



Research Article

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The value and role of counselling psychologists in university settings

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Abstract

The figure of the psychologist is integrated into many settings, including hospitals, health centers, schools, and both public and private institutions. However, their presence is often lacking in university environments. This study focuses on examining the role and significance of psychologists within university settings. It aims to explore the effects and benefits of having psychological service to students, as well as to evaluate the counseling process and its impact on emotional well-being. The goal is to provide recommendations for enhancing mental health and emotional support programs in universities. The research includes a contextual analysis, a literature review, and a questionnaire administered to students regarding the perceived importance of psychologists in university life. The sample consists of 320 students: 89% females and 11 % males. A strong majority of students expressed the need for mental health professionals on campus to face universities challenges.

Keywords: psychology, counselling, wellbeing, students, university.

1. Introduction

Nowdays, attention to psychological problems and mental health in higher education is becoming more relevant for various scientific communities and psychology researchers. Universities, as environments where the personal and professional identity of young people is developed, face numerous demands that affect the mental health of students. University is characterized by academic stressors, environmental stressors, lack of awareness etc. In this sense, the presence of psychologists in university is considered an indispensable condition for attention to emotional support with psychological counseling and guidance.

We intend to investigate the need and advantage of having psychology service at universities, through international experience and national context. We intend to give practical recommendations to improve existing services to protect and promote emotional health of students. The research provides insight into the complexity of the context, will serve as a basis for better understanding the challenges and opportunities in this field, as well as contributing to the improvement of university life for students today.

2. Literature

University is the most important period for an individual's personal, intellectual, and emotional growth. Students during university face high levels of stress, anxiety and depression. Academic pressure, competition and social changes and other factors can contribute to a difficult environment for many students. These mental health struggles directly affect their academic performance, how they learn and develop, socialize and connect with others and the world around them. The presence of a psychologist within the university can be a valuable source of support for students during these challenging times. Psychologists provide counseling, stress management training, group sessions, and assistance in addressing mental health issues. They are trained to offer professional support and to help students cope with challenges by developing effective strategies to manage stress and improve emotional well-being.

Moreover, the presence of a psychologist within the university influences the overall institutional culture. By promoting mental health awareness, fostering an environment where both staff and students feel supported and accepted, and increasing recognition of the importance of emotional well-being, psychologists contribute to a more inclusive and compassionate academic climate. Through their involvement, higher education institutions can create a healthier and more supportive environment for all students and staff members. The role of the psychologist in university settings is essential, as it addresses the emotional well-being and academic success of the students positively influencing their university experience and their preparation for the future. Students face several challenges in academic life, but also in emotional, social and personal aspects. Some of the challenges that students face during their university period are:

- **Academic Stress and Pressure:** University students face academic challenges, including high workload, tests, assignments, and pressure to achieve good results. This can cause high level of stress and can affect the academic performance and emotional well-being of students. There is a link between study stress and pressure for high academic results that often negatively affect their study process (Hysenbegasi et al., 2005; Yamada et al., 2014).
- **Adapting to University Life:** For most students, time at university is a new and unusual period, with changes in social, emotional and academic life. These changes can cause anxiety and stress, especially for students who are under the pressure of coping with new and unfamiliar demands (Boland et al., 2019)

- Social and identity problems: Students also face other social and emotional challenges, including identity development, relationships with others, separation from family, and involvement in new social networks. They are in the process of building personal, academic, professional and relational values and principles (Horn et al., 2021).
- Mental Health and Stigma: Although mental health is an important issue in students' lives, stigma and lack of awareness can prevent many students from seeking help for their mental health problems (Andrews & Wilding, 2004).

The presence of a psychologist in university settings provides an important source of help and support for students. They can provide training, individual counseling, group therapy, and other services that can help with stress management, improving communication skills, and helping to resolve mental health issues. This ensures that students have the resources they need to meet the challenges and succeed in their academic and personal journeys in university settings.

