International Research Journal of Scientific Studies
e-ISSN: 3048-8451

RESEARCH ARTICLE SEPTEMBER 2025, VOLUME 2, ISSUE 7

The Essential Role of Active Listening in University Counselling Services

Isaac Mutelo [1], Getrude Chatira [2]

[1] Lecturer and Director of Quality Assurance, Research, Innovation and Commercialisation, Arrupe Jesuit University, Harare, Zimbabwe

[2] Lecturer and Student Counsellor, Arrupe Jesuit University, Harare, Zimbabwe

✉ Corresponding author email: isaacmutelo@yahoo.com

Cite this article: Mutelo I., Chatira G., (2025). The Essential Role of Active Listening in University Counselling Services. International Research Journal of Scientific Studies, vol. 2, no. 7, pp. 1–11, Sept. 2025, https://doi.org/10.64383/irjss.20250923

Abstract: *Counselling is a process whereby trained therapists and other professionals listen to clients to help them resolve or overcome issues, problems, or challenges in desired ways. University students today experience numerous problems which require counselling support to effectively address these challenges. Students who seek counselling in universities require sufficient space to share their concerns without unnecessary interruptions or premature problem-solving suggestions from counsellors. Based on a qualitative document analysis research approach, the paper argues for the centrality of active listening and its associated skills in the counselling process. It notes that without active listening, university counsellors and other professionals involved in the counselling process will be unable to help students resolve their problems and challenges adequately. Active listening is the foundation for effective counselling interventions, creating an environment where students feel understood, valued and empowered to address their concerns.*

Keywords: *Counselling, University Counsellors, Active Listening.*

This article is an open-access publication under the Creative Commons Attribution License, permitting use, sharing, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. © 2025 International Research Journal of Scientific Studies. Published by Sciencia Publishers. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction -

Counselling is a delicate and interactive process whereby, based on experience and expertise, a counsellor "helps the client to face, perceive, clarify, solve and resolve adjustment problems/issues" [9]. With university students facing various challenges requiring expert intervention, most educational institutions now provide counselling facilities and services. Counselling significantly impacts university students' lives by helping them navigate and address challenging situations [3,11,18]. Current academic literature indicates that students endure considerable stress due to financial constraints, academic pressure, personal relationships, transition to university life, peer pressure to do drugs, and other personal, social and psychological problems requiring counselling support [1,2,16,22].

Additional challenges university students face stem from their attempts to pursue goals with persistence, manage relationships effectively, build networks, deepen self-awareness, and understand their emotions [5]. For university counsellors and educators to effectively support students, they must be equipped with active listening skills. Active listening requires counsellors to pay complete attention to what is being expressed to understand and recall what the student is communicating. This enables the counsellor to help the student resolve problems without misunderstandings or presumptions. Therefore, it is crucial to examine the centrality of active listening and its key related skills in university counselling. This paper examines how active listening contributes to the effectiveness of counselling interventions for university students. It also analyses the specific needs and concerns of university students seeking counselling support, as well as the centrality of creating a conducive counselling environment. While identifying and analysing common barriers that hinder effective listening in counselling settings, it proposes relevant strategies on how university counsellors can enhance their active listening skills.

2. Active Listening in University Counselling

Active listening is a fundamental skill required of counsellors in university settings. A counsellor who practices active listening focuses on understanding rather than on formulating responses, seeking specific information, or rushing to problem-solving, as these elements create barriers to effective listening [19,20]. Egbochuku argues that active listening

is “fundamental for effective counselling relationship” because “When we listen, people tend to respond in more democratic and less authoritarian way; become more mature, more open to experience and less defensive” [9]. Effective listening enables counsellors to understand, assess, and guide university students in ways that make them feel accepted and valued, thereby facilitating healing and trust-building in the counselling relationship.

Regarding the necessity of active listening, Egbochuku writes.

