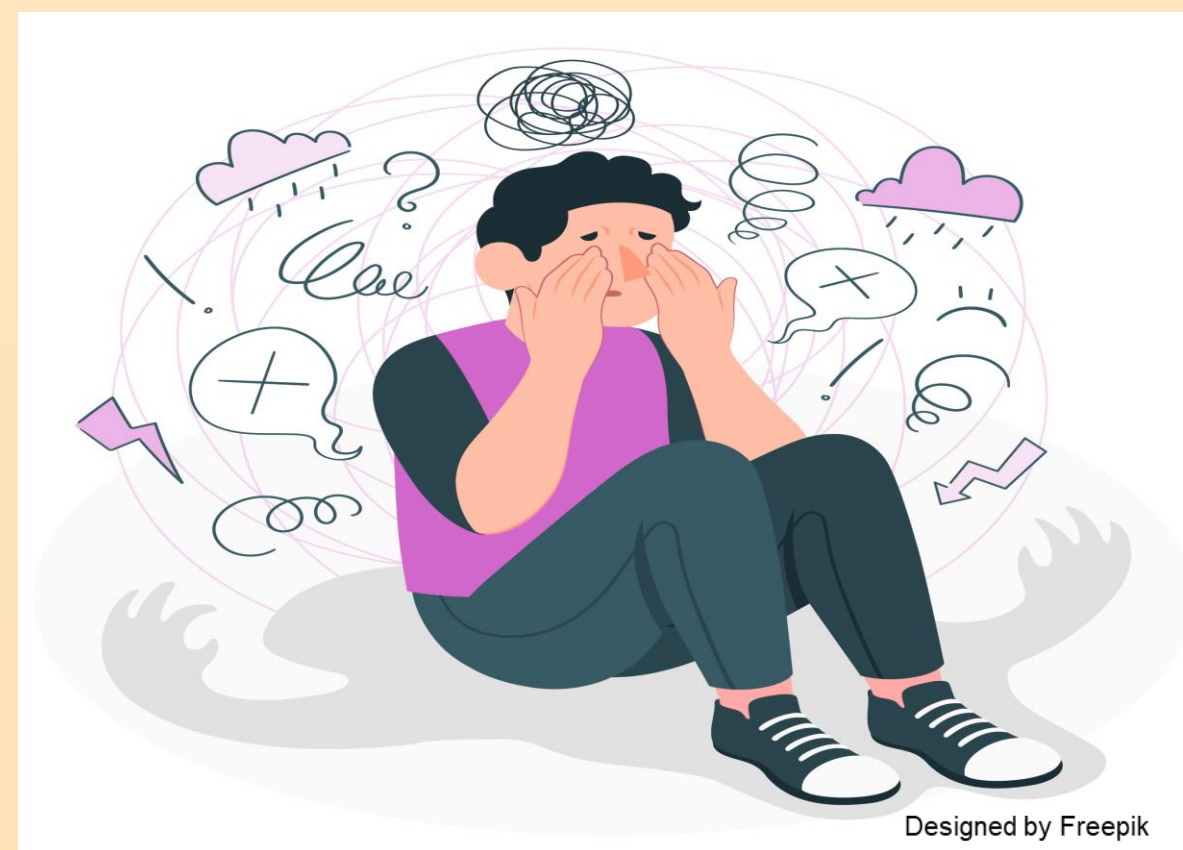


# Lived Experiences of University Students Who Access Campus Mental Health Support

Olga Papadopoulou, PhD student, University of Bolton, op1res@bolton.ac.uk  
Research Supervisor: Dr Klio Geroulanou, kgeroulanou@nyc.gr

## Aim and Purpose

The global interest in the study of mental health issues prevalence among university students is growing. Current data and qualitative studies on students' perceptions and feelings about their experiences with on-campus counselling services are scarce. This study aims to explore questions such as: What are students' thoughts and feelings about counselling services on campus? Do universities provide counselling services accessible to all? What elements of counselling do students find helpful or not? How can universities enhance the accessibility of mental health services for students? What measures can universities implement to improve mental health services? The study gives importance to the students' voices, allowing them to share their personal lived experiences with university counselling.



