with Kamau et al., (2024), who reported that contemporary students are becoming more appreciative of counseling as a holistic support system. This evolution in perception may be attributed to growing advocacy for mental wellness in higher education settings.

Guidance and counselling services were consistently described as vital for students' mental health, academic stability, career planning, and addressing personal challenges. They were seen as a way to remain "*stable and go through their academics without mental issues,*" to prevent challenges such as addictions, and to boost confidence through self-expression. This resonates with literature showing counselling enhances wellbeing and resilience when accessible (Nalwadda et al., 2018). Yet, earlier studies suggest that students often underestimate its academic role (Mutisya & Kioli, 2018), indicating that recognition of benefits may not always translate into integration of counselling into academic life.

Despite acknowledging the importance of counselling, actual use of services was reported to be low. Barriers included lack of awareness, mistrust, and stigma, particularly among male students who felt that "*as a man, it is a shame to reveal weakness, hence I cannot open up to seek counseling.*" Others openly admitted, "*I don't trust anyone.*" Such perspectives strongly align with research showing that low awareness remains a major obstacle (Ndlovu et al., 2022) and that cultural stigma discourages students from seeking professional help (Tumwesigye et al., 2023). The explicit gendered framing of counselling as a weakness adds an important dimension that extends what is already documented in the literature.

At the same time, many preferred turning to peers, with the view that "*counseling is for the weak*" and "*it is better to confide in peers than counselors.*" This pattern supports findings that peer-counselling can be an effective way of reducing stigma and building trust (Adebowale et al., 2020). It suggests that students' preference for peers is rooted not only in accessibility but also in a deeper sense of psychological safety and shared experience.

Accessibility challenges were especially pronounced among external students who felt the services were not designed with their circumstances in mind. One explained that *“if they were tailored for us, they would be following up to keep us engaged,”* while another added that *“these services are rarely targeting us; they cannot be reached by external students at all.”* This reflects earlier evidence that counselling infrastructure is not well adapted for external learners (Nalwadda et al., 2018) and echoes findings on the limitations of online platforms, where poor internet and high costs constrained uptake (Kiguli & Namutebi, 2021). The emphasis on follow-up and active engagement adds a fresh practical insight into how services might be reshaped to meet these needs.

The role of technology was viewed with caution. While recent studies point to AI-driven and community-based counselling tools as potential enhancers of access (Lee et al., 2023; Kamau et al., 2024), mistrust and confidentiality concerns remain significant obstacles. As one student put it, *“I would not because I don’t trust anyone.”* This implies that without strong privacy safeguards and integration with human support, digital tools alone may fail to address the underlying scepticism.

Cultural narratives also played a role, with some expressing that *“it is only important in white communities, but a black African doesn’t need counseling.”* This racialised myth expands on existing literature, which has documented stigma broadly (Tumwesigye et al., 2023) but has not deeply examined such racial framings. It suggests that culturally grounded strategies are necessary to challenge myths and normalize help-seeking within African contexts.

Nevertheless, counselling was still strongly linked to academic resilience. One participant explained that *“these services play a role in academics because they help students to push harder.”* This resonates with findings that counselling can improve academic outcomes when services are accessible and trusted (Mugisha et al., 2025). Interestingly, this contrasts with studies suggesting that students often doubt its relevance to academics (Mutisya & Kioli, 2018), showing that perceptions may differ depending on awareness, exposure, and context.

### **5.1.2 Barriers to guidance and counseling services**

Just 5 students (13.9%) claimed none of the listed ideas influenced them, while 19 students (52.8%) felt that cultural beliefs portray counseling as a show of weakness. This study emphasizes the widespread stigma attached to seeking treatment, particularly among students from conservative or rural communities where it is customary to resolve emotional difficulties in secret or through family and church channels. Counseling is often associated with personal failure, which deters students from getting help when they need it. This supports the findings of Adebowale et al. (2020), who observed that a large number of students absorb cultural norms that stigmatize or disgrace mental health conditions. Likewise, Tumwesigye et al. (2023) highlighted that stigma is a significant barrier to receiving counseling services and called for culturally grounded awareness campaigns to challenge these harmful beliefs.

Six students (16.7%) said they were not familiar with any benefits of counseling, whereas 17 students (47.2%) said they were extremely familiar with them. This implies that even while more people are becoming aware of the value of counseling, a sizable portion of the population is still unaware of how it can enhance both academic and personal wellbeing. Lack of exposure to mental health education or inadequate marketing of the counseling unit's range of services could be the cause of this knowledge gap. Similar findings were made by Mutisya and Kioli (2018), who noted that many students undervalue counseling because they believe it is only important in times of crisis. They contend that these false beliefs make it less likely for students to seek help for common problems like stress or interpersonal conflicts.