“Active listening is an important way to bring about personality changes in attitudes and the way we behave towards others and ourselves…If the counsellor is not able to listen and decode the client's problems, the counsellor will not be able to communicate her understanding of the client's problem (content) and how she feels about the problem (feeling) or be able to tell the impact of the problem on her client's psychological well-being. The ground skills which help counsellors in active listening include: Empathy, awareness of body language, posture, tone of voice, words and body language, and the client's body language” [9].

A counsellor with effective listening skills facilitates client disclosure, helps identify valuable solutions, and builds trust. Thus, attentive listening demonstrates the counsellor’s genuine interest in assisting the student and conveys acceptance and respect [9,21]. When students feel comfortable due to the counsellor’s attentive listening, they are encouraged to share deeper emotions and concerns, providing the counsellor with valuable information that enhances the counselling process. Some students benefit significantly from being listened to without judgment or premature advice, even when the counsellor offers minimal verbal responses.

University counsellors must develop attentive listening skills to effectively support students. They should consider students' backgrounds when helping them manage, interpret, and understand themselves better, build self-identity and self-efficacy, and develop emotional and intellectual problem-solving competencies. Students attending counselling sessions may harbour feelings of victimhood, potentially viewing themselves as worthless and helpless. In such cases, “since a person in crisis may experience overwhelming feelings of helplessness, [the counsellor] needs to be able to

facilitate feelings of hope in the person" [10] to help them cope with their challenges. According to Schön, the counsellor should help the "client find direction through various strategies" by "encouraging clients to do the work" [24]. Counsellors need not always prescribe solutions to students. While providing direct advice might temporarily satisfy students, it may fail to help them develop the skills necessary to manage their problems independently.

Silence and attentive listening can themselves be therapeutic interventions, facilitating the counselling process by giving students control over the content and pace of sessions. Through active listening, students feel their concerns are acknowledged and that someone cares for and understands their experiences [10,13]. According to Ross, this approach, where the counselee is listened to and supported in addressing their own problems, is known as "client-centred counselling," with "key aspects [being] that the counsellor is non-directive and reflective" [23].

University students may struggle with typical adult responsibilities if they are experiencing personal difficulties. For example, if a student has trouble maintaining relationships or employment, they might be dealing with self-esteem issues or stress. In such cases, the counsellor should consider encouraging appropriate action by "prescribing some activity that will keep them functioning and in touch with people" [4].

By recommending activities that help students cope with their problems, counsellors can prevent them from becoming isolated, depressed, or feeling helpless. However, counsellors must also consider the student's capacity to address their concerns. Educational counselling approaches can benefit university students when appropriate. Without compromising active listening principles, counsellors should recognise that a student's "inability to perform a skill up to expectation should never be the basis for determining one's worth as a person" [12]. Counsellors can help students who feel helpless by helping them understand that their problems do not define their intrinsic or extrinsic value, while remaining mindful of their primary role as listeners rather than problem-solvers [6].

To help university students cope with their problems, counsellors must ensure sufficient freedom exists in the counselling relationship. Adequate freedom promotes student autonomy by helping them become "self-determining

agents insofar as this is humanly possible" [25]. Because their primary task is attentive listening, counsellors should not pressure students into activities that might accelerate the process or manipulate them into accepting the counsellor's perspective. In helping students reach their own solutions, counsellors can clarify options while remaining in the background. Counsellors must recognise their responsibility to "liberate, empower, and nurture wholeness" in young adults [4]. Force or manipulation damages the counselling process and prevents students from effectively addressing their problems. Therefore, counsellors must remember that their primary role is to listen rather than control or manipulate the counselling process.

3. Skills Necessary for Active Listening in University Counselling

University counsellors need specific skills to engage in active listening. First, active listening requires effective communication skills. In the context of active listening, communication involves the ability to uncover the student's inner feelings and thoughts through attentiveness and experience, which, according to Wise, requires awareness of the question: "What is the person trying to communicate and what are his problems in communicating effectively?" [25]. To answer this question, counsellors must engage in active listening 'with multiple ears,' not only through literal hearing but also through empathetic understanding. Communication skills help counsellors listen effectively by reading between the lines and going beyond the student's explicit statements, as students may hesitate to share certain information due to shame, fear, or guilt.

