Students' perceptions of psychosocial support services at a selected university in Masvingo, Zimbabwe

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Abstract — This study determines students' perceptions of psychosocial support services at a university. A case study involving a single university in Masvingo was conducted. Ten participants (five males and five females) were purposively selected from a university in Masvingo. Interviews and focus group discussions were used as techniques for data collection. Thematic results indicated the presence of psychosocial support services such as peer counselling, peer education, pastoral counselling, academic counseling, health counselling, and support groups. Gender differences in the perceptions of psychosocial support were also noted. The results showed that students spend most of their time on campus. This study recommends that universities should make effective and accessible psychosocial support services for the students' well-being, and peer counsellors and educators should be trained to support other students.

Keywords: Psychosocial support, Psychosocial challenge, University students

I. INTRODUCTION

UNIVERSITY students worldwide experience several psychosocial challenges (Van Breda, 2017). As early as the 1920s, the mental health of university students began to be a matter of concern in developed countries (Coelho de Oliveira et al., 2018). This realisation eventually led to increased awareness that university students face the challenges of higher education and many developmental issues that accompany late adolescence and young adulthood (Maree, 2014). Among these are their individuation and connectedness to their families, the development of friendships and intimate relationships, career choices and the pursuit of personal and professional goals, the transition from high school to higher education, homesickness, financial problems, peer pressure, adjusting to the university environment and loneliness (Collins & Van Breda, 2010; Maree 2014).

University students are also confronted with mental health problems. For instance, a national survey done in America found that three-quarters of students suffered from moderate or severe psychological distress (American College Health Association, 2021). Swanbrow Becker, Dong, Kronholz, and Brownson (2018) reported that international students in American universities face mental health problems, among others. In Denmark, Wulf-Andersen et al. (2023) revealed that a vast number of students enter higher education with problems like stress, anxiety, or depression or develop them during their student lives due to, for example, loneliness, family crisis, mental health or study environment issues. In addition, it should be noted that many young adults experience their first psychiatric episode during their time at university, considering that epidemiological studies indicate that many mental illnesses usually have their onset in young adulthood (Coelho de Oliveira et al., 2018).

University students in Africa also face a myriad of challenges. For example, Tuchili and Ndhlovu (2015) reported that in Zambian schools, students face problems such as poor academic performance, unwanted pregnancies, drug abuse, dropout, poor study habits, examination anxiety, and undesirable behaviours. In Zimbabwe, common problems that students face relate to unwanted pregnancy, sexual abuse, dropouts, heading families, poverty, loneliness, bullying, caring for sick parents, and inadequate resources, just to mention a few (Chireshe, 2006; Samkange & Dondofema, 2016). If these problems are not dealt with, they can affect their academic achievement and other areas of their life (Moeti, 2016). Students need help to cope with the challenges they face in their lives.

In Zimbabwean traditional society, psychosocial support is provided by senior family members, such as uncles, aunts, and grandparents (Gwirayi & Yule, 2017). However, most families have lost their traditional social networks due to migration, modernisation, and urbanisation (UNESCO, 2009). More so, Ndichu (2005) argues that the social safety nets that existed in the traditional society to ensure a stable environment for children to grow up in no longer exist. Regarding Zimbabwe, Chimonyo, Mapuranga, and Rugonye (2015) state that with the country's economic challenges, many parents left for greener pastures, leaving their children without parental guidance and support. Given such a scenario, it becomes essential for universities to develop effective psychosocial support services to help students cope with their problems and the demands of their degree programmes. This study, therefore, investigated the university students' perceptions of the psychosocial support services at their institution. University students'

views are considered essential because they have a bearing on whether they would use the services.

Psychosocial Support Services offered by universities

Literature suggests that universities across the globe provide students with psychosocial support services. For example, a study done by Graham et al. (2021) in the United States of America revealed that most university campuses provide formal resources for survivors of sexual assault, such as student health services, mental health counseling, survivor advocates, and peer counseling. Another study conducted by Welch in 2016 at Mansfield University, New York, reveals that most students are unaware of the psychosocial support services available on campus. They, therefore, highlighted the need to advertise these services to students.

