

Prevalence of Counselling Services among University Students in Kenya

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Abstract

Transition to university life can be stressful for all students. In mitigation, most universities, both private and public, including those in Kenya offer social support to students in form of counselling, financial assistance, health and academic support. Despite this it has been documented that only a minority of university students who experience psychological distress seek professional counselling. This paper aimed at establishing the prevalence of counselling services among university students in Kenya. The study applied descriptive survey research design and guided by Person Centred and Social Learning Theories. Data was collected using questionnaires, in-depth interview schedules and Focus Group Discussions. Findings reveal that university students are faced with various life challenges such as academic, psychological, social, personal, economic, health, physical, vocational and spiritual. However, only 35% of students with issues in both private and public universities seek counselling services, either frequently or rarely, majority of which are females. The study recommends that university counsellors should initiate vigorous campaign to encourage male/female students to seek for counselling services.

Key words Prevalence, gender, frequency

2.0 Background and Literature Review

2.1 Overview of need for Counselling among University Students

The complexities and challenges of everyday living are experienced by all persons, both adults and students, in developed and developing countries (Wango, 2015). In addition, there are increasing social, economic, personal and even educational challenges in the modern society (Biswalo, 1996; Wango, 2015). University life is associated with experience of significant stressors for students that include stress experienced by new life of transiting into a university life (Atwarter, 2003 Julal, 2013). Triggers to these stress factors can be linked to increased academic demands, constrained finances, lack of employment and personal relationships (Julal, 2013). These challenges can have major effects on the student experience that include negative academic performance (Harding, 2011; Mertler and Vannatta, 2005), inability to progress through the university academic years, decision to remain at university and overall psychological well-being (Bennett & Bigfoot-Sipes, 1991). According to Slaa and Barkam, (2010) psychological well-being in students' decreases significantly just before the first semester at the start of university education. In mitigation most universities including those in Kenya offer social support to students in form of counselling, financial assistance, health and academic. The provision of counselling services is thought to increase the likelihood of students continuing with their courses. Thus, counselling is a significant service (Biswalo, 1996; Commission for University Education, 2013; Wango, 2015) for university students. In light of importance attached to counselling in the Kenyan Universities the Commission for University Education (2015) includes it as an essential service that must be provided to students in higher education as a condition for accreditation of an institution.

2.2 Limited Search of Professional Counselling for University Students

Despite the fact that counselling is important to university students, it has been documented that only a minority of students who experience psychological distress seek professional counselling (Khan & Williams, 2003; Raunic & W., 2008). Raunic and Xenos (2008) report on utilisation of counselling services rate by local and international students in America, shows that that only a very small percentage of between 2% and 4% of university students accessed counselling services and in which case females are more likely to use them than males (Cornell, 2003). In Kenya, a study by Wachira (2012) indicates there is poor utilisation of counselling services by university students in Kenya. These findings corroborates with the Vice Chancellors Committee Report (2000) that stated that counselling services may not have had the desired effect in dealing with challenges facing universities students in Kenya (Standa, 2000).

Biswalo (1996) contends that the need for counselling services today could be due to the ever-growing complexity of the society and people have to learn how to cope with the upcoming challenges. The unprecedented expansion of educational institutions especially first generation learners create a number of psychological problems that are personal, vocational and social and hence a need for counselling (Nyaga, 2011). This is because, as argued by Frank and Karyn (2005), university undergraduate students are young adults and hence a need for counselling services (Frank & Karyn, 2005). Knowledge about the proportion, issues and gender of students who use university counselling services is an important preliminary consideration in evaluating the effectiveness of such services (Morgan, Ness, & Robinson, 2003) in the university. The objective of the paper was to establish the prevalence and gender of students seeking counselling services in the Kenyan private and public universities.