The most commonly mentioned issue was that counseling services are not adapted to the needs of external students, as reported by 17 (47.2%) of the students. Just three people (8.3%) chose "other" as a challenge. This illustrates a structural flaw in the way services are planned and provided, which frequently puts internal students' accessibility and timetables first. The existing counseling schedule is inconvenient for many external students who might attend classes on the weekends or in the evenings. When designing student services, universities frequently fail to consider the unique requirements of external learners, as noted by Nalwadda et al. (2018). Additionally, Ndlovu et al. (2022) highlighted that underutilization is a result of rigid counseling paradigms. These results support Mwangi and Oketch's (2018) recommendation that services be reoriented toward student-centered, flexible models that account for the varied realities of external students.

When it came to internet-related difficulties, the most frequently reported problem was inadequate internet access, which was stated by 13 students (36.1%), while the least frequently mentioned problem was mistrust of online counseling, which was mentioned by just 6 students (16.7%). The focus on connectivity rather than trust implies that while many students are willing to use online venues, they are thwarted by budgetary and infrastructure constraints. These findings are consistent with those of Kiguli and Namutebi (2021), who found that technical constraints including erratic internet and expensive data plans severely hampered the effectiveness of digital counseling programs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, Lee et al. (2023) pointed out that students' capacity to properly utilize these services may be hampered by gaps in digital literacy and a lack of technical assistance.

In examining the connection between academic burden and the ability to use counseling services on a flexible basis, 21 students (58.3%) agreed that their workload permitted them to do so, whereas 15 students (41.7%) disagreed. This result implies that even while most students think they can find time for counseling, a sizable fraction still feel that their academic schedule is restricted and demanding. Individual time management abilities or varying program requirements may have an impact on these discrepancies. Institutional time limitations are a major structural hurdle for external students who are already juggling their studies with work or family responsibilities, according to Mutisya and Kioli (2018).

Thirteen (36.1%) of the students stated that living far from school was the most common reason that restricted their physical access to counseling services, while only five (13.9%) stated that none of the options on the list had an impact on their access. This suggests that for external students, particularly those who are based in rural places or lack regular transportation, geographical distance is a major obstacle. Physical distance and restricted mobility frequently discourage external students from using campus-based support services, according to Tumwesigye et al. (2023). To lessen this problem, Mugisha et al. (2025) suggested using decentralized services and mobile counseling units.

The qualitative results reveal a complicated interaction between institutional, logistical, technological, and cultural hurdles that restrict external undergraduate students' ability to effectively use guidance and counseling services. According to students' cultural perspectives, openness is discouraged by cultural views and familial background, especially for men. *"Starting from parents, they believe in punishments rather than sitting down to talk, and boys are not allowed to cry because it is taken as weakness, so they better keep quiet,"* one person noted.

These gendered norms support previous research showing that cultural stigma and misconceptions have a significant impact on students' unwillingness to ask for assistance (Adebowale et al., 2020). The idea that *"counseling is basically considered to be needed by those with mental health issues but not healthy people"* is another example of the misconception that counseling is only appropriate in extreme situations. This is in line with Mutisya and Kioli (2018), who pointed out that students frequently overlook the regular academic and psychological advantages of counseling.

One common deterrent mentioned was stigma. Students indicated worry of being *"used as examples when counselors are talking in public"* and characterized *"social labelling as weak, especially when you open up seeking counseling."* These stories are similar to those of Tumwesigye et al. (2023), who highlighted that fear of being judged and cultural shame continue to be among the biggest obstacles to the use of mental health services. Peer influence and digital platforms were also reported to reinforce stereotypes, with some arguing that *"because of social media, many students undermine counseling services."* This demonstrates how stigma is spreading outside of conventional cultural contexts and being exacerbated by online discourses.

Another important factor was institutional constraints. One student clarified that *"lecturers only talk about counseling when teaching about the topic, but they do not encourage students to use the services,"* highlighting the persistent lack of awareness and poor exposure. The key issue, according to another, is that *"the location of services is visible, but advertisement is sub-optimal."* This is consistent with the findings of Nalwadda et al. (2018), who discovered that universities frequently neglect to modify counseling programs to the realities of external students, and Ndlovu et al. (2022), who maintained that low knowledge continues to be a significant barrier to service utilization. According to Mwangi and Oketch (2018), these disparities are made worse by a lack

of funds and inadequate institutional investment, which limits the ability to recruit employees and create adaptable programs.

Barriers related to technology were also significant. As one foreign student put it, *"I am not sure whether these services are offered because they have no schedule on university activities,"* and another said, *"honestly, they are hard to access online,"* several external students expressed difficulty using services remotely. These observations align with those of Kiguli and Namutebi (2021), who reported that inadequate connectivity and expensive data plans weakened online platforms launched during COVID-19. They also support the findings of Lee et al. (2023), who discovered that students' ability to effectively use telecounseling is hampered by deficiencies in computer literacy. According to Ochieng et al. (2025), the only way to overcome these obstacles is to invest in digital infrastructure, provide subsidized internet access, and provide training in digital literacy.