Regarding Kenya, Kamina (2018) identified psychosocial support services offered in Kenyan Universities, such as qualified staff counsellors, peer counselling, and reproductive health programmes, as ways of helping university students to over their behavioural and developmental challenges and offer a forum through which university students can discuss various issues about life including academic and relational issues. Some counseling programmes include group counselling, individual counselling, consultations, motivational talks, outings, and visits to other universities. Similarly, Kamunyu, Ndungo, and Wango (2016) in Kenya found that universities offer psychosocial support to students through counselling, financial assistance, and health and academic support. However, only a minority of university students who experience psychological distress seek professional counselling. A discussion with the students elicited varying feelings that showed how they mistrusted psychosocial support services in their universities, such as training peer counselors and educators.

In Ethiopia, Negash et al. (2020) found out that although the university has psychosocial support facilities, most students with mental health problems did not untilise professional mental healthcare. This is due to barriers associated with thinking the problem would get better with no intervention, preferring self-medication, denying a mental health problem existed, and preferring to get alternative forms of mental care (religious leaders, friends, families, traditional healers, relatives, etc.) and lack of information about the counselling offices in the university.

II. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study determines students' perceptions of psychosocial support services at a selected university in Masvingo, Zimbabwe.

III.   METHODS

Research paradigm

Creswell and Creswell (2018) define a paradigm as a framework that guides the researcher's perception and interpretation of reality. The paradigm which frames this research is an interpretive paradigm. The central aim in the context of the interpretive paradigm is to understand the subjective world of human experiences (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). Emphasis is on understanding the individual and their interpretation of the world around them. This paradigm is relevant to the current study because it makes it possible to value university students' subjective interpretations, perceptions, and understanding of psychosocial support services at their institution. Their experiences and perceptions of psychosocial support services are vital because they affect whether they would use the available services.

Research approach

The research approach that the researcher used is qualitative. The qualitative method was ideal for this study because of the need to gain insight into students' perspectives on psychosocial support services offered at the university. Based on the view that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds, qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people make sense of

their world and the experiences they have in the world (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The qualitative method emphasises detailed descriptions of natural or social events where the researcher tries to develop an understanding concerning a social situation, role, group, or interaction. According to Smith (2015), the qualitative approach is an individual actively exploring, describing, and interpreting personal and social life experiences. The advantage of this paradigm is that it helped the researchers understand the experiences and perceptions of university students being interviewed.

Research design

This study adopted a case study research design to solicit university students' responses. This research design is advantageous because it allows the researchers to investigate an issue, event, or phenomenon of interest in its natural, real-life context (Priya, 2021). It further enabled exploring students' perceptions of psychosocial support services at a selected university in Masvingo.

Participants

Ten participants were purposively selected from the School of Education at a university in Masvingo, Zimbabwe. Participants consisted of five male students and five female students. Their age ranged between twenty-four and twenty-eight years. Their demographic details are presented in Table 1.

Research instruments

In-depth semi-structured interviews

This study used in-depth semi-structured interviews. Interviews lasted 20-30 minutes per session; each was audio recorded with the interviewee's permission and transcribed. Ten participants were interviewed on two different days. The first five participants were interviewed on the first day, and the other five were interviewed on the second day. This study used an interview guide to do face-to-face interviews with university students. In-depth semi-structured interviews were used because they provided the researchers with a greater opportunity to ask follow-up questions, probe for additional information, and revisit key questions later in the interview to generate a rich understanding of attitudes, perceptions, motivations, and ideas of university students about psychosocial support services offered at their university (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Focus Group Discussions

This study also employed the focus group discussions. The researchers divided the participants into two separate groups for focus group discussions. Each group consisted of five participants. According to Fowler (2009), deciding the size of the group is very important; too small and intra-group dynamics exert a disproportionate effect; too large, and the group becomes unwieldy and hard to manage. Morgan (2008) suggested there should be between four and twelve people per group. Two sessions were done with each group on different days. Each focus group discussion was limited to one hour per session. In total, four sessions were held, two with each group. The researcher guided the focus group discussions in this study to ensure the participants addressed the study's objectives. Focus group discussion was relevant because it allowed the researcher to solicit university students' attitudes, beliefs, opinions, and ideas about psychosocial support services offered by their university.

Research site

The selected university uses a multi-campus system with different campuses scattered throughout Masvingo. This study was carried out at schools comprised of students from various departments, such as curriculum studies, teacher development, and educational foundations. The Department of Student Affairs, responsible for students' psychosocial needs, does not have an office at this campus. To access any form of psychosocial help, students must visit other campuses or consult peer counsellors who belong to their school.