3.0 Methodology

This study adopted descriptive survey design that used mixed methodology that collected both quantitative and qualitative data. According to Kerlinger (1973) a survey can be utilised to study large or small populations by selecting and studying samples chosen from the population, such as the large number of university students involved in this study. This in turn enables one to determine 'what is', and the state of affairs as they exist, for instance, the prevalence of counselling services among university students (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 2007). Kothari (2004) posits that a survey can be utilised to study large or small populations by selecting and studying samples chosen from the population, such as the large number of university students involved in this study. A survey enables one to determine state of affairs as they exist, (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 2007). In this study the target population were the 65 Universities in Kenya by 2015 (Commission for University Education, 2015). The accessible population were three universities; Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology; Kenya Methodist University and Mount Kenya University. Stratified, simple random and purposive sampling methods were used to sample the participants in the three universities. The sample size was 310 students and seven student counsellors. Research instruments included a questionnaires, in-depth interview schedules and Focus Group Discussion Guide. Quantitative Data was analysed using descriptive statistics while qualitative data was used to supplement interpretation of quantitative data. The instruments were piloted at one private and one public university. Reliability of questionnaires was determined through test-retest method. Pearson's Product Moment Formula was used to calculate the correlation coefficient between the tests. The test retest scores showed a correlation coefficient of 0.93 for counsellors and 0.89 for students which indicates that the instruments were highly reliable. A major limitation of this study was that some of the research participants had never sought counselling services and were therefore not real clients in a practical counselling session. However, responses were compared with data obtained through in-depth interview and focus group discussions with students who had attended counselling. In addition, information obtained from students was compared with data from university students' counsellors who had been involved in practical counselling of students. Data from university counsellors consisted of information on the prevalence of counselling services among university, gender of those who sought counselling and the frequency. This was important to harmonise the data from students seeking services, as well as those who could have failed to seek help. Suggestions from the study could enhance interventions and promotion of student counselling services in the Kenyan Public and Private university.

4.0 Results and Discussions

This study aimed at seeking information on the prevalence of counselling services in Kenyan universities. Research questionnaires formulated for this study sought to gather information from both counsellors and students on the prevalence for services from the university counselling departments. A summary of the findings is presented below.

4.1 Prevalence of counselling services

The study showed that both counsellors and students agreed that majority of students in both public and private universities were not fully utilizing counselling services provided for them by their respective universities. This was attested by majority of counsellors (n=4, 33% female, 24% male) and students (n=126, 37% female, 28% male) who indicated that students in universities did not seek counselling services although they were faced with various challenging issues that needed counselling services. While some students often utilized university counselling services, there was evidence that a higher proportion of them were reluctant (Mertler and Vannatta, 2005; Raunic and Xenos, 2008; Wachira, 2012). This is in spite of Biswalo's (1996) argument that for most students, the college years represented unique challenges. It is actually a time of significant personal growth and decision making phase regarding one's values, interpersonal relationships, career and other life goals all within a stressful student academic environment. However, some university students had the secondary school mentality in which counselling was regarded as a service for deviants and this was inhibiting them from seeking counselling services. A male student explained:

Students perceive counselling as a service for those with problems. When I was in secondary school, students that had discipline problems would be referred for counselling after being punished by the deputy head teacher. So here we do not seek counselling except for those involved in drugs and alcohol.

Wango (2006) notes the discipline aspect in overall guidance and counselling services in schools among men as well as sexuality issues among women as explained by a female student who participated in this study;

We seek help mostly on pregnancy and sexual issues. For example, I took my friend for counselling when she was raped. Then we suggested to another girl to see a counsellor because she was crying a lot after her boyfriend suddenly dropped her. Other than that, we are okay.

This implies that despite efforts made by universities to provide counselling services, the services are underutilized. A female counsellor reported:

Universities should do something about counselling for university students. Only a few students seek the help of counsellors although the services are diverse and offered free of charge.

This study concurs with Sutton and Stewart (2009) who contend that the road to the counsellor's door can be a long one. This was illustrated by one of the female student who was also a peer counsellor who said:

Students fail to seek counselling help because of a number of reasons. For example, fear of being stigmatized, lack of trust with counsellors, tight academic schedule and thus no time for seeking counselling help. There are also cultural values that prohibit men from seeking help such as men should not seek help from females.