Lastly, time and location limitations are also important, especially for external students who live off campus and juggle employment, school, and family obligations. The idea that services are not suited to these students' needs is strengthened by the fact that they frequently do not have the opportunity to use them during regular business hours. In addition to supporting Mugisha et al. (2025), who call for adaptable models like mobile units or after-hours counseling to close the gap, this closely resembles Tumwesigye et al. (2023) and Mutisya and Kioli (2018), who highlighted how logistical constraints restrict access.

### **5.1.3 Strategies for improving guidance and counseling services**

A considerable preference for digital communication channels is indicated by the conclusion that the majority of students, 21 (58.3%), thought that university emails and social media campaigns were the best ways to spread the word about counseling services. This probably results from the fact that the majority of international students are largely dependent on online resources for academic updates and are geographically separated from the university campus. Only one responder (2.8%) chose posters and flyers, which may indicate their low campus presence and the inefficiency of conventional approaches in reaching them. This aligns with Kamau et al., (2024), who emphasized the effectiveness of digital sensitization campaigns in promoting mental health

awareness and normalizing help-seeking behavior among university students. This is further supported by qualitative remarks, where participants suggest that university email, social media, and WhatsApp are better outreach channels.

Only four people (11.1%) thought peer counseling was unsuccessful, whereas the majority (19, or 52.8%) thought it was highly beneficial. This shows that peer-to-peer support models are generally trusted, probably because students and peer counselors are relatable and have similar experiences. According to one participant, peer therapy lessens stigma and anxiety, suggesting that these programs could provide a more approachable option than traditional counseling. Confidentiality issues were brought up, nevertheless, indicating the necessity of appropriate instruction and moral standards. These conclusions are corroborated by Mugisha et al. (2025), who found that, with proper management, peer counseling programs can close service gaps and lessen stigma.

When considering potential partnerships to increase guidance and counseling services, half of the respondents (18, or 50.0%) supported collaboration with NGOs, while just six respondents (16.7%) supported interaction with community leaders. The idea that NGOs are better equipped to fund, resource, and develop mental health projects may be the reason behind this. These views are in line with those of Ochieng et al. (2025), who highlighted that NGOs usually provide the information, training opportunities, and material support necessary to boost service capacity.

However, concerns about stigma or the belief that they are unimportant in a university setting may be the reasons for the lack of support for enlisting community leaders.

Just six respondents (16.7%) supported interaction with community leaders, whereas half of the respondents (18, or 50.0%) supported collaboration with NGOs when thinking about possible partnerships to expand guidance and counseling services. This might be reflection of the belief that NGOs are better able to finance, resource, and innovate mental health initiatives. These opinions align with those of Ochieng et al. (2025), who emphasized that NGOs frequently contribute knowledge, opportunities for training, and material assistance that are essential for increasing service capacity. However, there may be a lack of support for enlisting community leaders because of worries about stigma or the idea that they are irrelevant in a university context.

Just six students (16.7%) chose mobile counseling units, whereas 19 students (52.8%) suggested combining academic and personal support services in the program design. This result points to a want for extensive, adaptable programming that takes into account the complicated lifestyles of external students. Counseling programs that address both academic stress and personal difficulties are likely to be more appealing and effective because many external students balance employment, family, and academics. This integrated approach is supported by Mwangi and Oketch (2018), who promote student-centered counseling models that are adapted to a range of requirements.

Of the respondents, 28 (77.8%) thought it was extremely necessary to train counselors expressly to meet the requirements of external students, while just 8 (22.2%) thought it was somewhat important. This shows that the deficiencies in counselors' readiness to work with this particular student population have been clearly identified. This view was supported by qualitative replies, which pointed to a lack of comprehension and accessibility in the services that are now available. These results back up the recommendation made by Adebowale et al. (2020) for professional development courses that teach counselors how to engage with underserved or unconventional student groups.

Finally, a significant majority of students 31, or 86.1% showed interest in online counseling services, suggesting that digital mental health solutions are widely accepted. Just five people, or 13.9%, expressed no interest. This is in line with a larger trend in higher education, where digital tools are being used more and more because they are accessible and convenient. If online counseling systems are user-friendly and reasonably priced, they can greatly increase access for distant learners (Lee et al., 2023). Interview responses did, however, also draw attention to implementation obstacles like visibility, availability, and scheduling. Thus, even though there is a lot of interest, it takes careful planning, resource investment, and ongoing student involvement to turn that interest into real usage.