2.1 Psychologist in support of the university environment

The inclusion of a psychologist within the university setting offers numerous significant advantages for students, faculty, and the institution. These benefits are manifested across various dimensions of university life, contributing to the establishment of a nurturing and supportive atmosphere for all individuals within the academic community. The presence of mental health professionals plays a crucial role in promoting well-being, enhancing academic performance, and fostering resilience among students and staff alike. Some of the major benefits are:

- Emotional Support and Counseling: The presence of a psychologist on campus provides students with an important source of emotional support and counseling. Students may seek help to address their mental health problems, such as stress, anxiety, depression, relationship problems, and other personal issues that can affect their academic performance and overall well-being. Counseling as part of higher education is linked with better mental health (Demirtepe & Metin, 2021).
- Stress Management and Improving Emotional Well-Being: Psychologists are trained to provide stress coping strategies and skills, improving communication skill, and encouraging effective coping mechanisms. This helps students cope with university demands and improve emotional well-being (Bradley, 2000).
- Help address academic problems: Psychologists help the students in acquiring methods to improve their study performance. This includes creating efficient study routines, helping to resolve learning and study delay problems, and supporting time management (Lichtenberg et al, 2018).
- Increase Mental Health Awareness: The presence of a psychologist on campus also helps to increase awareness of mental health and reduce the stigma that often accompanies mental health problems. This has the effect of increasing the number of students seeking help and improving the culture of emotional well-being in the higher education institution (Vogel et al., 2007).
- Developing an open and supportive teaching: The presence of a psychologist can

also help create a more open, collaborative and supportive teaching and learning. This includes supporting academic staff in managing conflict and stress, and providing training and workshops to enable effective communication and classroom management skills. By providing emotional well-being and counseling services, students and staff are able to discover healthier coping mechanisms for problems and reach their full potential during their time at university (Stanely, 2013).

2.2 International experiences with counselling services at university

International studies and experiences are important sources for assessing the success of the presence of psychologists in university settings. These experiences help us to understand how these models have been implemented at different levels and for identifying best practices that can be applied in the local context. Some of the international experiences that can serve as models for the presence of psychologists in university settings include:

- Many universities in the United States have advanced counseling services that provide assistance to students with a wide range of mental health issues. These services include individual counseling, group counseling, and various trainings that help students cope with the challenges of university life (Leshner & Sherer 2021).
- Several universities in Europe have developed innovative models to address students' mental health issues. These models include the presence of a psychologist on campus but also provide other services such as online mental health services, support groups, and other initiatives to promote students' emotional well-being. Wallace (2012) reported that 80.2% of 5,537 students across 85 UK universities found counseling to be beneficial for their academic performance.
- Universities in Australia and New Zealand: These countries have developed innovative models for addressing the mental health needs of students in university settings. For example, some universities offer created programs for students with specific mental health needs, as well as specialized counseling services for students who are sensitive to stress or anxiety (Rosenthal et al., 2006a).
- Universities in Asia and the Middle East: In these countries, there has been an increase in awareness and focus on student mental health. Some universities offer counseling services and support programs for students to improve their emotional well-being and address the various challenges they may encounter on campus. (Lee et al., 2004).

2.3 University Center for Psychological Counseling at University "Luigj Gurakuqi" Shkoder

In the Faculty of Educational Sciences, during the academic year 2011-2012, the University Center for Psychological Counseling was opened and was in service of students. It was the first University Psychological Counselling center opened at the University of Shkoder "Luigj Gurakuqi". The University of Tirana, the University of Durrës or the University of Elbasan had a Psychology department but not a counseling

center within the faculty before these years. It was an initiative of the department of psychology and social work. The center was in service of students and community to take free psychological services, to do their practice especially the students with clinical profile, to develop and practice counseling skills (Ndoja & Selcetaj, 2013). The center's staff offered psychological services related to issues such as stress and anxiety, trauma, family relationships, interpersonal and love relationships, self-esteem, personal growth, problems of adaptation to new environments, academic problems/difficulties, etc (Lumanaj, 2012). The Counselling Center was active until 2019. There are several reasons for closing it and not being in the service of the students, faculty, university and the community. In a period when academic, social and emotional challenges are increasing, especially for young people, universities have become not only centers of knowledge, but also spaces where mental well-being should be promoted. In this context, university psychologists have an essential role in maintaining and improving the quality of student life and the entire academic community. It is necessary to reopen the Psychological Counselling center to address student, university and community problems.