Some students felt that they needed to use the available time for their studies and so considered counselling as a waste of time. A female student who had gone for counselling said:

I often seek the services of a counsellor when I have challenges and have found it very useful. Personally, I encourage my colleagues to seek assistance and some have approached a counsellor here in campus while others shy away.

Such students have encouraged others to be positive about seeking counselling help. Another female student agreed with the above when she said that some students made use of counselling services because they had heard someone talking positively about counselling in the university.

4.2 Gender of those seeking Counselling Services

The study sought data on which gender (men or women) sought the services of counsellors more than the other in the university. Data regarding this information is presented in Figures 1 and 2:

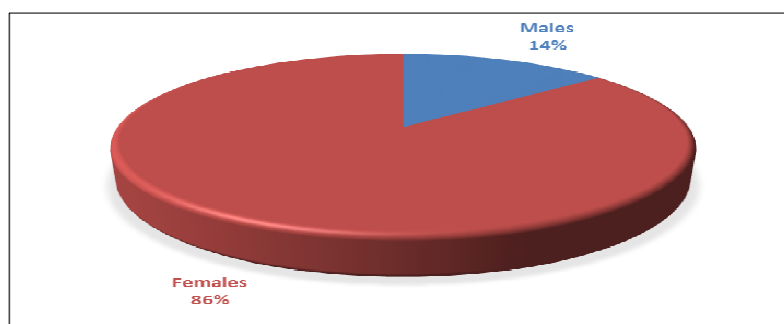


Figure 1: Opinions of Counsellors on Gender Seeking Counselling Services

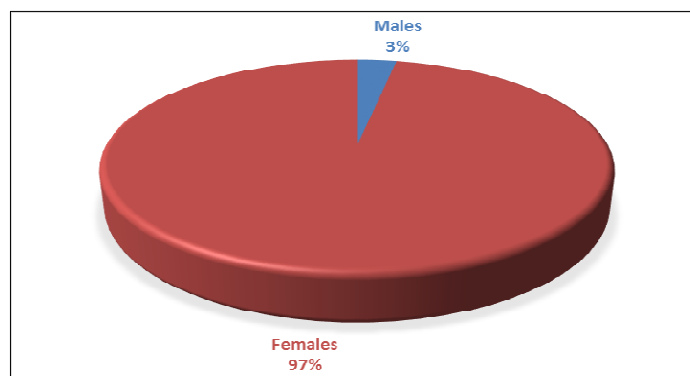


Figure 2: Opinions of Students on Gender Seeking Counselling Services

More females than males sought the services of university counsellors with majority of counsellors (n=6, 86%) and majority of students (n=188, 97%) sharing similar opinions. Computed Chi-square test for counsellors shows no significant difference in the opinions of counsellors on the number of students of either gender that sought counselling services ($\chi^2=3.571$, $df=1$, $p=.059$). Chi-square test for students also indicated no significant difference in the opinion of students concerning which gender sought counselling services more ($\chi^2=85.371$, $df=1$, $p=.076$). The computed statistics confirmed that students and counsellors were of similar views; that female students sought counselling services more than male students in the universities. This concurs with Fisher and Hood (1987) who suggests that females are more likely than males to become counselling clients. As a result, women are more willing than men to reveal highly personal and vulnerable information about themselves to counsellors (Herink, 2001). In this line, Russell, Thompson and Rosenthal (2008) reported that most of the students who sought help from a counselling centre were females. According to Dusek (1996), many female clients who seek counselling are concerned with a lack of self-esteem, an inability to assert themselves and an inability to seek power or control their lives. Females have been socialised to take a lower position than males thus may not take control of their lives as power belongs to men (Golombok and Fivush, 2004). When difficulties or conflicts arise between them and males, the females tend to blame themselves and to harbour mixed feelings of guilt, shame, resentment, hostility and depression (Dusek, 1996). Data from the counsellors showed that female students engage in more open and personal self-disclosure than male students. This disclosure difference has been explained in terms of gender-role socialization as supported by Social Learning Theory adopted in this study. Data from students showed that men seek counselling less than women not because they have less counselling issues than women but because they keep them to themselves. They also shied off from seeking the counselling services. The counsellors noted that whereas the male gender-behaviour of being tough and emotionally inexpressive discourages them from disclosing to others, the female gender-behaviour of being connected and social promotes intimacy. According to counsellors, and in agreement with Turner (1981), men are reluctant to seek counselling and when they do, they tend to resist a close counselling relationship. However, Pedersen, Sue and Ivey (1996) states that although men have in the past been reluctant to seek counselling, they are now willing to seek counselling services as supported by 14% male counsellors. According to counsellors, men seek counselling services when they experience personal dissatisfaction or feeling of inadequacy, exhibiting addictive behaviour, having problems with intimate relationships or when they realize that they are developing pathological patterns of violence and abuse of others.

