

## Training via Sandwich Education: How Stressed is the Counsellor Trainee?\*

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### Abstract

The voluminous study nature and the intensive structure of sandwich study mode masters-level counselling programmes might pose various unascertained stress levels to counsellor trainees. With a descriptive cross-sectional study design and a census survey, this study used the University Stress Scale (USS) to determine the prevailing stress levels among 92 Master of Education (MEd) counsellor trainees in a Ghanaian university. The study employed means with standard deviation and t-test to analyse the data set. The findings of the study indicated that counsellor trainees reported stress levels that predicted significant psychological distress. Also, some perceived stressors emerged as the major predictors of significant psychological distress. However, there were no statistical differences in the stress levels of men and women, those below 35 years and those that were 35 years and above, and those in year one and those in year two of their studies. Thus, the study recommended that a stress-reducing and positive-coping strategy guide, encompassing age, gender and years in training, would improve the mental health of sandwich mode masters-level counsellor trainees. The study also recommended that the counsellor trainees practice self-awareness, self-assessment, and self-assistive strategies to identify and cope with their stressors and seek psychological help when necessary. The study suggested that university authorities and counsellor educators consider a Sandwich Hybrid and Blended Learning environment for counsellor training through a sandwich education mode.


**Keywords:** stress, sandwich education, counsellor training

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## Introduction

Counsellor training at the university gives trainees structured theoretical and practical learning experiences to usher them into the field of helping. During the training, counsellor trainees develop their 'self' and learn about clients and the techniques to help clients (Karaman et al., 2018; Moller & Rance, 2013). They acquire the theories needed for counselling, perfect research skills and how to administer and interpret psychological assessment tools. However, the period of counsellor training may pose a distressing experience for counsellor trainees. Slovak et al. (2015) asserted that a challenge among counsellor trainees is learning the complexity of interpersonal reflection in counselling skills development. Counsellor trainees also experience confusion, anxiety, excitement, curiosity, and fear during practicum (Dye et al., 2020; Hodges, 2016; Kurtyılmaz, 2015) (Hodges, 2016; Kurtyılmaz, 2015). Moreover, they endure the complex dynamics of privilege and oppression in the counselling training programme (Chan et al., 2018).

The sandwich education system was noted in engineering education among Scottish universities in the early nineteenth century, where engineering students spent six months each year in practical training in the office, the field, or the workshop. By the 1920s sandwich education was adopted as a standard form of earning national certificates and diplomas for technical courses in Scotland. The purpose was to mainly cater for part-time students in technical colleges that erupted in Scotland due to industrial demands for both theoretically and practically trained workers (Smithers, 2021). Sandwich education allows workers to study at a higher institution without a study leave while in active employment. The concept of sandwich education is to provide a tertiary education that combines academic work and practical work experience through an industrial placement, internship and employment. The system affords students the practicality to apply learned theoretical concepts gained at the university (Brooks & Timms, 2023; Dei & Peprah, 2021; Smithers, 2021). In Ghana, at the University of Education, Winneba, a sandwich mode of study enables some students, the majority in gainful employment, to come to campus for an intensive programme for a short period when regular full-time session students are on vacation.

Generally, the structure of sandwich education manifests lifelong university learning that caters for teachers' and education workers' education and training (Imakpokpomwan & Adeyemi, 2016; Okeke et al., 2021; Osuji, 2009). Sandwich education offers a wide range of courses of study to males and females aged 20-59 years (Adesoye & Amusa, 2010). Globally, sandwich education has been accepted and embraced by some prospective students and lifelong learners as a standard form of education (Manu et al., 2020). Thus, the demand for sandwich education admission and placement has increased worldwide (Ampomah et al., 2020; Imakpokpomwan & Adeyemi, 2016; Manu et al., 2020).

Sandwich students are prone to stress due to their study's short duration and intensive nature. Esia-Donkoh (2014) discovered that 56.6% of sandwich students experience acute stress, 28.6% of them experience chronic stress, and 14.8% experience episodic stress. Yorke (2000) found out that, some sandwich students could not complete their programme due to varied stressors. Stressors among sandwich students include limited facilities, learning difficulties, course outline challenges and unhealthy student-lecturer relationships were perceived as stressors. The rest are frequency of examinations, financial challenges, family/marriage problems misappropriation of time (Kayode & Adedokun, 2019; Kwaah & Essilfie, 2017; Nwosu et al., 2021; Ofuebe et al., 2021). Asante (2017) found that stress, sleep deprivation and eating disorders prone sandwich students to ailments and diseases such as upper respiratory infection, influenza, gastroenteritis, conjunctivitis, and meningitis.

