Common Tertiary Student Counselling Issues in Fiji

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Abstract

University life presents various stresses for students. Some students are able to cope well with these stressors while some need support. This paper examines some common and critical issues found during counselling at a tertiary institution during 2014. A few psychological tools were used to find the level of depression, stress and anxiety of the students. The paper suggests that issues relating to academic progress, family/relationship, finances and discipline, if not dealt with in a timely manner and with due seriousness, could develop into behavioural problems, anxiety, stress, depression and in some cases personality disorders.

Introduction

The transition to university life presents various stressors for students. Coping with new university environment, developing new social and personal relations, meeting academic deadlines, and performance in exams, may act as stressors for many students. Many students are able to cope up well with these stressors but some fail to do so fully or partly. The latter may end up with poor academic performance, poor class attendance, possible dropout, and/or anxiety, depression or some personality disorder.

It is usual to feel lost or lonely during the first few days at a university. Students begin to meet and make new friends during the first few weeks of their commencements. It is common for students to begin to have some feelings of homesickness mixed in with all of the fun and energy of a new beginning.

Relationships are central to one's life. At universities this becomes especially important for the young minds. Being a student is a period of great personal change. It is often difficult to understand ones own self at

the critical tertiary institution age, let alone trying to understand someone else within a relationship. Relationship issues further complicate and challenge new tertiary students.

This paper discuses some of the common issues among tertiary students found during counselling. The results are based on evidence from 200 students examined at one campus of a major tertiary institution in Fiji during the first half of 2014.

What does the Literature Say?

Literature on problems students face when they enter university life is extensive. Relevant for our purposes is the issue of stress. Blaine states that 'stress can be particularly acute for students because of their stage of development. It has been found that adolescents are more vulnerable to stress than adults and younger children. Ordinary stresses can be monumental at this stage of development' (1963: 25). Kuethe (1981) found that the college student is subjected to a variety of stresses in addition to examinations; these include the general atmosphere of competition, the student's doubt about his vocational choice, and often his fears of acceptance into graduate school. The major stress of adjusting to a new environment is especially critical for many students who are away for the first time. Other pressures such as deciding whether or not to continue school, to change majors, to get married, dating, etc., are also additional issues.

Several studies have dealt specifically with students and stress. In 1960, Sarason and Palola found that stress detrimentally affects the performance of highly anxious subjects. In a 1953 paper, Waterhouse and Child concluded that stress or anxiety will produce a decrease in the quality of on-going performances, to the extent that stress or anxiety evokes other responses which interfere with their ongoing performance. Steiniger, Johnson and Kirts (1964) found a positive correlation between cheating in college examinations and the anxiety provoking content of the class environment. These authors implied that cheating was used as a technique to reduce the anxiety produced by the examination situation.

Hoover et al. (1993) did a study to identify the relationships between demographic, social, and interpersonal adjustment variables with subjective ratings of loneliness and time spent alone among 179 college students at the University of Nebraska. Although their data suggested that while there was some overlap between ratings of loneliness and time spent alone, the measures of alone time had a more consistent association with social and emotional isolation variables than did the subjective ratings of loneliness. Another study, done in 1978 by Bumberry, Oliver and

McClure with 34 college freshmen to explore the characteristics of depression in college students, showed that although depression was transitory for half of the students over 2-3 weeks, many others had diagnosable major or minor depressive disorders. Of the students found to have felt major or minor depression, only one student had sought therapy for depression while the others had talked to friends or family about their depression.

McMurray et al's study with 229 pre-clinical students at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine in 2005 to examine areas and manifestation of stress as well as sources of support, reinforced reports of a core of problems related to demands of schooling and interpersonal relations. The study suggests that stress is evinced in substantial behaviour changes, for example increased sleep problems, irritability, and crying spells. Female students showed more behavioural signs of stress. Race was less influential than sex in the distribution of stress. However, minority students were especially vulnerable to academic and financial problems and showed greater stress on many of the behavioural indicators.