Procedures

After the university management granted permission to conduct research, the researcher contacted the Dean of the respective School under which the students were studying. In this study, the researchers

used purposive sampling to deliberately select the students from the three departments in the school of education to ensure that all departments were represented in the sample. The researchers divided the participants into two groups for focus group discussions. Each group consisted of five participants. Each focus group discussion was limited to one hour per session. In total, four sessions were held, two with each group. The researchers guided the focus group discussions to ensure the participants addressed the study's objectives. In-depth interviews lasted between 20 and 30 minutes per session. Ten participants were interviewed on two different days. The first five participants were interviewed on the first day, and the other five were interviewed on the second. The researcher used an interview guide to do face-to-face interviews with university students. Focus group discussions and interviews were conducted with the participants in lecture rooms during their free periods to avoid interrupting lectures. Data were audio recorded with the consent of the participants and then transcribed.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The analysis technique is principally concerned with identifying patterns, which are then reported as researchers 'generated themes (Naeem, Ozuem, Howell & Ranagni, 2023). Trustworthiness was ensured by meeting the following four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba, 1981). The researchers ensured credibility through member checks of the data collected, while transferability was ensured through thick descriptions of findings. An in-depth description of study procedures enhanced dependability, while conformability was achieved by conducting audit trails.

Ethical considerations

Ethics ensure that participation in the study is voluntary, informed, and safe for the research subjects (Bhandari, 2021). In line with the research ethics, the researchers requested ethical clearance from the university to conduct research there. For this study, the following ethical issues were observed: informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality, and freedom to withdraw. This study ensured that the participants were kept anonymous, and pseudonym names were used to protect their identities. This study ensured that participants had the right to withdraw if they were not comfortable carrying on with the interviews and focus group discussions.

IV.   RESULTS

Table 1: Characteristics of the Sample

Name	Gender	Age	Degree	Year of Study	Departments
Susan	Female	24	BEd Pr	Fourth	Teacher Devpt
James	Male	26	BEd Sec	Fourth	Curr Studies
Chipo	Female	25	BEd Sec	Fourth	Curr Studies
John	Male	28	BEd Pri	Fourth	Teacher Devpt
Moses	Female	25	BEd Pr	Fourth	Teacher Devpt
Mary	Female	26	BEd ECD	Fourth	Educ Found
Rumbidzai	Female	24	BEd ECD	Fourth	Educ Found
Peter	Male	25	BEd Sec	Fourth	Curr Studies
Debra	Female	25	BEd ECD	Fourth	Educ Found
Cephas	Male	26	BEd Pr	Fourth	Teacher Devpt

Bachelor of Education Primary (BEd Pr)
Bachelor of Education Secondary (BEd Sec)
Teacher Development (Teacher Devpt)
Curriculum Studies (Curr Studies)
Educational Foundation (Educ Found)
Bachelor of Education in Early childhood develpment (BEd ECD)

Psychosocial support services provided by the university

The results revealed that peer educators, support groups, university counselors, and peer counsellors are available for psychosocial support services. Participants also revealed that problem students are referred to the chaplain or academic counseling committee depending on the nature of the problem. The extracts below indicate the psychosocial support services available at their university. The extracts below point to the above effect.

"The university provides counselling through the Department of Student Affairs. University counselors work with peer counselors and peer educators to provide psychosocial support" (James).

"Problem students are often referred to as the chaplain for counselling" (Rumbidzai).

"Some peer educators provide information to first-year students during orientation week. These peer educators are only visible during the orientation week; once orientation is over, peer educators' activities become non-existent (Moses).

The results from focus group discussions also confirmed the availability of counseling services at the university. This is indicated in the extracts below:

"The Health Department also provides student support by providing health education, counselling, treatment of all illnesses, Family Planning services, HIV Testing and Counseling" (FGD1).

"There is an HIV and AIDS Life Skills programme that mainly focuses on Sexual Reproductive Health, HIV and AIDS, and Life Skills education for students. They do awareness campaigns, behaviours change forums, seminars, talk shows, gender-based violence dialogues, video screenings, and workshops on selected issues/topics" (FDG2).

