

Contributors to Students' Use of Counselling Services in Kenyan Universities

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Abstract

Transition to university life can be stressful for all students. In mitigation, most universities 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 looks at contributors to students' use of counselling services in Kenyan universities. These are classified into four: the social and behavioural issues, academic issues, psychological issues and economic issues. The study applied descriptive survey research design guided by Person Centred and Social Learning Theories. Data was collected using questionnaires, in-depth interview schedules and Focus Group Discussions. The study findings indicate that both male and female students are faced with many counselling issues such as academic, psychological, social, personal, economic, health, physical, vocational and spiritual. It can be concluded that the threat to masculine ideology encourages males to have more positive attitude towards seeking help for academic issues and that female students seek social psychological counselling to help them gain understanding of root causes of their problems.

Key words: reasons, social and behavioural issues, academic issues, psychological issues, economic issues

Introduction

Studying at university is associated with experiencing significant stressors in including stress experienced by new students after transiting to a university life (Atwater, 2003 Julal, 2013). Triggers to these changes can be linked to increased academic demands, constrained finances, lack of employment and personal relationships (Julal, 2013). Entry into educational institutions for first generation learners expose them to psychological problems that are personal, vocational and social and hence a need for counselling (Nyaga, 2011). In retrospect, Frank and Karyn (2005) argue that university undergraduate students are young adults in need for counselling services. Counseling services aim at assisting and supporting students that experience psycho-sociological problems especially as they transit into university life. Such problems can potentially disrupt their academic, inter-personal and campus adjustments (International Association of Students Affairs and Services Professionals, 2001). Arguably, providing counselling services is important in increasing the likelihood of students to continue and complete their studies (Biswalo, 1996; Commission for University Education, 2015; Wango, 2015). Consequently, universities have a responsibility and obligation to offer counseling services to all students. It is this regard; Kenyan universities offer social support to students in form of counselling, financial assistance, health and academic intervention. The Kenyan Commission for University Education (2013) stipulates that counselling is an essential service that must be available to students in institutions of higher education before they are accredited. Despite the availability of counselling service in universities, the propensity to seek the service depends on an individual student. This paper presents findings on the factors that trigger students to seek counseling services within Kenyan University.

Methodology

This study adopted descriptive survey design that used mixed methodology that collected both quantitative and qualitative data. 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). 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.

Results and Discussions

Reasons Why Students Seek Counseling Services

The study also investigated issues that make students seek help in counselling. Results are presented in table 1.

Table 1 Reasons Why Students Seek Counselling Services

Reasons for seeking help	Counsellors		Students	
	M (%)	F (%)	M (%)	F (%)
Academic Issues	37	49	34	45
Social Issues	43	57	41	53
Psychological Issues	30	41	31	40
Economic Issues	12	17	17	23

Table 1 shows reasons why students seek counseling services included academic issues, social issues, psychological issues and economic issues. This corroborates with views from Atwarter (2003) that shows that university students often experience high levels of stress. Unattended psychological difficulties can result into serious consequences such as academic failure and ultimate withdrawal from the university (Mertler and Vannatta, 2005).

Social and Behavioral Issues

Social and behavioral issues that affect students in the universities as highlighted by both counselors and students included drunkenness, drug and substance abuse, poor relationships with other students and sexual relationships which could lead to unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). The counselors, reported that the youthful university students face several issues and conflicts related to identity crises due to disintegration of social support structures, peer pressure, drug and substance abuse, HIV/AIDS, grief, anger management, family problems, self-esteem, loneliness, adjusting to new life and academic issues. These findings corroborate with those of Cheung and Liu, (2005) who argues that individual students are likely to seek professional help for different problems such as emotional, personal, interpersonal or academic/vocational problems, stress-related problems, relationship issues and mood problems.

Academic Issues

Academic achievement was noted by a majority of counselors (n=6, 37% male and 49% female) and students (n=144, 34% male and 45% female) as a concern. The study revealed that poor academic results and loss of interest in studying triggers students to seek counseling. University students scoring poor grades as compared to secondary school make them feel frustrated, especially for those whose fees was paid for by donors for they had to show reports at the end of the semester. It was more frustrating for those on probation or those suspended for may be one year since they felt this meant more money and a longer stay in campus. This corroborates with views by Mertler and Vannatta (2005), who observe that some students are admitted to universities with very high grades but end up being discontinued due to low academic achievement. Challenging class work and poor grades lead to anxiety for some students and suicidal thoughts. This concurs with Russell et al (2008) findings that surveyed a large sample of international students attending an Australian metropolitan university to examine the distribution of the problems for which they sought help. This study found out that of the 268 students who needed help majority (76%) needed academic-educational counseling, 60% career-vocational help, and 56% requested personal-social-emotional counseling.