Prout and Prout (1998) found that school based psychotherapy had demonstrable beneficial effects on student well-being but not academic achievement. Wilson (1986) found that directive counselling and behavioural counselling had positive effects on academic achievement with underachieving students. Additionally, including skills training improved effectiveness. Group counselling was found to improve elementary student's school behaviour (Gerler, 1985); group-format social skills training develops adolescents' skills and reduces aggressive and hostile behaviour (Whiston & Sexton, 1998). Outcome studies reviewed by St Claire (1989) indicated that group cognitive-behavioural and relaxation training interventions with middle school students can reduce teacher reports and referrals for disciplinary problems and that group counselling can improve middle school students' self-concept.

Bundy & Poppen (1986) reported that Behavioural and Adlerian consultation with teachers can improve elementary students' academic performance, work habits, and classroom behaviour, and Adlerian parent consultation and parent effectiveness training can increase student academic performance, student motivation and parent-child relationship quality.[1]

The Study

The present study was conducted in the first half of 2014. The most common issues were identified for a period of 6 months. The most critical issue concerned academic issues (59%), followed by family and relationship issues (19%), financial issues, and student disciplinary issues. Table 1 provides the details.

Table 1: Common issues: January to July 2014

Month	Academic Issues	Family/ relationship issues	Financial problems	Disciplinary issues
January	2	0	3	0
February	9	6	0	0
March	9	2	0	0
April	6	6	7	2
May	4	1	0	0
June	2	1	1	1
July	21	1	2	4
Total	53 (59%)	17 (19%)	11 (14%)	7 (8%)

It should be noted that students were either referred or self initiated for one issue but through the process of interactive sessions in counselling, the students were found to have that particular issue as a result of some psychological issue. A student may be referred for poor attendance; this would be characterised as an academic issue, but when counselled, it may be found that the student is suffering from depression and lacks motivation due to some family issues which lead to poor attendance. Most issues, though listed as a single issue here, would have associated other issues involved.

The common diagnosis are behavioural problems, anxiety/stress, depression and personality problems.

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[1] Adlerian parent consultation is a collaborative problem-solving consultation which provides a useful framework for working within and between family and school systems to involve parents and teachers together in cooperative problem-solving, with a focus on the interacting systems in a child's life. It is a therapeutic approach for chil-

dren through play. In Adlerian parent consultation, the therapist combines consultation with teaching and counselling techniques so that parents are able to better understand their own roles in the maintenance of the child's self-defeating behaviours and attitude. Parent effectiveness training can increase student academic performance, student motivation and parent-child relationship quality.

Table 2: Case Study and Diagnosis

Diagnosis/ problem	Depression	Anxiety/ Stress	Behavioural problem	Personality problem
No. of students	22	33	34	19
%	20%	31%	31%	18%

Academic issues

Academic issues were issues related to academic performance. These included poor attendance, poor performance in exams, lack of understanding of the lectures, lack of concentration, and lack of motivation. Most of these students were diagnosed with anxiety, stress, and personality problems such as antisocial personality, and impulsive behaviour. The main reasons for the academic issues identified were lack of goal, ambition and lack of motivation; lack of knowledge of career prospective; peer pressure on the hostel students; and lack of coping strategies.

Lack of goal, ambition and lack of motivation: Students seemed to have a very carefree attitude regarding the goals, thus we not internally motivated to work hard of perform. As a result academic demands worked as an stressor for them. They eventually lost interest in academic work and tended to perform very poorly in exams.

Lack of knowledge of career prospective: Often it was found that the goals of these students differed from what he/she was pursuing at the university. For example, a student wished to become a nurse but was pursuing Biology at the University. This was compounded with the student knowing nothing about career prospects in Biology. Lack of motivation led the student to not even attempt to find out more about the subject or its career prospects. There were a considerable number of such cases.

Peer pressure on the hostel students: About 70% of all students with academic issues were found to be hostel students. They had poor academic attendance, poor exam performances, and lacked concentration. The main reason found for these was peer pressure. Most of them were often under the influence of intoxicants such as grog, or remained awake late nights, and spent their time with friends instead of studying in their rooms or the library. These students also often missed classes, particularly the morning classes.