"The university has peer educators for all campuses responsible for the dissemination of information and gathering information on issues concerning their peers for guidance and counselling purposes" (FDG 2).

"Those students who do not do well academically are also referred to the academic counselling committee for counselling" (FGD1).

Results from focus group discussions and interviews revealed that the university has psychosocial support services for university students. Some of the services include counselling, support groups, and peer education.

Gender differences in the perceptions of the psychosocial support services provided by the institution

All the participants agreed that gender differences exist in perceptions of psychosocial support services. Most participants indicated that male students are reluctant to seek support despite facing challenges. All the participants indicated that female students were more forthcoming in seeking help. Preference of counsellors was another critical issue raised, with most of the participants indicating that female students do not mind the gender of the counsellor while male students preferred same-sex counsellors.

"Male students are usually reluctant to seek help. This could be because cultural expectations force them to suppress their emotions. Real men do not cry" (Cephas).

"Male students do not usually seek help because of their desire to keep a masculine appearance and avoid the stigma that is associated with seeking help, such as being weak" (Moses).

"Female students can self-disclose (outpouring their feelings, beliefs, and thoughts) compared to their male counterparts. This lack of self-disclosure in male students hinders finding solutions to their problems" (Susan).

"Male students are unwilling to open their feelings during counseling and tend to hold them inside" (Chipo).

"Male students are less inclined to seek help from others; rather, they prefer to work through their problems on their own until the situation becomes too serious, that is when they may consider seeking help from psychosocial support services" (John).

"Female students are comfortable with male and female counsellors, whereas male students favour male counselors" (Rumbidzai).

Similar responses were also noted during focus group discussions, as indicated in the extracts below:

"The extent to which students seek psychosocial support services from the university counselling departments is influenced by the gender of the counsellor or peer educator. Every person has preferences and opinions about most aspects of life, including the gender of counsellor, peer counsellor, or educator. On one hand, male students are comfortable with counselors and peer educators of the same sex; on the other hand, female students are comfortable with both sexes depending on the issue at hand" (FGD2).

"Male students do not usually seek help; they are just reluctant to share their problems" (FGD1).

"Female students are fourth coming to share their challenges, worries, and experiences with counsellors and peer counsellors" (FGD 2).

"Both male and female students participate in awareness campaigns and workshops at the university. Maybe it is because of the free food, drinks, and T-shirts sometimes given at such workshops" (FGD1).

Extracts from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions indicate gender differences in perceptions and use of available psychosocial support services. Results suggest that most male students shun one-on-one counselling but prefer participating in awareness campaigns and workshops. More so, differences were noted in the preferences of counselors, with male students preferring male counselors while female students did not mind the counselor's gender.

Strategies improving the use of psychosocial support services

Varied strategies that can be used to improve the utilisation of psychosocial support services were given. From the interviews conducted, all the participants indicated the use of awareness campaigns and advertisements as strategies to increase utilisation of psychosocial support services. The participants also raised the issue of doing away with the stigma associated with seeking help as a strategy to increase the utilisation of psychosocial support services. The following quotations reveal the different strategies the participants suggested to improve the utilisation of psychosocial support services by university students. The following responses by the participants illustrate this point:

"The university should put walk-in centers at all campuses where students can go for help any time. The department responsible for offering psychosocial support to students is housed at the main campus, where very few students are housed. Students from other campuses must travel to the main campus for help. It is expensive for us to travel to the main campus for counselling service" (John).

"There is a need for the Department of Student Affairs to carry out more awareness campaigns educating students about the services they offer. Of course, I know that there are peer counselors who distribute condoms. I do not know which other services they offer" (Mary).

Fear of the stigma that is associated with seeking help. Most students associate seeking help with psychopaths or drug addicts. Maybe students should be educated about seeking psychosocial support to eliminate the associated stigma" (Susan).

There is a need for effective marketing of psychosocial support services and more advertising, campaigns, and posters to make students aware of the available services (James).

"There is a need to adopt online psychosocial support service accessible through apps and social media platforms" (Peter).

"Peer counselors and educators should receive adequate training to support their peers" (Rumbidzai).

The same strategies were also raised during focus group discussions as evidenced by the extracts below:

"There is a need for proper guidance and counseling offices in all campuses to increase student accessibility. Counselling is a kind of service that requires a private and spacious office so that the students can feel safe and free to share information. There is a need to improve infrastructure for psychosocial support services" (FGD 1).