## Literature Review

### Stress

Stress is a word from strain to depict hardship, straits, adversity, or affliction (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The phenomenon of stress is that people are responsive to threatening or challenging events (Feldman, 2009). Such events could be pleasant or unpleasant. Stress is inevitable in the life of all humans due to the complex and uncertain sequences of daily existence (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Robinson, 2018). The interdisciplinary nature and the diverse conceptualization of the phenomenon of

stress broadly contribute to a proliferation of definitions of the stress concept (Epel et al., 2018; Mohamed & Baqutayan, 2015).

Specific to this study, stress is a common nonspecific reaction to surrounding environment changes that posits in different ways and for varied reasons among individuals (Feldman, 2009; Greenberg, 2016). Lemyre and Tessier (2003) factored stress as a physical and mental disorder precipitator. However, it is less threatening when successfully coped with and adapted to. Thus, an ascertained stress in a particular environment might also be a pleasure in another setting (Mohamed and Baqutayan, 2015). Thus, what might be a positive stressor in an individual may be a negative stressor for another. Also, stress could exacerbate physical health when resisted unabatedly.

The demands of life that cause stress are universally called stressors. Selye (1956) coined the term to represent sources of potential stress (Szabo et al., 2012; Tennant et al., 1985). The signs of stress are thoughts, behaviours and feelings. Acceptably, signs of stress are present in physical, mental, and emotional categorisation (Adasi et al., 2020). While categorising them as physiological, emotional and behavioural, Lin and Yusoff (2013) asserted that they occur in a vicious cycle. Wheaton et al. (2013) defined stressors as existential or concurrent conditions that destabilize the functional integrity of an organism.

Tennant et al. (1985) categorized stressors into physical, psychological and psychosocial stimuli. Spielberger and Sarason (2005) labelled stressors as extrapersonal, interpersonal and intrapersonal. Greenberg (2016) identified developmental transitions, major life events, chronic stressors, daily hassles, trauma, and fallout from childhood experiences as types of stressors. Focusing on university students, Zegeye et al. (2018) and Amponsah and Owolabi (2011) categorized stressors into cohorts of physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. According to Spielberger and Sarason (2005), the identified stressors are interrelated. Thus, one stressor might elicit or complement other stressors. Therefore, managing a particular stressor may assist in successfully coping with related stressors.

### **Counsellor Trainee's Stress**

The rubrics of counsellor training expect trainees to cope with multiple training demands such as coursework, research and practicum (Finlay-Jones et al., 2016; Malikiosi-Loizos, 2013). The pressure to academically impress lecturers and excite supervisors in therapy leads to socially unacceptable feelings. When trainees cannot adapt to such multiple demands in training, they are prone to stress (Richardson et al., 2018). Some trainees also experience stress due to their disabling biographies (Kumary & Baker, 2008). In unanimity, scholars have agreed that the development of personal change demands, professional skills development and strains for academic excellence make counsellor training a stressful event (Folkes-Skinner, 2011).

About 59% to 75% of trainee psychologists experience moderate to high stress (Cushway & Tyler, 1994). Reports of high and unacceptable stress levels among counsellor trainees are a repeated feature. Stress hinders their effective academic performance, practicum skills acquisition and personal well-being development (Myers et al., 2012). Kumary and Baker (2008) have wondered whether institutions purposely design counsellor training programs to expose trainees to unacceptable stress levels to assess their resilience to professional practice.

In categorisation, some counsellor trainees' stress is practicum-related, academic-related, and self-related challenges. For practicum-related challenges, Saki and Şahin (2021), Nike (2024), and Roebuck and Reid (2020) identified difficulty in self-sourcing for practicum sites, lack of opportunities to apply the knowledge acquired in class, and trainee's feelings of incompetence, sense of insecurity, communication with clients and lack of emotional resilience. Other stressors may include inadequate sleeping, fatigue, bullying from lecturers and supervisors, poor supervision, and long lecture hours and assignments. The rest are long distances to and from lectures and practicum, limited time and a lack of communication and teamwork (Richardson et al., 2018). Cushway and Tyler (1994) recognized four categories of stressors in psychology trainees. The stressors were academic, placement, organizational and personal. Those stressors were the basis for the Counselling Psychology Trainee Stress Survey (CPTSS) (Kumary & Baker, 2008). According to Varma (1997), six underlying factors that stressed

counsellor trainees were course structure and organization, workload and poor supervision. The rest were disruption of social support, self-doubt and client difficulties.