## Introduction

The present study is a qualitative investigation into the experiences of university students who access on-campus mental health services. Despite the global focus on the prevalence of mental health issues among students, there is a lack of research on students' counselling experiences. Studies indicate that approximately one-third of students experience clinically significant psychological distress [1]. Numerous studies underscore the increasing demand for student counselling as the student population grows. This growing demand for services, reflected in the increase in referrals for high-intensity support over the past three years, is well-documented (see [1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6]). The mental health of students in higher education is recognized as a major public health issue (see, for example, [7], [8], [9]). In recent years, there has been an increased interest in qualitative research focusing on the experiences of higher education students who use their universities' counselling services. Recent studies suggest that to prevent students from feeling lost or abandoned when seeking therapy, universities and external health and care groups should work together to simplify access to mental health care for students. It is crucial to develop an inclusive approach to facilitate service delivery and access for all types of mental health disorders [10]. Recent qualitative research suggests that by reorganizing existing support systems with student experiences and expectations in mind, student needs can be more accurately identified, evaluated, and addressed. This could potentially encourage service utilization and maximize a unique opportunity to improve the wellbeing of young people at a pivotal point in their lives [11], [12], [13], [14], [15].

## Design Methodology

This is an Interpretative Phenomenological (IPA) qualitative study. IPA is a qualitative research method that concentrates on how individuals interpret and make sense of their individual lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009). 12 semi-structured interviews have been carried out, and the study is ongoing with the analysis.

Sampling:

- ✦ 12 university students with a mean age of 24 years
- ✦ 6 undergraduate and 6 postgraduate students
- ✦ Gender: 8 female, 2 male, 2 non-binary
- ✦ Ethnic group: 6 British White, 2 British mixed, 1 British Black, 1 Chinese, 1 Indian, 1 Other white background.

This poster focuses on the experiential themes of one participant.