Lack of coping strategy: Most of the students in the lot came from rural backgrounds without much prior experience of independent living. They experienced difficulties in coping with the university environment, adjusting to their classmates, and handling academic pressures. The University environment acted as a stressor, leading the students towards anxiety, stress and depression. As a result, they develop very low self-confidence, avoided participation in classroom discussions, and developed fears of lecturers. They gradually became irregular in their academic work, performed badly, and tended to harbour feelings of quitting from the university.

Possible Approaches to Addressing Academic Issues

The core of the solutions for addressing issues remain those which have been tried and proven successful across the world: motivation counselling, career counselling, organising healthy competitions among students, monitoring student activities (and counselling) in hostels, and giving special attention to the students who were weak.

Motivation and Counselling: Motivating and counselling students who show poor attendance and poor academic performance is critical. With proper counselling and motivation, anxiety relating to academic issues diminish significantly. Appointing a mentor, who could be a guide and a friend to a student, would create an environment where the student could feel free and confident to approach him/her when in need of emotional support and guidance, is an effective tool. Mentors would be lecturers or teaching staff, professional counsellors, or senior students. They could be trained to become 'a guide' and 'a friend' for the student. Core elements of mentor training are to treat the student well, avoid being judgemental and practising empathy. Lecturers could use the technique of reward and motivation. For example, when a student scores the highest in the class, if applauded in front of the entire class and given a small reward, the student would tend to be motivated to perform better. Other students observing this would tend to get motivated too, to achieve that reward or recognition.

Career counselling: Many students coming to the university for the first time, particularly those from less educated family backgrounds, lacked adequate guidance in deciding careers and courses to pursue. Career counselling before students join the university, as well as when they first

joined the University would prove to be a significant first step in addressing the issue of lack of motivation arising from conflicts between their career goals and the goals of the programmes they undertake. At the University, full awareness of prospects, and declaration of issues concerning the programmes they are undertaking, would tend to address the issue of lack of motivation.

Organising healthy competitions among students: A spirit of competition among students tends to get students to strive to be the best and/or to do well. Healthy competitions could become a regular feature of the campus life. These could include quiz competition, best presentation competition, students' seminar competitions, oratory competitions, essay contests, etc.

Monitoring / Counselling in Hostels*:* Students in hostel require quality monitoring. Particularly where hostel students are found to be the ones predominantly with poor performance or with having disciplinary issues, monitoring activities in hostels becomes a critical factor. Hostel regulations, particularly on the 'dos and donts', need to be enforced; where these regulations need to be amended, urgent action needs to be taken. Monitoring must be regular and systematic. Counselling also needs to accompany monitoring.

Giving special attention to the students who are weak: Additional attention, particularly through one to one or special tutorial sessions for students who show low achievements, also helps motivate students. Some students suffer from inferiority complexes and/or anxieties. Such students ought to be directed to mentors or university counsellors. Arriving at conclusions that these students are not interested in studying would be counterproductive.

Family and Relationship Issues

This is one of the major problems affecting students. Being upset over family issues such as divorce among parents, living with step-father/mother, ill-treatment, sexual abuse by her step-father, other forms of physical and emotional abuse, and romantic relationship breakdowns are major causes of relationship problems. In one case, a student was mentally affected after she continued to tolerate sexual abuse by her step-father for one year as she did not want her mother to lose her newly found happiness because of her. She failed all her units and began frequently

absenting herself. After counselling, she moved out of the house to stay with her aunt. But she is still insecure and suffers from low self-esteem.

Cases of limited or attempted fatal self-harm are not unknown for new students unable to handle relationship issues. Access to lethal substances, particularly from science labs, and drugs, including hard drugs, makes self-harm relatively easier.

Family issues, thus, are found to be very common among students. Broken families affect the growth and development of children. As consequences, some develop depression, some lose interest in life, and also get attracted to negative social influences and habits, including bad company and reliance on intoxication. The behaviour of parents is critical in tackling relationship issues amongst students.