Counsellors need the skill to "listen to the 'baseline', what is not openly said, but possibly is being felt" [15]. This involves listening with undivided attention, observing non-verbal cues, recalling what has been shared, and tolerating longer pauses and periods of silence. Counsellors can also paraphrase the client's statements to clarify understanding. Active listening extends beyond hearing words to include attending to vocal qualities such as "particular pitch and timbre, speed and rhythm, volume and pronunciation," which can provide additional information to the counsellor [6]. Active listening thus entails attentiveness to all forms of communication, verbal and non-verbal and the ability to focus on content that appears most emotionally charged or meaningful. As counsellors listen

attentively and occasionally respond by paraphrasing what they hear, they "provide the counselee with an opportunity to examine and test the reality of feelings and actions" [4].

Another essential skill for active listening is patience. Sometimes counsellors become impatient and begin problem-solving prematurely. In such cases, counsellors may be too eager to respond with quick answers and advice, resulting in "insufficient time for listening, clarifying the issues, and reflecting on what the counselee is trying to say" [5]. Active listening requires the skill of patience based on thoughtful reflection without anxiety about immediate progress; counselling cannot be rushed. Counsellors with effective active listening skills develop a relaxed, deliberate pace that reassures counselees they are being heard and understood. This means counsellors should avoid becoming interrogators by asking too many questions or offering pre-packaged solutions. Listening effectively requires allowing time for silence while students formulate their thoughts and communicate them verbally or non-verbally.

Furthermore, as a skill necessary for effective listening, counsellors must avoid being judgmental or jumping to conclusions. When counsellors fail to listen effectively to the student's inner world, they do not take time to absorb "the inexpressible words or outrageous behaviour of the client" [14]. This occurs when counsellors presume to know what is right or wrong and consequently condemn their counselees prematurely by not attending to details. To create "an atmosphere of acceptance and a relationship that is non-judgmental" [23], counsellors need to listen actively and patiently, avoid hasty conclusions, refrain from dismissive remarks, and withhold evaluations. Counsellors should refrain from displaying shock or gestures of displeasure, such as narrowing their eyes or other negative non-verbal signals. As Collins argues, "rarely is anyone helped by counsellors who judge or fail to listen sympathetically and respectfully," as this can cause clients to withdraw [5].

If university counsellors listen effectively by avoiding dismissing what students share, regardless of how concerning it might be, students will feel understood, encouraged, accepted, and not judged during the counselling process. Active listening also encompasses dual skills: the "mental element which observes, takes notes and remembers; and a social element which responds appropriately to what is

heard" [14]. Active listening thus requires not only attending to what is verbally expressed during counselling sessions but also demonstrating this attentiveness. Undivided listening requires focused posture, appropriate eye contact, suitable non-verbal expressions, and occasional affirmations to "understand the message behind the message" [8].

Active listening also requires interpersonal skills such as warmth, identification, and empathy. This involves "imaginatively stepping into the shoes of another person and seeing the world from her or his perspective" [7]. By identifying with students and expressing genuine solidarity through active listening, counsellors can better understand the emotional complexities of students' experiences based on self-awareness. This fosters empathy, enabling counsellors to connect with the unspoken emotional content of students' narratives. As a counsellor, one must also "listen to yourself, how you might feel in a described situation, as a way of further understanding – empathy" [15]. This involves not only identifying with students by metaphorically walking in their shoes but also connecting with one's own feelings congruently and considerately.

This listening skill is what Clinebell calls "reflective empathic listening," which involves "attempts to listen to feelings (as well as words), including feelings that are in between the lines, too painful to trust to words" [4]. During counselling sessions, counsellors must place themselves in their clients' situations and connect emotionally with them. Responses should reflect empathy and identification without becoming excessively immersed in the client's experience or problem, even when counsellors recognise similarities with the client's situation. Active listening through identification and empathy does not mean becoming overwhelmingly fused with the client's feelings or problems. As Collins notes, "there is a fine line between caring and becoming too involved to be helpful" [5].