In order to increase the accessibility of counseling services, participants underlined the integration of digital platforms like Google Meet, WhatsApp, and call centers, pointing out that *"establishing online guidance and counseling services would make it easier for external students to access help."* This is in line with Lee et al. (2023), who noted that although issues like slow internet connectivity

and expensive data plans still exist, online counseling platforms are essential for getting around regional restrictions. By emphasizing students' receptivity to cutting-edge technological solutions, the proposal that "training AIs in delivering these services as well as establishing a call center could help" builds on the literature and supports suggestions for bolstering digital tools and infrastructure.

Students emphasized the importance of focused promotion via social media, class representatives, lecturers, and posters, which also played a significant part in raising awareness. *"The university should increase outreach by having personal conversations with students and telling them the benefits of services,"* for example, was one suggestion. Another commented that *"counselors should use student-to-student approaches instead of posters and files."* These opinions are in line with Kamau et al. (2024), who stress the importance of awareness efforts via digital and traditional media in de-stigmatizing counseling and normalizing help-seeking behaviors. The recommendation for peer-driven sensitization is in line with Mugisha et al., (2025) findings, which showed that peer outreach and counseling were effective in overcoming hurdles linked to trust and culture.

Since most students noted that *"it is easier to open up to age mates who are facing the same issues,"* peer counseling itself became a frequently suggested practice. But there were other worries expressed as well; one warned that *"peers may mock you instead of understanding you."* This dichotomy is consistent with the literature, which highlights the value of formal training as recommended by Adebowale et al., (2020) and praises peer support for relatability and accessibility (Mugisha et al., 2025). However, concerns regarding professionalism and secrecy are still legitimate.

Participants also emphasized the importance of regular follow-up and mentoring, proposing strategies such as assigning specific staff to *"remind students of their appointments and follow up" and initiatives to "carry out surveys regarding what is affecting students."* These suggestions are in line with those made by Ochieng et al., (2025), who encourage organized monitoring and assessment systems backed by government and non-governmental organizations in order to maintain the efficacy of counseling programs.

One participant suggested that *"counseling services should be offered both online and when external students are at campus, so they can catch up,"* highlighting the use of mixed approaches as a workable alternative. This proposal is in line with the recommendations of Mwangi and Oketch (2018) and Tumwesigye et al. (2023), who advocate for adaptable, customized interventions that address the particular needs of international students by fusing digital advances with in-person assistance.

## **5.2 Conclusion**

In summary, the results of this study show that external undergraduate students at Makerere University have a complicated and conflicting opinion of guidance and counseling services. Even though a sizable portion of students acknowledge the potential benefits of these services in promoting both academic and personal well-being, many are either ignorant of their existence or believe they are not well catered to the particular requirements of external learners. Major obstacles to utilization include operational difficulties such as awkward office hours and inadequate communication, cultural shame, and restricted visibility. Additionally, key informant responses indicate that even while counseling is regarded to be important, many external students have found the services irrelevant or unavailable due to structural limitations, lack of understanding, and negative peer judgments.

The study found a number of interconnected obstacles that prevent Makerere University's external undergraduate students from using and gaining access to guidance and counseling services. According to survey results and key informant interviews, stigma and avoidance are greatly influenced by the cultural belief that seeking counseling is a sign of weakness or mental illness. Although many students are aware of the advantages of counseling, their accessibility is restricted by institutional and structural issues including rigid service hours, a lack of knowledge about the procedures, and services that are not customized to meet the needs of foreign students. The situation is made worse by technological obstacles such as inadequate internet connectivity, expensive data plans, and mistrust of online platforms, particularly for individuals who depend on virtual services.

All things considered, these results highlight the necessity of counseling services that are culturally aware, effectively articulated, and structurally flexible in order to accommodate external students' academic timetables, technology needs, and psychological requirements. The study identified a number of useful and student-centered tactics that could greatly increase the efficacy and accessibility of guidance and counseling services for Makerere University's external undergraduate students. One of the most important of these is using digital communication platforms, especially social media and university emails, to spread the word about the advantages and accessibility of services.

Although concerns over anonymity were raised, the majority of students acknowledged the potential of peer counseling to lessen stigma and promote help-seeking, making it another attractive strategy. Enhancing the availability of digital tools and teaching students how to use online platforms were emphasized as crucial measures to improve access to virtual counseling. Strong support was given to structural changes such providing services on the weekends and in the evenings, modifying curricula to accommodate both personal and academic concerns, and increasing counselor capacity through specialized training. Partnerships with NGOs were also shown to be beneficial for increasing service reach and resource availability.

### **5.3 RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **University Administration**

By establishing satellite or virtual counseling centers and expanding office hours to weekends and evenings, the university administration should give priority to reorganizing guidance and counseling services to better serve international students. The administration should also spend money on counseling training so that counselors can recognize and meet the special academic and psychosocial demands of external students. Improving communication via focused digital channels, such as university emails and social media, can raise awareness and exposure of these services. In order to increase financing and resources, cooperative collaborations with NGOs should be encouraged.