Handling family issues are beyond each reach of counsellors and mentors. The latter can only help students to focus on the positive side of life and encourage them to engage in productive activities such as sports, creative arts, music, and the like. Ultimately relationship issues gets best tackled by the relationship partners. Third party intervention through counselling and mentoring provide a more conducive environment for students to develop self-confidence and ability to handle the specific relationship issue.

Third party intervention, however, is an extremely delicate matter. This needs to be tackled only by professionals. In one case at the university, a partner in an otherwise seemingly healthy relationship killed himself after an aggressive third party intervention by a member of the senior management led to the publicity of documentation of the intimate relationship between the partners.

At universities, and more generally in all organisations, protocols need to be developed on handling relationship issues of various types.

Financial Problems

Financial problem is also a notable problem among students. In an environment of lack of access to financial resources for students from weak financial background, this is an expected issue. What is not expected, however, is financial problems for scholarship students staying in hostels. The case study found that financial problems was a notable feature for scholarship students in hostels. In an extreme case, a hostel student was reported to be not attending classes since the beginning of the term. On intervention, it was established that this was because of financial problems she was afflicted with - she was an intelligent student who scored consistent good grades until she returned for term holidays when

she was brutally abused by her drug addicted brother and was not given any pocket allowances when she returned, leading to her depression on being unable to complete her assessments which required her to incur large printing expenses.

Most of the students who are on scholarship are usually from weak financial backgrounds, where parents' abilities to send regular pocket allowances are weak.

Scholarships normally come with full accommodation and subsistence, as well as reasonable allowances for incidentals and books which are paid in cash. However, the management of scholarships seem to be quite inefficient as by the time students receive their allowances, the terms are already in progress, and needs for cash begun. Some students sometimes approached lecturers or other staff for financial support to help acquire stationery or materials to complete their assessments. But not all develop the ability to seek assistance from staff or succeed in this attempt. Improving the efficiency of scholarship agencies is a critical factor in addressing at least a part of the problem.

In one tertiary institution, a unique initiative of student financial aid was launched. Under this, students could undertake limited employment at the university itself to cover for their educational needs. However, this programme seems to have been shelved after a change in management in early 2015.

The problem of finance, however, is not restricted to timely access to cash. Even when students receive case, managing this is a major issue. As noted, scholarships provide allowances for incidentals and books, which are paid in cash. Financial problems arise even when students receive cash allowances. Their ability to budget and manage money is a major issue.

This seems to be a wider problem for the society from which students come from as both, the social norms and behaviours, as well as the socialisation processes would be reflected in behaviours on money management.[2] Over these issues, neither mentors nor professional counsellors would have much influence. Institutional intervention at the university in this regard would also only have a limited impact; intervention would

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[2] In one case which received wide media publicity in the country a number of years ago, a student had committed suicide on the eve of his supposed 'graduation' as he hadnt actually completed his programme on account of squandering the funds his reasonably able parents were regularly sending him. In this sad case, parents had actually turned up to the graduation ceremony on apparent calculation of their own and assurances by the student of completion, only to find the child missing from the graduation ceremonies and subsequent report of his suicide.

need to be done at the appropriate community level. It is for such reasons that universities normally develop community outreach programmes and projects. Unfortunately, in Fiji there is no community outreach programme for any tertiary institution, which aims to address issues of money management at the society and national level. Dividends from such programmes would generally be slow in coming, but are likely to have long term positive impacts.

Finally, and ultimately, considerations ought to be given in course and programme development on additional cash demands on students other than upfront tuition demands. A complete transparency on full cash outlays needs to become a part of the policy of universities. Unfortunately, none of the tertiary institutions pass this test. This is particularly so for areas like costs for field visits, and cash outlays required in completing required assessments.

Disciplinary Issues

Disciplinary issues relate to breach of rules and regulations of the university. For the subject institution, most of the disciplinary cases are of students who are in hostel. The inability to handle new found freedom is a major issue for a number of new students. One part of this is inability to handle personal lives in a community of people of similar age group but diverse backgrounds and interests. Another relates to inability to handle substances, particularly kava and alcohol.