Stress gradually exposes counsellor trainees to apathy, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and a decline in personal accomplishment (Makadia, 2016). Stress, coupled with other predisposition factors, induces depression. Prolonged stress among counsellor trainees causes burnout that makes them feel exhausted and dissatisfied, manifesting in their approach towards life and relationships with others and even cynicism toward life and others (Richardson et al., 2018). Burnout causes counsellor trainees not to trust the effectiveness of therapy. Thus, they shy away from clients when they experience burnout. However, Richardson et al. (2018) asserted that stress does not impede the competency development of a counsellor trainee.

Subhi et al. (2021) asserted that counsellor trainees cope with stress intelligently, especially in unavoidable situations such as the recent lockdowns due to the outbreak of COVID-19. Some strategies they used included planning their work and time, positive evaluation of themselves and others, accepting emerging situations and believing and practicing religion. Besides that, they sought emotional support, practiced denial and withdrew from stressful behaviours. Moreover, counsellor trainees express their feelings frequently, seek social care and engage in alcoholism and smoking to relieve themselves from stress.

### **Purpose of Study**

Owing to the short and intensive nature of the academic period of sandwich students and its associated challenges at the University of Education, Winneba, sandwich students may experience significant levels of acute, chronic, and episodic stress. However, the stress levels of counsellor trainees studying a sandwich mode programme are vague. There seems to be no forthcoming study that has evaluated stress levels solely and their associated stressors among counsellor trainees at the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana. Thus, this study sought to find the stress levels and associated stressors among masters-level counsellor trainees studying a sandwich mode programme at the University of Education, located in Winneba in Ghana, to create awareness that would promote mental and physical well-being. Also, the study evaluated the mean difference in stress to determine the statistically significant differences between the average values of the groups within counsellor trainees' gender, age, and years in training. The comparison of the means would prove the reality or randomness between the groups, which will allow for informed conclusions and recommendations for accurate stakeholder interventions. The study outcome shall contribute to counsellor trainees' well-being and mental health in counsellor training literature. Also, it shall inform counsellor trainees and educators about the stress levels of counsellor trainees, and their associated stressors. This will enable counsellor trainees to decide whether to cope with their stresses, devise stress reduction mechanisms or seek psychological help from counsellor educators. It would also create a pathway for a scholarly discourse among counsellor educators and university authorities on stress-free learning environments in counsellor training.

## **Method**

### **Participants and Procedure**

We used a descriptive cross-sectional study design (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and a census survey (Kothari, 2004; Martínez-Mesa et al., 2014; Mathers et al., 2009) to collect single-point data to determine the prevailing stress levels among 92 out of 153 masters-level counsellor trainees who are studying for the 2021/2022 academic year on sandwich mode. Participation was voluntary. To reduce nonresponse in the survey, we employed the personally administered questionnaire and the collective administration methods to collect the data. However, since the participation was voluntary, 101 of the 153 counsellor trainees responded to the study instruments. During sorting for analysis, we identified that nine of the packs of questionnaires that they responded to were incomplete. Thus, the completed responses to the study instruments were 92. 92 respondents represent 60% of the total population of 153 masters-level counsellor trainees. 60% response rate constitutes an acceptable participation for a survey measure in a cross-sectional study (Denscombe, 2010; Fincham, 2008).

Of the respondents, 62% ( $n = 57$ ) were women, and 38% ( $n = 35$ ) were men. Also, 73% ( $n = 67$ ) of respondents were 35 years and above, and 27% ( $n = 25$ ) were below 35 years. For marital status, 64% ( $n = 59$ ) of them were married, and 36% ( $n = 33$ ) were not married. Accordingly, 53% ( $n = 49$ ) of respondents were first-year students, and 47% ( $n = 43$ ) were final-year students. Invariably, 87% ( $n = 80$ ) of respondents were employed. Additionally, 13% ( $n = 12$ ) were unemployed. Lastly, 86% ( $n = 79$ ) were gainfully employed. The remaining 14% ( $n = 13$ ) were searching for jobs.