## **Counseling Department and Service Providers**

To lessen the stigma attached to asking for help, counseling professionals should create confidential, culturally sensitive peer counseling programs that make use of student support networks. They should plan frequent training sessions to give students the tools they need to use online counseling platforms efficiently and guarantee that the services are easily available. In order to promote use, counselors must also actively participate in outreach initiatives that demystify counseling, explain how to obtain services, and highlight the advantages and confidentiality of therapy.

## **Students and Student Organizations**

Through peer education and awareness campaigns utilizing social media and other digital platforms, students and student leaders should actively participate in raising awareness of the value of mental health and therapy. By sharing good testimonies and offering support to peers in need, they can help debunk cultural stigmas and stereotypes surrounding counseling. In order to foster a more encouraging campus environment, student organizations and the counseling department should work together to plan workshops or events that are specifically geared toward the difficulties faced by international students.

## **Policy Makers and Educational Stakeholders**

The development and implementation of policies that require inclusive mental health care for all student categories, including external learners, should be the responsibility of policy makers and education authorities. The adoption of online counseling services depends on infrastructure investment to increase internet availability and affordability. In order to improve resource availability and guarantee that counseling services are thorough, easily available, and culturally relevant, policies should also promote the inclusion of mental health awareness in academic curricula and facilitate collaborations between academic institutions and non-governmental organizations.

## **5.4 Implication of the findings to educational institutions and counseling**

### **Implications of the findings to Educational Institutions**

The results highlight how urgently educational establishments like Makerere University must reconsider and revamp their advice and counseling programs to be more inclusive and sensitive to the unique requirements of international students. Institutions must admit that the conventional counseling approaches, which are frequently designed for internal students with set timetables, are inadequate for the increasing number of external learners who encounter particular difficulties such as restricted physical access, social stigma, and technological difficulties. This necessitates adaptable service delivery options, such as satellite centers nearer to external students, virtual platforms, and extended hours. Additionally, organizations should improve their communication tactics by using social media and digital media to spread the word about the availability and advantages of counseling.

### **Implications of the findings to Counseling**

The results show that counselors must modify their methods to better engage external students by creating interventions that are stigma-reducing and culturally sensitive. In order to dispel frequent misconceptions and myths among students, counselors must take the initiative to educate them about the confidentiality of counseling and its wide range of applications beyond crisis intervention. The results also suggest that in order to help students successfully use online counseling platforms, counselors should include training in digital literacy. Counselors must also push for program designs and service hours that accommodate external learners' schedules and lives. Counselors can enhance this underprivileged student group's psychological support and academic results by increasing trust, accessibility, and use of mental health services.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX I: CONSENT FORM

**Title of the Study:**

**ACCESSIBILITY AND UTILIZATION OF GUIDANCE AND COUNSELING SERVICES AMONG EXTERNAL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AT MAKERERE UNIVERSITY**

**Researcher:**

Kemigisha Vaola

Registration Number: 21/U/18385/EXT

**Introduction:**

You are kindly invited to take part in this research study. The purpose of the study is to assess the accessibility and utilization of guidance and counseling services among external undergraduate students at Makerere University.

Before you decide whether to participate, it is important that you understand why the study is being conducted and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully.

**Purpose of the Study.**

This study aims to identify the level of awareness, accessibility, and use of guidance and counseling services by external students, as well as the challenges faced and suggestions for improvement.

**Participant's Role.**

If you agree to take part, you will be asked to respond to a questionnaire that may take approximately 20–30 minutes. Your participation is entirely voluntary.

**Confidentiality:**

All information collected in this study will be treated with the strictest confidentiality. Your responses will be coded and analyzed anonymously. No personally identifying information will be shared or published.

**Voluntary Participation.**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any point without giving a reason and without any penalty or effect on your academic status.

**Risks and Benefits.**

There are no anticipated risks in participating in this study. However, you may benefit by reflecting on your experience with counseling services, and your input may help improve such services for other students.

**Contact Information.**

If you have any questions or need further clarification about this study, you may contact:

**Kemigisha Vaola**

Tel: .....

Email: .....