## Preliminary Themes

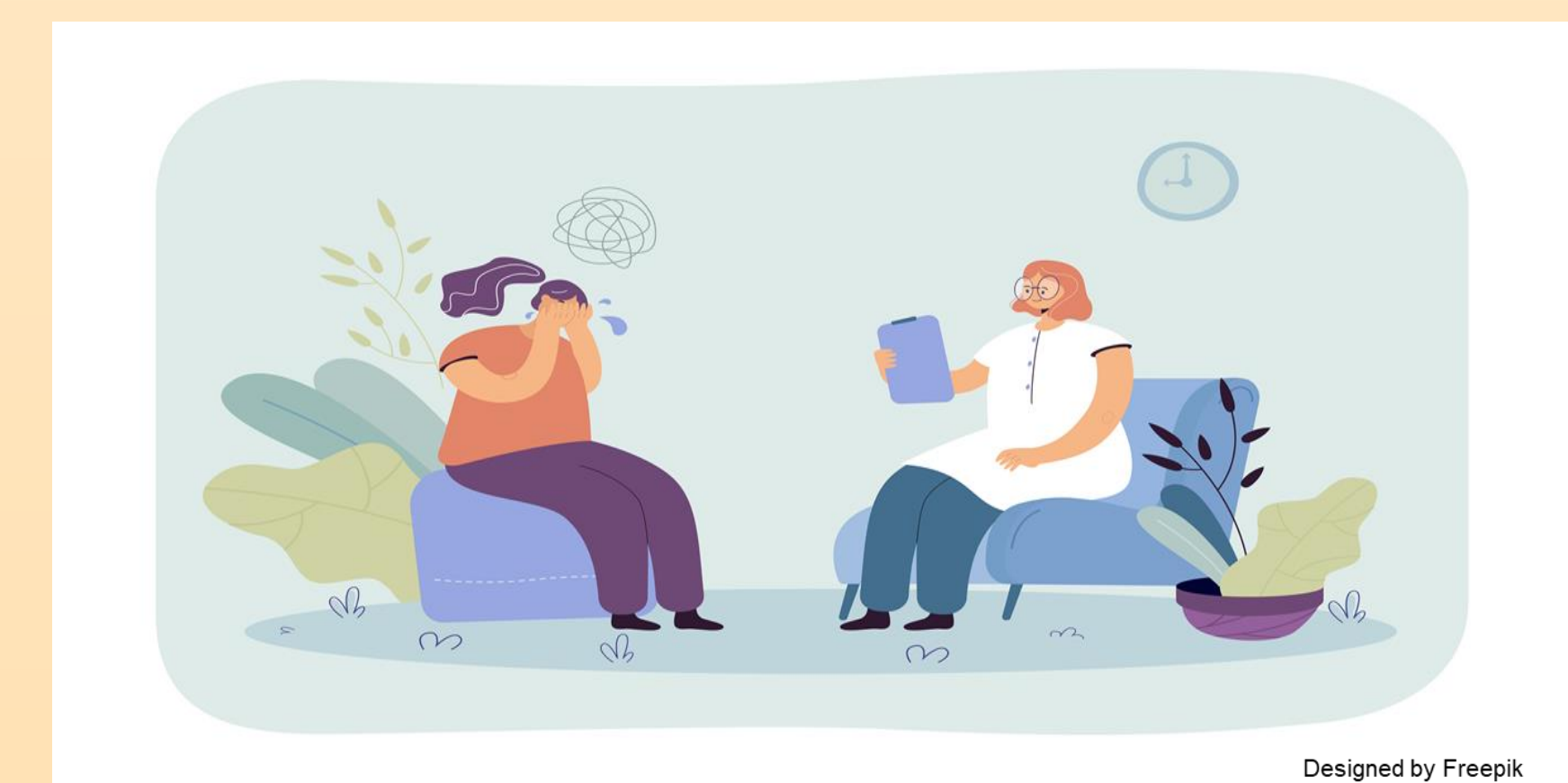
- **Talking to a stranger is beneficial**  
*"I think that would have taken me a lot longer if I didn't have therapy, and didn't tell a stranger."*
- **Positive impact of sharing feelings**  
*"Honestly, ...the most positive for me was probably just the release of the emotions"*
- **Importance of university counselling services for students with mental health issues**  
*"In terms of counselling services in general I think they're totally necessary I mean, even if you didn't lose a parent could you imagine going to university, and this brand new world or like you get depressed. You're homesick there's so many factors that come into this."*
- **Underfunding and limited resources**  
***Underfunding limitations in university counselling services***  
*"So for me, I could see that, you know, the counselling service was extremely underfunded"*  
***Impact of limited number and frequency of sessions***  
*"The reason why I even went once a month was because there was hardly any space"*  
*"if the way it's funded the university only offer by a couple just like not that many sessions really over a short period"*  
***Counsellor had limited time and resources and could not offer more sessions or different therapeutic approaches***  
*"I think it really just boils down to the fact that she didn't have time or the resources as in, she literally couldn't offer me more sessions or a different type of therapy"*
- **Perception of counselling as unhelpful**  
*"Yeah, that [university counselling] was bare minimum, and that was like the bare minimum was kind of done like nothing. It wasn't great at all."*
- **Experienced counsellor as unsupportive and inexperienced - Rupture in therapeutic alliance**  
*"I feel like she tried her best but I wouldn't say, Oh, I felt really really supported by that person"*  
*"It feels like they weren't equipped, but if they are, I don't know the qualifications because I just feel like they couldn't do a good job"*  
*"she just really dismissed ... I was literally crying over the fact I had to go home, I was so distressed over it and have to relive that and she just said, like, after me saying all that, I remember her saying 'well it's summer, like, Enjoy your summer'"*

## Discussion

The student identifies counselling to be beneficial, the release of their emotions and discussing with a professional is a positive experience that helps them in resolving their issues. The importance of university counselling services for students with mental health issues is recognized. However, the insufficient number of sessions provided, staff shortage, limitations in the counselling approaches available, and the adequacy of the counsellors' skills significantly diminish their positive experience of counselling and campus counselling services.

**Next steps:**

Continue to analyze rich data and clarify experiential themes. Aggregated themes from all 12 interviews will form the final results. Write an academic paper.



## Limitations of research

Since IPA studies often only look at small samples, generalizability cannot be guaranteed. However, the goal is to illuminate the whole by closely examining a small part and putting a light on it.

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