Excessive involvement can cause counsellors to lose objectivity and become confused due to difficulty distinguishing between their feelings and those of their counselees. Sometimes, university counsellors may attempt to appear overly professional, which can impede active and effective listening by making them seem detached from students' problems [10]. Active listening does not require counsellors to appear capable of

handling all counselling situations flawlessly or to use technically perfect language without genuine feeling when interacting with clients.

For effective active listening, counsellors must also develop the skill of fostering support and empathy in the counselling relationship. They "should not try to give the impression that [they have] a deeper knowledge and understanding than the person wants [them] to have at a particular time" [25]. This means counsellors must accompany counselees with patience, unconditional positive regard, and the ability to create an atmosphere of acceptance and value. If counsellors allow other concerns and pressures to occupy their minds or presume to know more than the client, this can hinder active listening. Moreover, for counsellors to listen effectively and for counselees to feel heard, "counsellors must demonstrate genuine interest by taking on "the role of a loving servant" [17]. This enables counsellors to participate actively not only in literally listening to counselees' problems but also in sharing their emotional burden.

4. Recommendations

Based on the analysis presented in this paper, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance active listening in university counselling services:

- Universities should ensure that all counselling staff receive specialised training in active listening techniques, including non-verbal communication interpretation, empathetic responding, and cultural sensitivity in listening. This training should be ongoing and include regular refresher courses.
- Counselling centres or offices should establish systems where counsellors can observe and provide feedback on each other's listening skills, creating opportunities for professional growth and skill enhancement.
- With appropriate ethical safeguards and client consent, counsellors could occasionally record sessions to review their own listening patterns, identifying strengths and areas for improvement.
- Counselling centres should design spaces that minimise distractions and create a sense of safety and privacy, allowing both counsellors and students to fully engage in the counselling process.
- Regular assessment of students' experiences of being listened to should be collected, using standardised measures to evaluate the effectiveness of active listening in counselling sessions.
- Given the diverse student populations at universities,

counsellors should be trained in culturally responsive listening techniques that acknowledge different communication styles and cultural expressions of distress.

- While technological tools can enhance counselling services, universities should emphasise the irreplaceable value of attentive human listening in an increasingly digital environment.
- University administrations should ensure counsellors' caseloads allow sufficient time for the practice of active listening with each student, rather than rushing through sessions to accommodate high demand.
- To maintain the capacity for active listening, counsellors need institutional support for regular self-care practices that prevent burnout and compassion fatigue.
- Counselling centres should collaborate with academic departments like psychology, communication studies, social work, Child and Vulnerable Adult Protection and cultural studies to enhance understanding of listening processes across different contexts.

These recommendations aim to strengthen the foundation of university counselling services by prioritising active listening as the cornerstone of effective therapeutic relationships. By implementing these suggestions, universities can create counselling environments where students feel genuinely heard, understood, and supported in addressing their concerns.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the importance of active listening in university counselling. It emphasised good communication, a non-judgmental attitude, identification, and empathy as key skills necessary for active listening. University counsellors should allow students to own the counselling process by not coercing them into following counsellors' ideas and insights, as their primary role is to listen effectively and actively. In certain cases, university counsellors may provide relevant encouragement and support to help students better cope with their problems. This paper concludes that without active listening, university counsellors will be unable to help students resolve their problems and challenges adequately.

References:

[1] L. E. Atwarter, "Does who you work with matter? Effects of reference group gender and age," Journal of Applied Psychology, vol. 88, no. 4, pp. 725–734, 2003.

[2] S. K. Bennett and D. S. Bigfoot-Sipes, "American Indian and White college student preferences for counsellor characteristics," Journal of Counselling Psychology, vol. 38, pp. 440–445, 1991.

[3] F. Campbell, J. Proudfoot, D. Reeves, E. Kontopantelis, A. Rogers, C. Chew-Graham, … and C. Dickens, "Recognition of psychotherapy effectiveness: The APA resolution," Psychotherapy, vol. 50, no. 1, pp. 98–101, 2013.

[4] H. Clinebell, Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counselling: Resources for the Ministry of Healing and Growth. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984.