**Declaration of Consent.**

I have read and understood the information above. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX II: QUESTIONNAIRE

### SECTION A: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Please circle the appropriate option:

**1. Age of a student**

- a) Below 20 years
- b) 20–24 years
- c) 25–29 years
- d) 30–34 years
- e) 35 years and above

**2. Gender:**

- a) Male
- b) Female

**3. Year of Study:**

- a) Year 1
- b) Year 2
- c) Year 3
- d) Year 4 and above

**4. Home District or Region of Residence:**

- a) Central
- b) Eastern
- c) Northern
- d) Western
- e) Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

### SECTION B: PERCEPTIONS OF GUIDANCE AND COUNSELING SERVICES

5. I believe that guidance and counseling services at Makerere University are tailored to meet the unique needs of external students. **(Choose the most appropriate single choice)**
- a) Strongly agree
  - b) Agree
  - c) Disagree
  - d) Strongly disagree

6. Cultural beliefs and stigma surrounding mental health make it difficult for students like me to seek counseling support. **(Choose the most appropriate single choice)**
- a) Strongly agree
  - b) Agree
  - c) Disagree
  - d) Strongly disagree
7. I think online counseling platforms are effective in supporting external students. **(Choose the most appropriate single choice)**
- a) Strongly agree
  - b) Agree
  - c) Disagree
  - d) Strongly disagree
8. I am aware of the availability and location of guidance and counseling services provided by the university. **(Choose the most appropriate single choice)**
- a) Yes
  - b) No
  - c) If yes, where is the location? .....
  - .....
  - d) If no, what explains this state? .....
  - .....
  - .....
  - .....
9. Counseling services are important for improving both academic performance and personal well-being. **9.. (Choose the most appropriate single choice)**
- a) Strongly agree
  - b) Agree
  - c) Disagree
  - d) Strongly disagree

**SECTION C: BARRIERS TO GUIDANCE AND COUNSELING SERVICES**

10. What cultural beliefs or attitudes discourage you from seeking counseling services at Makerere University? **(Choose the most appropriate single choice)**
- (a) Counseling is viewed as a sign of weakness
  - (b) Mental health is associated with shame or embarrassment
  - (c) Counseling is only for people with serious problems
  - (d) None of the above affect me
11. How familiar are you with the benefits of guidance and counseling services? **(Choose the most appropriate single choice)**
- (a) Very familiar
  - (b) Somewhat familiar
  - (c) Not familiar
  - (d) I don't believe the services are useful
12. Which of the following institutional challenges have made it hard for you to access counseling services? **(Choose the most appropriate single choice)**
- (a) There are too few counseling centers or facilities
  - (b) The services are not tailored to external students' needs
  - (c) There is a shortage of trained counselors
  - (d) Others specify .....
13. How do internet-related issues affect your ability to access online counseling services? **(Choose the most appropriate single choice)**
- (a) Poor internet connectivity prevents me from attending sessions
  - (b) High data costs make it difficult to participate
  - (c) I have reliable internet and do not face issues
  - (d) I do not trust online counseling, it doesn't feel like it is counseling.
14. Does your academics workload allow you flexible time for using other services like counseling? **(Choose the most appropriate single choice)**
- a) Yes
  - b) No
  - c) If No, state why
- .....

**15. Which of these factors limits your physical access to counseling services on campus?**

**(Choose the most appropriate single choice)**

- (a) I live far from campus
- (b) I have work or family responsibilities during counseling hours
- (c) Travel time or transport costs make it difficult
- (d) None of the above

**SECTION D: STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING GUIDANCE AND COUNSELING SERVICES**

**16. How effective do you think peer counseling would be in encouraging external students to seek help? (Choose the most appropriate single choice)**

- (a) Very effective
- (b) Somewhat effective
- (c) Not effective
- (d) others specify .....

**17. What would improve access to online counseling services for external students? (Choose the most appropriate single choice)**

- (a) Free or subsidized internet data packages
- (b) Training sessions on how to use online platforms
- (c) Providing devices like smartphones or laptops
- (d) others specify .....

**18. Which partnerships could help strengthen guidance and counseling services? (Choose the most appropriate single choice)**

- (a) Collaboration with NGOs for funding and resources
- (b) Increased support from government for hiring staff counselors
- (c) Engagement with community leaders for outreach to students
- (d) others specify .....

**19. What program features would make counseling more suitable for external students? (Choose the most appropriate single choice)**

- (a) After-hours or weekend sessions
- (b) Mobile counseling units for remote learners

- (c) Programs that address both academic and personal issues
- (d) others specify .....

20. How important is counselor training focused on the unique needs of external students?

**(Choose the most appropriate single choice)**

- (a) Very important
- (b) Somewhat important
- (c) Not important

21. Would you be interested in online counseling services? **Choose the most appropriate single choice)**

- a)Yes
- b)No.
- c).If No from 21(1) above, why?

.....  
.....