3. Methodology

The aims and objectives of research are focused on the contribution of the role being played by the psychologist within the university and the benefits of the students as a result of their presence.

The central argument is to understand the role and impact of the psychologist in universities. This entails understanding the psychologist's tasks and duties, as well as how they can contribute to students' emotional and academic performance. Identifying the needs of the students regarding their emotional and mental health. This involves understanding their problems, i.e., academic stress, anxiety, depression, and how having a psychologist can address these problems. The objective is to determine the real benefits of the presence of a psychologist in universities among students. They include improvement in emotional state, increase in academics, enhanced socialization among students, and impacts on mixed lifestyle and relationships among students. The final objective is to provide concrete policy recommendations and implications for college campuses to have psychologists. This can lead to a far healthier and more supportive environment for students.

3.1 Research Instruments

The main instrument used in this study is a questionnaire, designed and distributed via the *Google Forms* platform. The questionnaire consists of 11 single-choice questions and was created based on the theory of Help-Seeking (Rickwood et al, 2005) and Social Support Theory (Cohen & Wills, 1985). The collected data were analyzed using the SPSS statistical software.

Sample

The sample consists of 320 students from five faculties of the “Luigj Gurakuqi” University in Shkodër:

- Faculty of Education Sciences;
- Faculty of Natural Sciences;
- Faculty of Law;
- Faculty of Foreign Languages;
- Faculty of Economics;

4. Results

Table 1. *Number of students based on age.*

Age					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	17-19	84	26.3	26.3	26.3
	20-22	184	57.5	57.5	57.5
	23-25	52	16.2	16.2	16.2
	Total	320	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 1 presents data on students age, showing that 57.5% of the students are 20-22 years old, 26.3% of the students are 17–19 years old and 16.2 % are 23-25 years old.

Table 2. *Number of students based on gender.*

Gender					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Female	284	88.8	88.8	88.8
	Male	36	11.2	11.2	11.2
	Total	320	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 2 presents data on students' gender, showing that 88.8% of the students are female and 11.2% are male.

Table 3. *Number of students based on faculty.*

Faculty					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Faculty of Natyral sciences	84	26.2	26.2	26.2
	Faculty of Educational sciences	116	36.3	36.3	36.3
	Faculty of Law	20	6.2	6.2	6.2
	Faculty of Foreign languages	28	8.8	8.8	8.8
	Faculty of Economics	72	22.5	22.5	22.5
	Total	320	100.0	100.0	100.0

According to the table 3, there are 36.3 % students from Faculty of Educational

Sciences; 22.5 % from Faculty of Economics; 26.2 from Faculty of Natyral Sciences; 8.8 % from Faculty of Foreign Languages and 6.2% from Faculty of Law.

Table 4. *Do you think there is a need for a mental health professional in your study environment?*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	I strongly disagree	4	1.3	1.3	1.3
	I agree to some extent	68	21.3	21.3	21.3
	I agree	124	38.8	38.8	38.8
	I strongly agree	120	37.5	37.5	37.5
	Total	316	98.7	98.7	98.7
Missing	System	4	1.3	1.3	1.3
Total		320	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 4 results show the need of the mental health professional in the university. There are 38.8 % of the students that agree to have the need of mental health professionals in the university followed by 37.5 % of students that strongly agree. Around 21.3 % of the students agree to some extent.

Table 5. *Where do you go when you need advice (counseling)?*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Private Psychologist	16	5.0	5.0	5.0
	Professors	12	3.8	3.8	3.8
	Parents	100	31.1	31.1	31.1
	Frendship	172	53.8	53.8	53.8
	Total	300	93.8	93.8	93.8
Missing	System	20	6.3	6.3	6.3
Total		320	100.0		100.0

Table 5 shows the results of where the students go when they need advice. 53.8 % of the students seek help from their friends; 31.1% from their parents, 3.8% to professors and 5% to private psychologists.

Table 6. *Factors that you think have the most impact on your stress.*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Course loads	112	35.0	35.0	35.0
	Lack of social support	4	1.2	1.2	1.2
	Uncertainty about the future	52	16.3	16.3	16.3
	All of above	152	47.5	47.5	47.5
	Total	320	100.0	100.0	100.0

The results show that 47.5% of students attribute the stress they experience to a mix

of factors such as multiple workloads, lack of social support, and uncertainty about the future, while 35% of them attribute it mostly to multiple academic workloads.