"Peer educators and counselors should be properly trained and knowledgeable on different issues affecting students. Proper training will ensure these peer helpers are adequately empowered to help others. Other students seeking help will have confidence in them" (FGD 2).

"Peer educators and counselors should be exemplary. Some peer educators do not lead exemplary lives, and because of this, it becomes difficult for students to seek help from them. Whoever appoints them should choose people who live what they teach other students. You cannot expect other students to do what you cannot" (FGD1).

"The student affairs department should advertise the available psychosocial support service. Most students are unaware of whom to approach when facing challenges. There is a need for posters, flyers, and billboards to market the available services. These people are only visible during orientation week. Once orientation is over, there will be nowhere to be found" (FGD 1).

"The psychosocial support service providers should partner with NGOs or other stakeholders interested in helping young people. This can increase their visibility. Given the economic situation in the country, the department is lacking in terms of both human and capital resources. Otherwise, this department is not visible" (FGD 2).

Several strategies were suggested through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. These strategies include partnering with stakeholders outside the university community, advertising the available services, training peer counselors, developing infrastructure, and leading exemplary lives.

V. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study focused on a single university in Masvingo Province of Zimbabwe, thereby limiting the generalisability of the findings. To offset this limitation, the researchers used a case study research design, which allowed for an in-depth investigation of the phenomenon. Participants were more limited to the School of Education, whereas the university has some schools. However, it was believed that the participants represented the final-year students well.

VI. DISCUSSION

The study sought to investigate students' perceptions of the psychosocial support services available at the university. The results of this study show that several psychosocial support services are provided by the university, including counseling, peer counseling, support groups, and peer education. Students are guided in terms of healthy lifestyles, academic issues, social issues, personal issues, and acquiring skills, knowledge, and positive attitudes, just to mention a few. This view is compatible with the assertion made by Parveen and Akhtar (2023) that university psychosocial support services usually address the following: academic issues, career and vocational guidance, personal and social development, and psychosocial problems.

Gender differences were also noted in the use of psychosocial support services. Male students are reported to be reluctant to seek help from the available psychosocial support services as compared to their female counterparts. Kahn and Hessling (2001) observed that male students have difficulty discussing their problems and usually choose to conceal them. Male students were reported to prefer male counselors and peer educators, while female students did not mind the counselor's gender. These findings contradict the existing literature in which Lin (2010), in a study done in the United States of America, reported that both male and female students did not have any preference for a counselor of a particular gender; what they wanted was a competent and professional counselor. These preferences have implications for practice. The university should have male and female counselors to accommodate the counselee's preferences.

To improve utilisation of psychosocial support, participants expect the university administration to implement good infrastructure for counselors and peer educators. The adoption of online support services was also recommended. Online psychosocial support services for university students make the services readily available to students. This is also confirmed by Priestly et al. (2022), who recommended digital support services through apps, online booking, text, and social media. They noted that digital platforms could support timely, anonymous, and personalised service accessibility. Awareness campaigns can be used to conscientise students about the available psychosocial support services. Participants suggested using posters, fliers, pamphlets, campus radio, and billboards. When students know the services, they will likely seek help when faced with problems. Similarly, Ruckert (2015) found that effective service publicity and outreach are vital for students to know their services.

Results from the study also reveal the need to do away with the stigma associated with seeking help. According to the views expressed by the participants, students tend to label those seeking professional psychological help negatively. In a similar vein, a study conducted by Topkaya (2015) has found that social stigma is a significant negative

predictor of attitudes and intentions toward seeking psychological help. Students get anxious about stigma by society and lose face in public when they are known to have professional psychological help. Therefore, one may deduce that they will try to conceal their problems or opt for other methods rather than going to the support services.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study concluded that university students in Masvingo face psychosocial challenges like their counterparts in other countries. It is paramount for the university to put in place effective and vibrant psychosocial support centres and services for students. Advertising is also necessary to improve utilisation of psychosocial support services. Despite calls for youths to be included in discussions about issues that affect their lives, their voices have been missing from the debates on psychosocial support services offered to them. Therefore, this study gave university students a voice to contribute to their well-being. Their perceptions are important because they have a bearing on whether they would utilise the available psychosocial support services.

VIII. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest in this article

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