End

Thanks for your cooperation

## APPENDIX III: QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW GUIDE

**Study Title:** *Accessibility and Utilization of Guidance and Counseling Services Among External Undergraduate Students at Makerere University*

**Tool Type:** In-Depth Interview Guide for Key Informants

**Participants:** Selected external undergraduate students

**Approach:** Semi-structured, open-ended, and exploratory

### SECTION A: Exploring Perceptions and Use of Guidance and Counseling Services

1. How do you personally understand the purpose of guidance and counseling services at Makerere University?  
*Can you explain your view further?*
2. Have you ever used these services? If yes, what motivated you? If not, what has prevented you?  
*Why do you think that is?*
3. How do you think other external students perceive or talk about counseling services?  
*Tell me more about what you've observed or heard.*
4. In your experience, are these services designed in a way that suits the needs of external students like you?  
*Can you give an example or explain more?*
5. Do you think these services have any effect on students' academic or personal success?  
*Why do you think they are important or not?*

### SECTION B: Assessing Barriers and Proposing Improvements

#### *Cultural and Personal Barriers*

1. What cultural beliefs or personal views affect whether students seek help from guidance and counseling services?  
*Can you describe that further or give an example?*

2. Have you or anyone you know felt uncomfortable or stigmatized when thinking about using these services?

*Why do you think that happens?*

3. Are there any misunderstandings or myths among students about what counseling services are for?

*Tell me more about what students believe.*

### ***Institutional and Technological Barriers***

4. What challenges have you noticed in how the university organizes or delivers these services?

*Are the hours or locations convenient?*

5. What difficulties do external students face in using online or digital counseling services?

*Can you give an example or explain more?*

### **SECTION C: Suggesting Strategies to Enhance the Effectiveness of Services**

1. What changes would make it easier for external students like you to access and use these services?

*Tell me more about what would work best.*

2. How could the university increase awareness about guidance and counseling services among external students?

*Why do you think those approaches would be effective?*

3. What do you think about involving peer counselors to support fellow students?

*Would that help? Why or why not?*

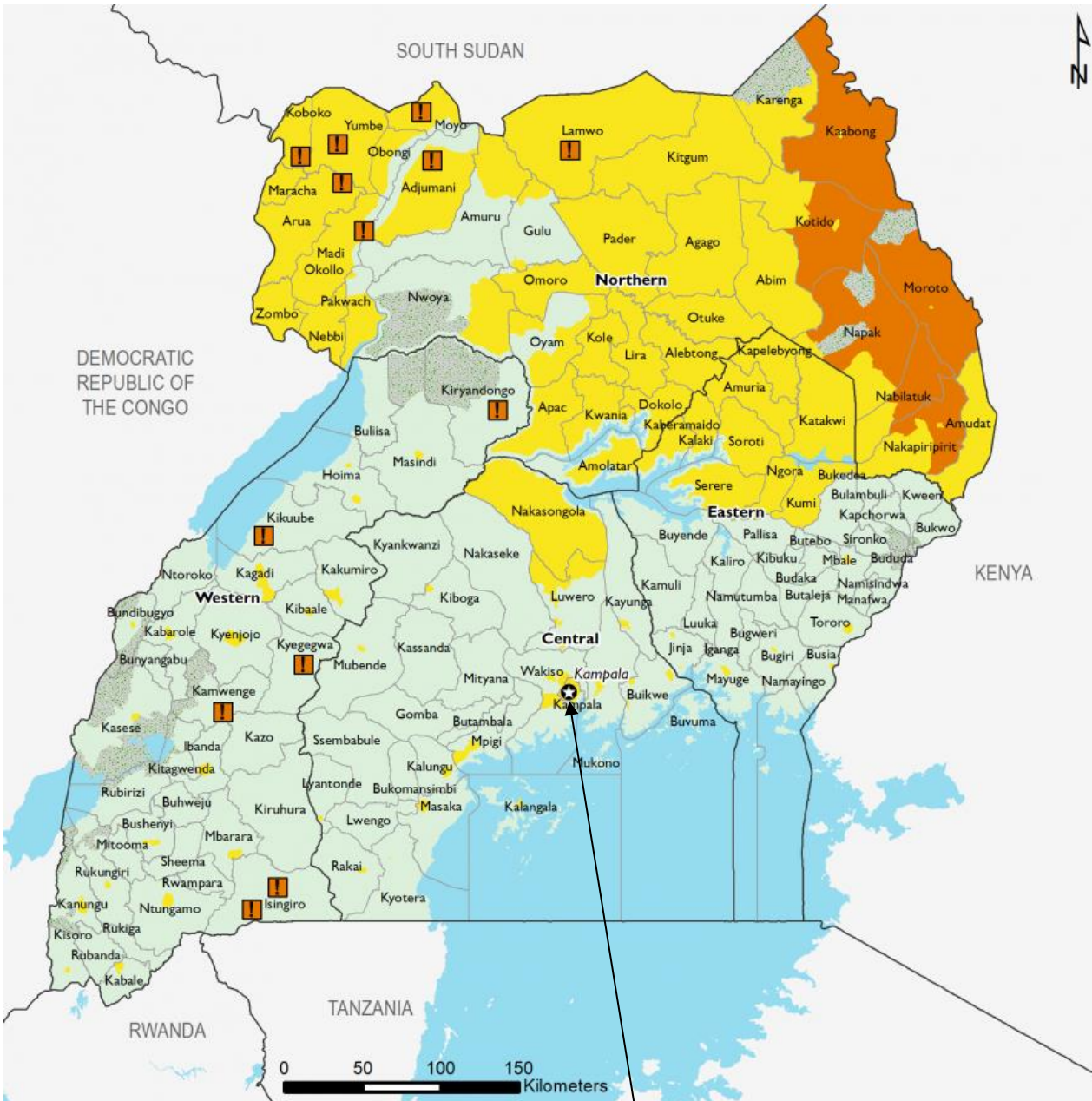
4. How can digital tools be improved to support students better in accessing guidance and counseling?