[5] G. Collins, Christian Counselling: A Comprehensive Guide. Illinois: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2007.

[6] R. Dayringer, The Heart of Pastoral Counselling: Healing Through Relationship. New York: The Haworth Pastoral Press, 1998.

[7] C. Doehring, The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.

[8] G. Egan, The Skilled Helper: A Problem-Management Approach to Helping. London: Brooks and Cole Publishers, 1998.

[9] O. Egbochuku, "Counselling communication skills: Its place in the training programme of a counselling psychologist," Edo Journal of Counselling, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 17–32, 2008.

[10] B. K. Estadt, Pastoral Counselling. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983.

[11] J. Frank and B. Frank, Persuasion and Healing: A Comparative Study of Psychotherapy. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991.

[12] P. Hauck, Reason in Pastoral Counselling. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1972.

[13] G. Hornby, "Exploration of concerns and feelings," in Counselling Pupils in Schools: Skills and Strategies for Teachers, C. Hall, E. Hall, and G. Hornby, Eds. London: Routledge, 2003, pp. 23–35.

[14] R. Hurding, The Bible and Counselling. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1992.

[15] M. Jacobs, Swift to Hear: Facilitating Skills in Listening and Responding. London: SPCK, 1996.

[16] F. S. Julal, "Use of student support services among university students: Associations with problem-focused coping, experience of personal difficulty and psychological distress," British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, vol. 41, no. 4, pp. 414–425, 2013.

[17] R. Lutz and T. Taylor, Surviving Ministry: Navigating the Pitfalls, Experiencing the Renewals. New York: Paulist Press, 1990.

[18] N. Maclennan, Counselling for Managers. Aldershot: Gower, 1990.

[19] M. McKay, M. Davis, and P. Fanning, Messages: The Communications Skills Book. Oakland: New Harbinger, 2009.

[20] P. Nemec, C. Spagnolo, and S. Soydan, "Can you hear me now? Teaching listening skills," Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal, vol. 40, no. 4, pp. 415–417, 2017.

[21] C. Okobia, Practicum in Counselling: Training and Supervision. Awka: Haillmean, 1991.

[22] N. Raunic and W. Xenos, University Counselling Service Utilisation by Local and International Students and User Characteristics. Melbourne: Springer, 2008.

[23] A. Ross, Counselling Skills for Church and Faith Community Workers. Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003.

[24] J. Schön and M. Ryan, Elements of Counselling: A Handbook for Counsellors in Southern Africa. Westhoven: Reginald Orsmond Counselling Services, 2005.

[25] A. Wise, Pastoral Counselling: Its Theory and Practice. London: Harper and Row, 1951.

Author(s) Profile:

1. Rev. Dr Isaac Mutelo is an associate lecturer at Domuni Universitas in Toulouse, France, and a lecturer and director of quality assurance, research, innovation, and commercialisation at Arrupe Jesuit University in Harare, Zimbabwe. He is also a Catholic priest belonging to the Order of Preachers, commonly known as the Dominicans. He holds degrees in Theology, Philosophy, Education, and Law and earned his MA and PhD in Philosophy with a specialisation in religion and politics from the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. His research areas include religion and politics, human rights law, environmental law, interreligious dialogue (specifically Muslim-Christian relations), artificial intelligence, robotics, and ethics. He is the author of "Muslim Organizations in South Africa: Political Role Post-1948" (2023), the editor of "Human Rights in Southern Africa: Theory and Practice" (2024), and the co-editor of "Safeguarding Children and Vulnerable Persons in Southern Africa" (2025).

2. Sr Getrude Chatira is a devoted member of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Child Jesus (SJI). She holds a Master of Science and a Bachelor's Degree in Counselling Psychology, complemented by a Diploma in Theology of Religious Formation and a Diploma in Education. A licensed psychologist, she currently serves as a university counsellor and lecturer at Arrupe Jesuit University in Zimbabwe. Passionate about mental health research, she is dedicated to advancing knowledge and practice in this vital field.

Article History:

Submitted: 2025-08-25
Accepted: 2025-09-23
Published: 2025-09-30