Psychological Issues

The study showed both counselors and students identified psychological issues which affect students in the universities. The students thought that issues such as shyness, feeling of inferiority, loss of self-esteem, peer pressure and immaturity in intellectual development should be prioritized and addressed through the university counseling programmes. Other psychological concerns included health problems arising from HIV/ AIDS as well as stigma and discrimination; stress resulting from isolation from peers, family and the lecturers; drug and substance abuse and bereavement through death of significant members of the family such as parents and other family members. According to students, when one lost a loved one, the university community was not even informed. Students who come from communities where mourning is a community affair felt alone when a loss occurred. As one female student observed

“It is devastating to lose a loved one. When I lost my mother, I felt I had lost everything because she was very close to me. I expected my close friends to feel with me but they were so busy with their own life and I wondered whether they care. All they told me was that all will be well. No one really understood my pain”

Furthermore, failed relationships lead to anxiety for some students and suicidal thoughts. For some students, having come from very strict family background and schools, the freedom in campus took a toll in their lives. This is worse when they have no one to share with as everybody is concerned about their own life as one female student put it:

“I have no one to share with as no one is willing to listen. I just lock myself in my room and cry. I feel like I have come to the wrong place”.

The study further revealed that university students are affected by family problems which include separation, divorce and chronic illnesses among family members. University life compared with secondary school was different.

The freedom experienced in campus had pushed some students into drugs and alcohol. For some students it was the challenges that they were experiencing that were difficult to cope with thus took alcohol and drugs as a way of escaping such challenges. For some male students alcohol was acceptable. One male student said;

“Almost every man takes alcohol and it would be abnormal for me not to take”.

For this Student, the argument was that traditionally men have been socialized to conform to the norms of other men (Golombok and Fivush, 2004). This is in line with the social learning theory adopted in this study. Unfortunately some male students were squandering fees thus would end up not doing exams and others engaged in a sexual lifestyle that made some get infected with sexually transmitted diseases. It is such effects that made them seek counseling services.

As for female students, past traumatic events like sexual abuse, child battering and coming from a background of abuses were contributing factors. This concurs with Bloom and Covington (1998), who contend that women begun abusing drugs and alcohol after a specific traumatic event. Female students claimed they were treated with disrespect by male students. This concurs with Brissett (1998) who opines that substance use disorder in African American women, especially a maternal figure, violates a culturally transmitted pattern for families of descendants of slaves. Historically women of color have been socialized to rear their children at all costs despite all odds.

Economic Issues

The study revealed that some students sought help from counselors due to economic challenges. This fact was attested by 12% male and 17% female counselors and 17% male and 23% female of students. Counselors explained that students from humble families faced difficulties in paying tuition fees, accommodation expenses and other upkeep costs. The affected students felt that they could not cope up with university education and their trend in academic achievement therefore kept on declining. In the same light, the study revealed that it was frustrating for students to realize that the courses they were studying would not earn them much money as they had anticipated. For education students, the constant strikes by teachers created a negative image among their peers in other professions who would look down upon them especially when teacher's salary was analyzed in the press. Worse still, some had been persuaded to do the courses and still looked forward to a course of their choice. This concurs with Julal (2013), who contends that students have difficulties finding employment and such stress can have major effects on students experiencing such negative academic performance.

Summary

The paper has shown 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. The contributors can be broadly categorized into social and behavioural issues, academic issues, psychological issues and economic issues. The study showed that threat to masculine ideology encourages males to have more positive attitude towards seeking help for academic issues and that female students seek social psychological counselling to help them gain understanding of root causes of their problems.

Conclusion

Students appreciate the role of counseling in their lives, though some are unable to seek therapeutic services for reasons outside the profession. The students views showed that the core reasons which make them seek assistance from the counselors is the belief that counselors provide them with experiences that increase knowledge of occupations, training paths, improved lifestyles, decision-making strategies and knowledge of self. Students identified some educational and career aspirations which are inhibited due to social or personal difficulties that ought to be addressed by counselors if students are to experience success in the universities. Examples of personal difficulties which students experience included low achievements, low self-esteem and poor attitude towards the university education. The study further revealed that counselors assist students who are annoyed, unhappy and frustrated. Despite this both the male and female students are not fully utilizing counselling services.

Recommendations

This study recommends that university counsellors should initiate vigorous campaigns to encourage all students;- male and female to seek counselling services by providing follow up information to students in order to sensitize them on the need for counselling. A specific focus should be to male students in which university counsellors should raise awareness among them that the issues for which they need counselling help are normal. This can particularly effective if done by male counsellors since 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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