### **Instruments**

We used insensitive items to collect demographic data from the counsellor trainees (Bolarinwa, 2015; Lodico et al., 2010). Our focus was on counsellor trainees' sex, age, and years in training. Also, we adopted and used the University Stress Scale (USS) (Stallman, 2008; Stallman & Hurst, 2016), a 21-item screening measure, to gather information about the counsellor trainees' stress levels. The university Stress Scale is a 4-point Likert scale. Its responses and scoring are: not at all = 0, sometimes = 1, frequency = 2, and constantly = 3. An extent score, the sum of all items, which is  $\geq 13$ , predicts significant psychological distress. We pretested the University Stress Scale on 31 counsellor trainees randomly selected from the study population. The purpose is to know if there is a need to 'localize' the language of the University Stress Scale, determine its quality and ability, and ascertain the understanding and response latency of the trainees (Draugalis et al., 2008; Ikart, 2018). The responses obtained from the pretest were given to three language experts at the University of Education, located in Winneba, to ascertain if they constitute a valid participant language understanding of the University Stress Scale. The pretest outcome validated the acceptability of the study. The Cronbach alpha was .84.

### **Data Collection**

After obtaining official permission from the appropriate establishments, we contacted and established rapport with the counsellor trainees during one of their official gatherings at the Faculty of Educational Studies, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana, a couple of days after the pretesting. We explained the need and purpose of the data to them, assured them of confidentiality, and made them consent to provide the data for the study. We provided an email address to request clarification or exclusion of data from the set before giving them a pack containing the University Stress Scale with the demographic items and a pen. We also established anonymity by informing them to exclude their names or initials from any of the forms. On average, the counsellor trainees responded to the items within 10 minutes. We thanked them and promised to share the findings with their department.

### **Data Analysis**

The study employed Microsoft Excel 2006 and Addinsoft XLSTAT 2022.5.2 for a credible analysis of the data set. We used Mean ( $M$ ) with Standard Deviation ( $SD$ ) to ascertain the stress levels among counsellor trainees. Also, the study used an independent samples t-test analysis to evaluate the statistical mean difference in stress based on counsellor trainees' gender, age, and years in training. An independent t-test is a statistical method used in research to compare the means of two independent groups to determine if there is a statistically significant difference between them. The independent samples t-test analysis evaluated whether the difference in the stress levels reported by men and women, those below 35 years and those that were 35 years and above, and, those in year one and those in year two of their studies represent a true or random difference.

Considering the sample size for this study, the total number of items (possible stressors) on the USS, and the extent score of the USS that is predictive of significant psychological distress, the study developed a simple formula ( $SS \geq \frac{E}{I} \times Z$ ) to determine the stressor value that is predictive of significant psychological distress. In the formula, the 'SS' is the predictive value of significant psychological distress of the stressor/item. The 'E' is the extent score of the USS. The 'I' is the total number of items on the USS, and 'Z' is the study sample. From the USS scores of this study and the working formula, the total item/stressor score of the USS  $\geq 57$  indicated that the item/stressor is predictive of significant psychological distress.

### Findings

Table 1, Figure 1, and Table 2 summarize the study results aim, to identify stress levels and evaluate their differences based on counsellor trainees' gender, age, and years in training.

#### Levels of Stress

The analysis and summary of stress data are in Table 1. Also, the means chart in Figure 1 complements the information in Table 1. As shown in Table 1 and Figure 1, the descriptive analysis of the USS showed that scores of 11% of counsellor trainees fell below the lower quartile, and the data of 21% of them fell below the upper quartile of the dataset. Also, the minimum total score of counsellor trainees was one, the maximum total score was 48, and the median score was 15.

Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics of Masters-level Counsellor Trainees' Stress Levels

Statistic	Stress	Groups	Stress	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Number (n)	92	Gender							
Minimum score	1		Men	16.9	9.6	.7	90	.47	.15
Maximum score	48	Women	15.6	7.2	3				
1st Quartile	11	Age							
Median	15		< 35yrs	15.8	7.9	.2	90	.82	.06
3rd Quartile	21	≥ 35yrs	16.2	8.3	3				
Mean	16.09	Years in training							
Variance (n)	66.06		Year 1	16.0	9.4	.0	42	.95	.01
Variance (n-1)	66.78		Year 2	16.1	6.7	6			
<i>SD</i> (n-1)	8.17								

As shown in Figure 1, 60 counsellor trainees, representing 65% of the sample, obtained scores  $\geq 13$ . 35% obtained scores  $\geq 1$  and  $< 13$ . None of the trainees sampled obtained a zero score. Additionally, from the analysis in Table 1, the mean total score obtained was ( $M = 16.09$ ,  $SD = 8.17$ ). Also, the mean total score obtained by male counsellor trainees ( $M = 16.9$ ,  $SD = 9.6$ ) was higher than that of female counsellor trainees ( $M = 15.6$ ,  $SD = 7.2$ ), and the mean total score obtained by counsellor trainees that were 35 years & above ( $M = 16.2$ ,  $SD = 8.3$ ) was higher than that of counsellor trainees that were below 35 years ( $M = 15.8$ ,  $SD = 7.9$ ). Moreover, the mean total score obtained by counsellor trainees in year two ( $M = 16.1$ ,  $SD = 6.7$ ) was higher than that of counsellor trainees who were below 35 years ( $M = 16.0$ ,  $SD = 9.4$ ).

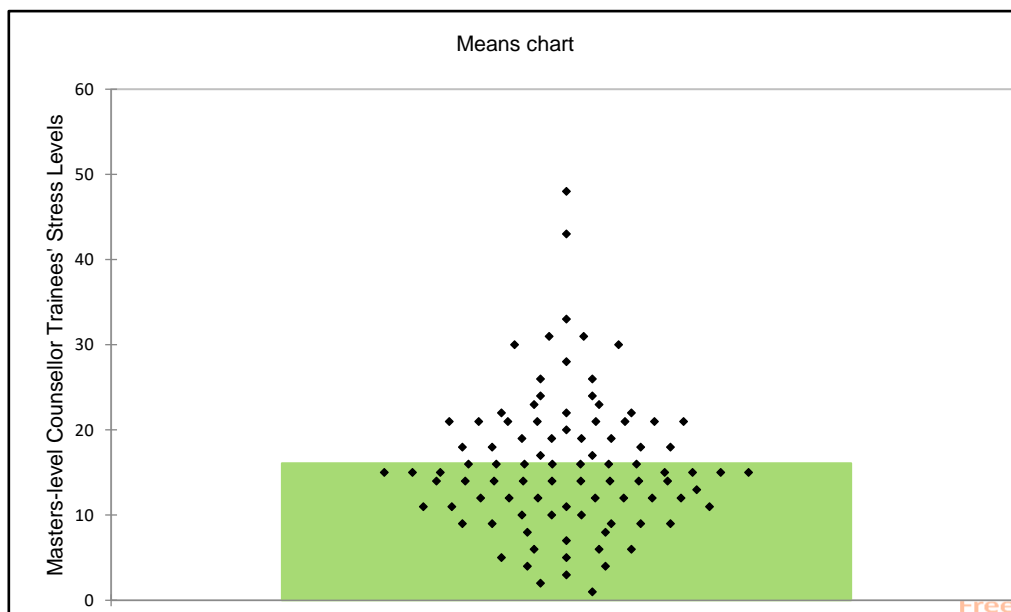


Figure 1. Means Chat of Masters-level Counsellor Trainees' Stress Levels

### Predictors of Psychological Distress

In total, 14 stressors were predictive of significant psychological distress to the counsellor trainees because their scores were beyond 57. The stressors were academic/coursework demands, finances and money problems, work, university/college environment, and study/life balance. Other stressors that predicted significant psychological distress to the counsellor trainees were transport, family relationships, parental expectations, procrastination, and housing/accommodation. The rest were parenting issues, child care, friendship, and other demands. The analysis of the items is in Table 2.

Table 2.

The hierarchical order of counsellor trainees' stressors in the University Stress Scale

Stressors	Score	Stressors	Score
Academic/coursework demands	185	Childcare	64
Finances and money problems	119	Friendships	59
Work	110	Other demands	59
University/college environment	100	Romantic relationships	46
Study/life balance	99	Language/cultural issues	39
Transport	90	Relationship break-down	37
Family relationships	85	Physical health problems	28
Parental expectations	83	Discrimination	28
Procrastination	77	Sexual orientation issues	25
Housing/accommodation	70	Mental health problems	13
Parenting issues	64		

### Statistical Differences in Stress Levels Based on Demographics

The study predicted a significant difference in stress levels between the demographic groupings of the counsellor trainees. The study considered data on men and women. It also evaluated data on counsellor trainees below 35 years and counsellor trainees 35 years and above. Lastly, it assessed data on counsellor trainees in year one and trainees in year two of their study. The results of the findings are in Table 1.