Dealing with disciplinary issues, particularly for hostel students, requires a number of strategies. Continuous counselling, mentoring, and development of good rules and regulations and their strict enforcement are some means to addressing disciplinary issues. The desirability of involving parents and guardians in tackling discipline issues has not been studied in the Fijian environment. Whether this will bring about positive changes or further deteriorate the problem needs to be researched. While discipline issues are issues of concern, these are of far lower life impacting problems than psychological problems like depression.

Depression

There are a number of students who show signs of depression, anxiety or stress. It is one of the common problems among students which lead to behavioural problems. Depression is a mood disorder where an individual feels extremely low and unhappy. The symptoms of depression include lack of appetite or overeating, lack of enthusiasm in life, lack of

energy, feeling worthless and in extreme cases developing a desire to end one's life. The diagnosis of the problem is done using a psychological tool named DASS (Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale).

To help depressed students, it is very important to help them change the way they think about their life. They must be encouraged to be optimistic and focus on the brighter side of life. By helping the student develop such a perception, one can help the student to gain a positive outlook on life. This will help them to take life positively and to accept challenges with patience and self-control. Engaging students in co-curricular activities, sports, seminars, creative writing, music and a range of non-academic activities can encourage them to develop hobbies and divert their attentions from negativity towards positive pursuits. But this is a skilled exercise; dealing with this must remain the domain of professional counsellors.

Other than depression, there are two other critical psychological problems; these are stress and anxiety. Almost every person experiences stress and anxiety. These become problematic when the person is unable to deal with stress and anxiety.

Anxiety in simple terms is a vague sense that something unpleasant is likely to occur. If such a feeling becomes intense and persists for long periods of time, it can form a mental disorder such as anxiety disorder. This will be characterised by extreme nervousness, palpitation, fear for a particular substance, place, individual, or situation, and can develop various phobias.

When an individual finds trouble in coping with a particular environment or situation, they experience stress. Stress may work as a motivator, for example if a student gets stress during exam, the student may work harder to score good grades. But it can also become a problem if the student is unable to handle stress. If the student experiences too much of stress, he/she may develop anxieties. Exam and assessment related stress may lead to exam-phobia, where the student may tend to forget simple matters during exams; in some cases they develop aches, like stomach or head ache, around exam times.

These may appear simple issues. They can, however, have life impacting effects. In one case examined, a student was reported to be regularly absent from class. When spoken to her, after much reluctance she explained that the moment she enters the University campus, she experiences palpitation and rapid heartbeats, and when she enters her class, she develops fears of her lecturers as well as her friends. On diagnosis, it was found that she was from a rural conservative family where she never experienced socialising with neighbours or friends. She developed anxiety

of the University environment and was reluctant to come to classes.

Individuals who are not very strong emotionally experience extreme anxiety/stress in some situations. Nature and nurture also plays a huge role in developing these disorders in an individual's life. Students who experience anxiety or stress can be helped if diagnosed early. Talking therapy is very important for anxiety and stress. If the students can articulate their fear, it will help them to release the fear to some extent. For example if a student is found to be having exam phobia, firstly it is important to find out the reason for the fear by talking to the student. Some students fear failure, some fear their parents getting annoyed at poor results. It is only after learning the cause of their anxiety that successful resolutions can be developed.

Dealing with anxiety, stress and depression are skilled and time-consuming exercises. Universities need to devote resources in dealing with these. These are, afterall, the core business of student welfare.

Conclusion

The transition to university life presents various stressors for students. Coping up with new university environment, developing new social and personal relations, meeting academic deadlines and performance in exams, act as stressors for many students. Some students are able to cope sufficiently well with these, but some fail to do so. Of the latter some develop personality disorders. This paper discussed some of the common problem issues students at one tertiary institution faced. Problems emerged from academic issues, family/relationship issues, financial difficulties and disciplinary issues. If not dealt with in a timely manner and with due seriousness, these can develop into behavioural problems, anxiety, stress, depression and in some cases personality disorders.

This paper is based on a limited data set, as well as is a limited time period study. It confirms that the issues are not of passing significance only; they have the potential to not only impact the life chances of students, but could also result in serious consequences like termination of life. Professional counselling ought to remain a core business of student-centred tertiary institution life.

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