4.3. Frequency of seeking Counselling

The study obtained data from the counsellors and students on how regularly students sought counselling services from the university. A summary of this data is presented in Figure 3:

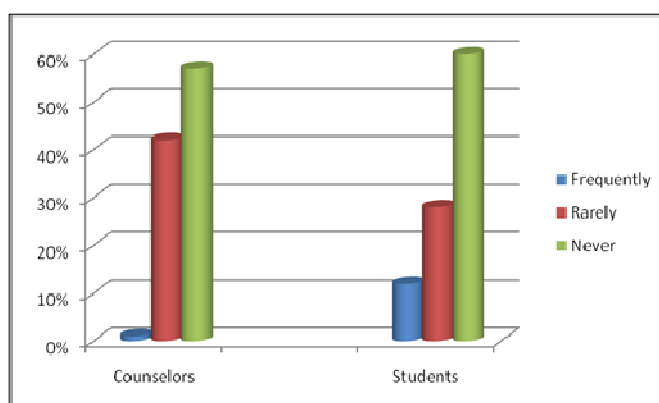


Figure 3 Counsellors and Students Responses on Students' Frequency in Seeking Counselling

Counsellors and students responses show that students do not frequent counselling services. To counsellors, 57% of universities never sought counselling services while according to data obtained from data, 65% of students never sought counselling services. From this study, a sizeable population of students sought the services of counsellors as indicated by 43% of counsellors and 35% of students. This suggests that more than half of university students have never sought any form of support through counselling. Data from both counsellors and students showed that less than 10% of university students do seek for counselling services frequently. It was notable that students did appreciate accrued benefits from counselling. For instance, the students who sought

counselling services developed effective problem-solving and decision-making capabilities useful in the enhancement of developmental capacity for academic, social and personal growth.

5.0 Summary,

The study findings reveal that majority of students did not seek counselling services although they were faced with various challenging issues. This was said by 57% counsellors and 65% students. Further, 43% of the counsellors and a half (50%) of the students indicated that students sought counselling help mostly in times of crises and 43% counsellors and 34% students felt that students in the first year of study present themselves for counselling more than any other academic years.

6.0 Conclusion

This study noted that both male and female students are not fully utilizing counselling services. The study has revealed that both male and female students are faced with many counselling issues such as academic, psychological, social, personal, economic, health, physical, vocational and spiritual that. Several students made comments regarding feeling overwhelmed by the volume of information delivered during the few days immediately preceding the start of their studies. However, the number of students who seek counselling services is less than 10%. This shows a very low prevalence of counselling services. Most of those seeking help are female students at 91.5% while males are much fewer at 8.5%. Male students are not utilizing counselling services for fear of violating masculine ideologies. In addition, the threat to masculine ideology encourages males students to have more positive attitude towards seeking help for academic issues while female students seek social psychological counselling to help them gain understanding of root causes of their problems.

7.0 Recommendations

This study recommends that university counsellors should initiate vigorous campaigns to encourage more students of either gender to seek for counselling services. University counsellors should raise awareness among male students with an aim of enabling them appreciate counselling and an acceptance that the issues over which they seek counselling help are normal. This should be done by male counsellors for male students are likely to identify with another male. University counsellors can also work to make the terminologies they use to describe therapy/counselling more appealing to men. For example they can use terms like consultations and to make therapy/counselling more attractive to males.

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