The independent-sample t-test results in Table 1 indicate no significant difference between men and women counsellor trainees' stress levels [ $t_{(90)} = .73, p = .47, d = .15$ ]. The interpretation of the findings is that men and women counsellor trainees were statistically equal in their stress levels.

Also, concerning age, the results of the findings are in Table 1. As indicated in Table 1, the significance level of the two-tailed t-test was above .05. Thus, we report no statistical difference in the two groups [ $t_{(90)} = .23, p = .82, d = .06$ ]. The interpretation of the findings is that counsellor trainees who were below 35 years old and those who were 35 years and above were statistically equal in their stress levels.

As shown in Table 1, the outcome of the independent sampled t-test employed to compare the differences in the mean levels of stress among counsellor trainees in Year 1 and those in Year 2 indicated that there was no statistical difference in the two groups [ $t_{(42)} = .06, p = .95, d = .01$ ]. It is because the significance level of the two-tailed t-test was above .05. The interpretation of the findings is that counsellor trainees in Year 1 and Year 2 were statistically equal in their stress levels.

### Discussion

This study assessed stress levels and associated stressors among masters-level counsellor trainees studying a sandwich mode programme at the University of Education, located in Winneba in Ghana for the 2021/2022 academic year. The study found that counsellor trainees reported stress levels that may cause them substantial psychological distress. The study also identified the perceived stressors behind the distress. Besides, there were no statistical differences in the stress levels of men and women, those below 35 years and those that were 35 years and above, and, those in year one and those in year two of their studies. From the analysis in Table 1 and the mean chart in Figure 1, all the counsellor trainees

sampled reported some stress levels. Moreover, 65% of the counsellor trainees scored and the mean total score of the USS was  $\geq 13$ . It indicates that the stress levels were predictive of significant psychological distress. Esia-donkoh (2014) implied that sandwich education at the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana, made students report acute, chronic, and episodic stress. Carter (2021) indicated that 82.2% of counsellor trainees sampled in the United Kingdom scored moderate to high range stress levels.

The total mean scores of men and women indicated that counsellor trainees who responded as men reported higher stress levels than their counterparts who were women. This finding contradicts the findings of Baqutayan et al. (2018), who asserted that female postgraduate students reported higher stress than their male counterparts. Baqutayan et al. (2018) indicated that the male postgraduate students reported adequate emotional intelligence levels that assist them in managing their stress. This study could not include emotional intelligence measures, to ascertain their influence on stress levels. However, unlike the findings of Baqutayan et al. (2018), the findings of this study contradict the stereotype assertion that females report higher stress levels than males because they are more emotionally expressive. Also, Adasi et al. (2020) indicated that female undergraduate teacher education students perceived higher overall stress levels than their male counterparts. Aside from notable academic stressors, money problems and living conditions on campus during sandwich mode counsellor training might have contributed to the findings of this study. In a cultural setting, Ghanaian men are the breadwinners of the family. Thus, they are domestically cared for by their female counterparts in the home setting. Finding themselves in a sandwich programme where they virtually have to do all their domestic chores on their own could have had a toll on their mental health. Aside from that, though they are taking care of their financial obligations at the university campus, they may also have to finance the care of their family back home. This double spending might have been a source of distress.

The finding of this study that counsellor trainees who were 35 years and above reported higher stress levels than counsellor trainees who were below 35 years contradicts the findings of Gutierrez et al. (2017). Gutierrez et al. (2017) asserted that graduate-level counsellors with higher age reported lower stress levels than their counterparts with lower age. The finding of this study may be that the younger counsellor trainees coped with the voluminous and intense nature of the sandwich counselling programme better than the older counselling trainees. Often, multitasking work, marriage, extended family and social engagements are burdens of older men in Ghana. Kwaah and Essilfie (2017) asserted that family/marriage problems were a notable stressor among university sandwich students in Ghana. Probably, the findings of this study suggest that both counsellor trainees who were 35 years and above and those below 35 years had challenges with multitasking. However, those 35 years and above were more burdened than those below 35 years.