*What features or support would help most?*

5. If you had the power to improve these services for external students, what would be your top recommendations?

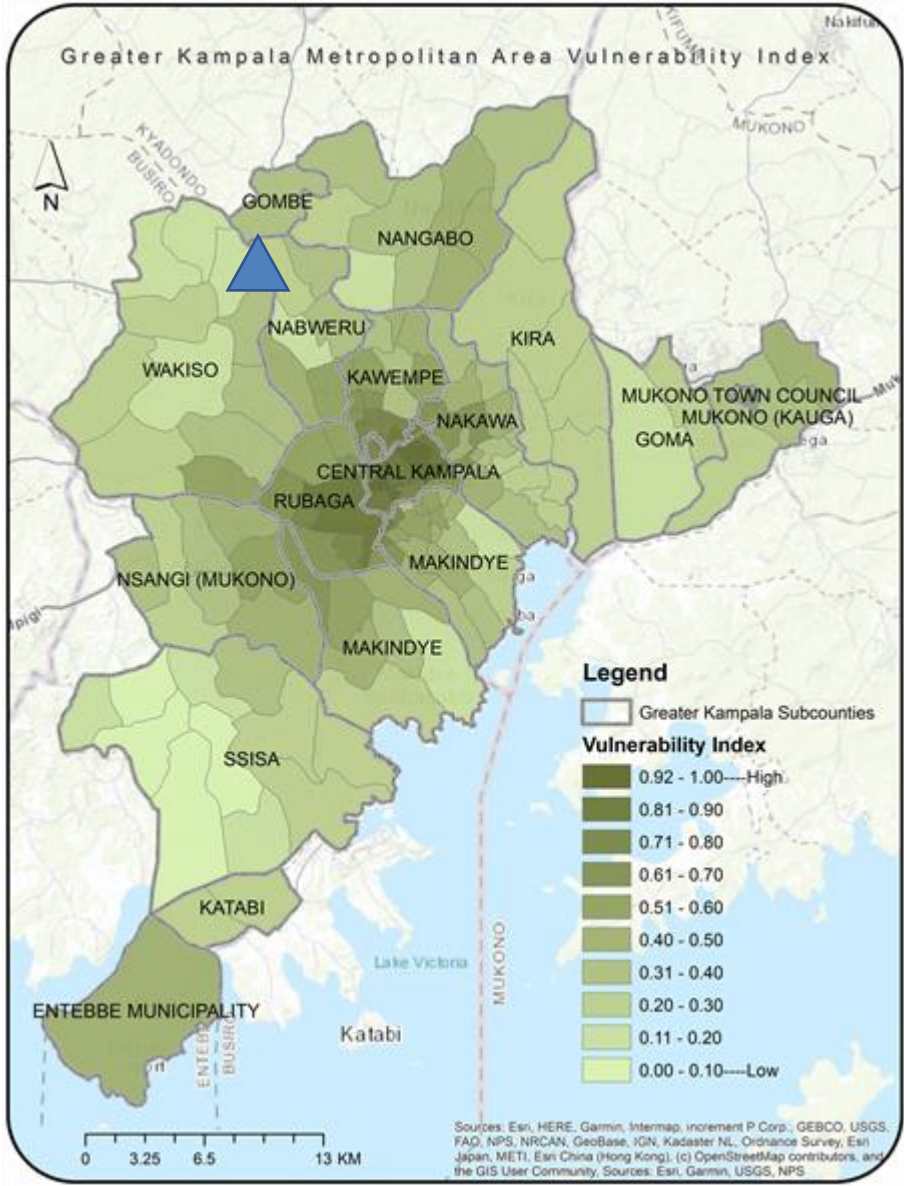
*Can you explain why these changes are important?*

# APPENDIX IV: A MAP OF UGANDA SHOWING KAMPALA DISTRICT



Location of Kampala District

**APPENDIX V: MAP OF KAMPALA METROPOLITAN SHOWING LOCATION OF MAKERERE UNIVERSITY**



Approximate location of Makerere University in Kawempe Division