Table 7. *Does High level of stress affect your academic performance and emotional well-being. Do you feel that in these situations you need counseling from a professional in the field?*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly disagree	8	2.5	2.5	2.5
	Disagree	20	6.2	6.2	6.2
	Somewhat agree	88	27.5	27.5	27.5
	Agree	116	36.3	36.3	36.3
	Strongly agree	88	27.5	27.5	27.5
	Total	320	100.0	100.0	100.0

The results show that around 63.8% of students agree to need counseling from a professional psychologist; 27.5 % agree to some extent and around 9 % do not agree to have a psychologist need.

Table 8. *Is the university period characterized by major changes in social, emotional, and academic life? Do you feel that in these situations you need advice from a professional in the field?*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly disagree	4	1.2	1.2	1.2
	Disagree	28	8.8	8.8	8.8
	Somewhat agree	112	35.0	35.0	35.0
	Agree	80	25.0	25.0	25.0
	Strongly agree	96	30.0	30.0	30.0
	Total	320	100.0	100.0	100.0

The results show that around 55% of students agree to need counseling from a professional psychologist; 35 % agree to some extent and around 10 % do not agree to have a psychologist to face social-emotional changes during university studies.

5. Discussion

The majority of the participants in this study were 20–22 years old (57.5%), followed by 17–19 years old (26.3%), and 23–25 years old (16.2%). The population participation was better represented better by female students (88.8%), and is consistent with trends for some of the faculties such as Educational Sciences, where females are better represented (OECD, 2022). Participants were choosen from several faculties, with the largest percentage from Educational Sciences (36.3%), followed by Natural Sciences (26.2%), Economics (22.5%), Foreign Languages (8.8%), and Law (6.2%). This diversity strengthens the relevance of findings across academic disciplines, as

academic and other stress factors can change by field of study (Ibrahim et al., 2013). A strong majority of students (38.8% agree, 37.5% strongly agree, 21.3% agree to some extent) expressed the necessity of having mental health professionals on campus. The results confirm the earlier studies indicating that 60–80% of university students want access to counseling services (Lipson et al., 2022; World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). Students view professional mental health services as a necessity for academic achievement, emotional well-being, and overall well-being. Students first turn to friends (53.8%) and parents (31.1%) when they encounter difficulties and require assistance for only minor percentages from professors (3.8%) or private psychologists (5%). Previous studies have demonstrated that informal support networks are more accessible to students, because they have easier access for support and assistance, are more familiar with the people around them than strangers; stigma and cost were two important factors preventing greater professional help-seeking (Rickwood et al., 2005; Eisenberg et al., 2011; McCabe, 2014).

Regarding sources of stress, 47.5% of students highlighted multiple factors—including heavy workloads, lack of social support, and uncertainty about the future—while 35% attributed stress mainly to academic workload. These findings are supported with earlier studies highlighting academic demands as a major predictor of stress and mental health challenges (Beiter et al., 2015; Barbayannis et al., 2022).

6. Conclusion

Brief training for academic and administrative staff in universities on the signs of emotional problems and ways to address them could be an option. This would help with the early identification of students who need help and in taking appropriate steps to provide support. Instead of having a psychologist on a permanent basis, universities could establish an emotional well-being counseling and protection center, where trained staff, including independent or specialized psychologists, can provide emotional counseling and support to students. Universities can establish links with organizations outside the university, such as counseling centers or practicing psychologists who are in training to provide emotional counseling services to students. Through specific courses or extracurricular activities, universities can promote emotional well-being awareness and practices among students. This could include relaxation techniques, stress management, and training in emotional communication skills. Through surveys and periodic assessments of student emotional well-being, universities can monitor the level of need for support services and build their programs based on these assessments.

Limitations

The main limitation is the lack of specialized psychologists at some universities, which makes it difficult to conduct detailed studies on their role and potential benefits. When only a few students participate, there is likely to be a lack of information about other students, making it difficult to understand the overall situation of emotional

well-being at the university.

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