The difference in mean scores of counsellor trainees in year one and year two indicates that the stress scores of those in year two were slightly higher than the stresses of those in year one. Graduate-level sandwich counsellor trainees in year two of their study battle with academic work on campus, thesis writing, practicum and work concurrently. Thus, it is undoubtedly unsurprising that their stress levels slightly surpass their counterparts in year one. Contrary to the findings of this study, Dessie et al. (2013) and Zegeye et al. (2018) asserted that academic-related stressors affected year one undergraduate students more than their counterparts in other years of their studies.

As indicated in Table 2, 14 stressors predicted significant psychological distress to the counsellor trainees. The top five were academic/coursework demands, finances and money problems, work, university environment, and study/life balance. Kumary and Baker (2008) found that counsellor training is associated with stress levels due to academics, placements, and personal and professional development. From the findings of this study, aside from the limited study period and short revision time for examinations, identifying practicum sites for practical assignments may have contributed to the stress levels reported by the counsellor trainees.

Also, Cieslak (2016) and Zegeye et al. (2018) asserted that academic burden, client population characteristics, working environments and societal pressures trigger high stress and burnout levels among counsellor trainees, affecting their psychological well-being. The finding of this study builds on a fundamental underlying factor that sandwich students, counsellor trainees in general and graduate counsellor trainees have an ascertained history of psychological distress. Thus, Cieslak (2016)



recommended that graduate counsellor trainees recognize and deal with the concurrent graduate education stressors so they might not worsen their stress predicaments.

The revelation that parental expectation was the eighth stressor in the ranking that predicted significant psychological distress to counsellor trainees is surprising. It is surprising because counsellor trainees were adult enough to care for themselves and sometimes their parents. Thus, an expectation is that they should not be concerned about their parents' expectations in academics. However, the extended family systems of bonding in Ghana that allow family members to share in each other's successes and failures might have contributed to the findings of this study. Since parents might be concerned to know and share in the academic success of their adult children, the counsellor trainees may be worried about how their parents may feel if they fail in their academic endeavours.

The final objective of this study was to examine the differences in stress levels among counsellor trainees' gender, age, and years in training. The findings showed an insignificant difference in stress levels regarding gender groups, age groups, and the year in training groups. Knowing that the difference in reported stress levels among male and female counsellor trainees was statistically insignificant is consistent with the findings of Baqutayan et al. (2018), who found that the differences in stress levels for male and female postgraduate students are statistically insignificant. Also, Abasimi et al. (2015) and Atindanbila & BanyenRejoice (2011) found a statistically insignificant difference in stress concerning the gender of university students. However, unlike this study, Abasimi et al. (2015) and Atindanbila & BanyenRejoice (2011) studied undergraduate students at the university. Besides, Adasi et al. (2020) asserted that the difference between male and female university students was statistically insignificant. Thus, the differences in the stress levels between the male university students and that of their female counterparts that Adasi et al. (2020) studied were relatively similar statistically and not noteworthy.

For age groups and stress, knowing that there was statistically no significant difference in stress levels regarding trainees below 35 years and trainees above 35 years contradicts the findings of Myers et al. (2012), who asserted that younger graduate students were significantly more stressed than older graduate students. Also, Gutierrez et al. (2017) found a small, negative correlation between stress and age among masters-level counsellor trainees, indicating that higher age is associated with lower stress levels. Gutierrez et al. (2017) study had a higher sample size from pastoral counselling students. With growth and training in biblical counselling, society anticipates adequate self-care and calmness in managing environmental encounters. However, a study by Saleh et al. (2017) confirmed the findings of this study.

Concerning years in training and stress, the findings that there was a statistically insignificant difference in stress levels regarding Year 1 and Year 2 counsellor trainees are consistent with the findings of Gutierrez et al. (2017), who asserted that masters-level counsellor trainees' stress scores did not have a statistically significant relationship with their hours of completed graduate work. However, Gutierrez et al. (2017) studied stress with emotional intelligence, and empathy. Also, the findings of Ugwoke et al. (2018), who studied a sample of undergraduate students, indicated no significant mean score among student stress levels concerning years in training. The finding of indifference in stress levels of years in training could be that both year one and two counsellor trainees could have been trained in counselling at the undergraduate level. Thus, they could have had some form of knowledge or training in self-care.

### **Conclusion**

This study assessed stress levels among Sandwich Study Master of Education counsellor trainees. The findings revealed that though all the counsellor trainees reported some levels of stress, the scores of 65% of them were predictive of significant psychological distress. Also, 14 stressors were predictive of significant psychological distress among the counsellor trainees. The findings of this research indicate that statistically, stress has no colour irrespective of sandwich study graduate students' age, gender and years in training. Thus, in mitigating implications to engender stress-reducing strategies and techniques, age, gender and years in training should not be discriminated against. The findings complement existing literature and provoke scholarship towards improved counsellor training and counsellor trainees' well-being.

Though studies report higher stress levels among graduate trainees, such stress levels should not inhibit lifelong learning and academic achievements. Thus, counsellor educators and supervisors should assist

sandwich study masters-level counsellor trainees in developing stress-reducing and positive coping strategies while on campus. The assistance should also include a practice model to guide and motivate counsellor trainees to adhere to positive coping strategies. Since counsellor educators would create an enabling study environment for counsellor trainees and assist them in reducing and coping with their stress levels, it is eminent that the onus lies on the counsellor trainees themselves to manage their stress levels to improve their mental health. Thus, counsellor trainees must consider practising self-awareness, self-assessment, and self-assistive strategies to identify and cope with their stressors. Also, counsellor trainees should quickly seek psychological help from counsellor educators, colleague counsellor trainees, the university counselling centre, face-to-face counsellors and online counselling sites.

Academic/coursework demands emerged as the number one stressor that is predictive of significant psychological distress among the counsellor trainees. Thus, there is a need for counsellor educators and other stakeholders to consider a Sandwich Hybrid and Blended Learning environment for sandwich counsellor training to ease academic pressure on campus. Counselling is a specialised programme rooted in psychology. The assumption is that the admission requirement for a Master of Education (MEd) in counselling could be an undergraduate counselling degree. However, at the University of Education in Winneba, the specific requirements for a sandwich counselling MEd is an undergraduate degree with a GPA of not below 2.5 from a Ghana Tertiary Education Commission accredited or assessed university locally or internationally, in Counselling Psychology or a related field of study (E.g., Psychology, Guidance & Counselling, Social Work, and Nursing). Also, applicants whose GPA is below 2.5 could be considered subject to the current population they serve and contingent upon passing a written and oral examination (UEW, 2023).

The requirement allows relatively low GPAs to get admission into the programme. Such applicants might also not have a specialised component of fundamental counselling knowledge. The intensive nature of the programme could make those counsellor trainees lag in academics, which may be a source of stress for them. Thus, it could be appropriate for the University to tailor its sandwich master's counselling degree programme towards only applicants with a degree with a specialised component of adequate fundamental counselling knowledge. Also, counsellor educators must consider introducing a full-time regular programme in Master of Education (Med) or Master of Arts (MA) in counselling. Counsellor educators could structure the regular-based master's programme in counselling to consider applicants who do not have a degree with a specialized component of adequate fundamental counselling knowledge since there is time in regular-based programme durations to study the fundamentals of the courses of an academic programme.

Considering a standard practice, the findings of this study must not be generalized to the entire masters-level counsellor trainees at the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana, because masters-level counsellor trainees that are studying as regular students would have characteristics that could be diverse from masters-level counsellor trainees that are studying as sandwich students. However, inferences from this study could suit similar studies to indicate how common the phenomenon is. Also, the study used a self-reported scale, the USS that could result in social desirability bias. Thus, respondents could have under-reported their responses to the study instrument. Finally, though the 60% survey response rate in this study is acceptable, a higher response rate of 80% and above could have improved the findings of the study.

Stress seems to be a topical domain in the mental health phenomena. Findings and recommendations on its studies provide a pivotal remedy in tackling mental health issues within the educational arena. Thus, future studies should expand the objective and methodology of this study to consider using a mixed method approach to ascertain an in-depth understanding of stress among sandwich mode of study masters-level counsellor trainees. Also, study populations from different counsellor training institutions could broaden the findings of stress levels among counsellor trainees.

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**Ethics statement:** In this study, we declare that the rules stated in the "Higher Education Institutions Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Directive" are complied with and that we do not take any of the actions based on "Actions Against Scientific Research and Publication Ethics". At the same time, we declare that there is no conflict of interest between the authors, which all authors contribute to the study, and that all the responsibility belongs to the article authors in case of all ethical violations.

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