

Cyber Counseling Practices in public and private universities in Zambia: Policy and Practice in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

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Abstract

This paper shares the findings of a study that explored cyber counselling policies and practices in public and private universities in Zambia. The study contended that the shift in teaching modes in universities has led to the shift from traditional on-campus classroom sessions to distance and on-line ones. This has made counselling service provision somewhat problematic and divisive. The study employed a descriptive research approach. Six (6) public and private universities were sampled using the simple random sampling technique and involved 90 respondents: 30 lecturers, comprising five (5) lecturers from each university; 60 students, consisting of 10 students from each university. Telephone interview guides and Google form questionnaires were the two main methods used to collect data for the study. Descriptive and thematic data analysis methods were used. Findings revealed an absence of counselling units and or departments in all the three private universities sampled. At least, 2 out of the 3 public universities had structures and some officers seconded to man (operate) the units. The following was evident in all the universities: absence of high-tech to facilitate and support cyber counselling; inconsistent engagement of students by the existing counselling units, no counselling plans, lack of models with guidelines in cyber counselling which is age appropriate. Social workers not knowing how to go about using cyber counselling students' lack of orientation where cyber counselling exists in universities by the social workers, thus students going to any lecturer to seek counselling which leads to lack of confidentiality. Findings further showed that all the private and public universities did not have trained staff in cyber counselling. What is more, is that there were few or no records of students either referred for counselling or identified by any staff as needing such service(s). What was established from both the students and lecturers was that counselling was provided to students in now evident ways such as 'learner support services', 'online student engagements', 'social media network engagements' and through the student union representatives. Indirectly, these were named, yet not categorized as constituting counselling services. The study recommends that HEIs designate units to coordinate counselling service provision now that there are students who learn both synchronously and asynchronously.

Key words: Cyber, Counseling, HEI, Policy, university

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper shares the findings of a study that explored cyber counselling policies and practices in public and private universities in Zambia. The study contended that the shift in teaching modes in universities has led to the shift from traditional on-campus classroom sessions to distance and on-line ones. This has made counselling service provision somewhat problematic and divisive.

Online or cyber counselling, as it is commonly known as, is characterized as the conveyance of counselling services via the Internet, where the counsellor and counselee/client are not within the same physical area and they communicate utilizing computer-mediated communication innovations [1], [2], [3].

Cybercrime is a broad term that describes various offences and crimes that are committed in cyberspace such as cyberbullying, hate speech, abusive language, extortion, fraud, phishing, and many more [4]. Counsellors have an important role to play in mitigating cybercrime. They can work collaboratively with victims and parents of victims and address issues such as control, empowerment, goal setting, identifying strengths, assertiveness, confidence, social skill building, as well as the importance of monitoring social media and involvement. Counsellors can also work with perpetrators and their families to determine underlying causes for bullying such as anger, aggression, control and encourage parents to monitor social media and technology usage to prevent future cyber bullying from occurring [5], [6].

II. OBJECTIVES

1. Determine cyber counselling policies in private and public universities sampled in the study
2. Establish whether units that provide cyber counselling services to students exist in private and public universities sampled in the study
3. Describe cyber counselling services provided to students in private and public universities sampled in the study

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

It is essential that universities have clear policies and regulations regarding cybercrime in order to protect students and themselves from liability [7]. Due to its pervasiveness, the USA for example has criminal laws that apply to cybercrime, however, not all states have statutes that apply to bullying or cyberbullying outside of school [8]. Definitions, methods for reporting, investigations, written records, and consequences are stipulated in the states' laws and policies. Researchers [7], conducted a nationwide study of 5,707 teens ages 12 to 17. Based upon the survey results the researchers found the following: 33.8 surveyed indicated that they have been cyberbullied, 22.5% surveyed indicated that they have had mean or hurtful comments online written about them, 20.1% surveyed indicated that they have had a rumour spread about them online, 12.2% of students indicated that they have been threatened online, 10.3% of students surveyed indicated that someone pretended to be them online, and 7.1% of students indicated that other kids created hurtful web pages about them. This study epitomizes the fact that regardless of age, demographics, sexuality, or SES status, an exorbitant amount of students have witnessed or fallen victim to cyberbullying.

In Zambia, the education Act No. 23 of 2011 as well as the 1996 Educating Our Future policy document on education has recognised the need for Guidance and Counseling in the learning institutions. Furthermore, the ministry has placed emphasis on strengthening school Guidance and Counseling services through the provision of guidelines on how to effectively implement Guidance and Counseling services in learning institutions [9] (MOGE, 2015). The notable forms of counselling provided in Zambia are Educational Guidance, Health or Therapeutic, Personal and Vocational Guidance and Counselling [10], [11].

The increase of the digital space in Zambia has drastically expanded over the last few decades, with the most notable phenomenon being the expansion of the social media space. Content posted on social media draws criticism from a variety of user demographics, some of which constitute hate speech among students in higher learning institutions. Evidence from the Zambia Information and Communications Technology Authority supports the exponential growth in the number of people among them students engaging in cybercrime and hate speech [12].

IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was guided by the General Strain Theory (GST) which argues that strains or stressors increase the likelihood of negative emotions like anger and frustration. These emotions create pressure for corrective action, and crime is one possible response [13]. Committing crime may be a method for reducing strain among students to seek revenge, or alleviating negative emotions.

V. METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research paradigm, in particular a descriptive research approach. Literature

abounds that support this choice of research design [14], [15], [16], [17].

Six (6) public and private universities were sampled using the simple random sampling technique. This accorded all potential participants equal opportunity to be selected. Two segments of university types were categorized as 'private' and 'public'. Since the population of both categories of universities was not too large, the lottery system was used for drawing the sample. The researchers placed all names of private universities in a hat, and those of public universities in another hat (separately) and randomly drew the sample. Thereafter, the six universities were assigned pseudo names as follows: public universities were ALU University, HALI University and UMA University; and the private universities were ZALI University, MARU University and SAKI University.

In the study, 90 respondents were sampled, comprising 30 lecturers, comprising five (5) lecturers from each university; 60 students, consisting of 10 students from each university. Of the 30 lecturers, 18 comprising two (2) from each of the six (6) universities held administrative roles of Dean of School, Head of Department, Learner Support Officer and or Academic Support Officer; the remaining 12 were lecturers with teaching-learning core responsibility. The universities that employed Learner Support Officers and or Academic Support Officers apparently engaged lecturers, only that they have a minimal teaching workload.

Both probabilistic and non-probabilistic sampling techniques were used [16], [14], [15], [17]. Simple random sampling technique was used to sample lecturers and students; while convenient sampling technique was employed to sample administrators (deans, heads of departments, learner support officers /academic support officers). Literature supports this manner of selecting participants as it supports and upholds the research rigor [18], [19].

Telephone interview guides and Google form questionnaires were the two main methods used to collect data for the study. Interviews accorded informants the opportunity to openly and willingly share their thoughts and feelings, on one hand, and on the other, they helped them present analytical viewpoints [14], [15], [17], [20].

Descriptive and thematic data analysis methods were used. The six stages in Thematic Data Analysis (TDA) were followed religiously [21], [22], [23] (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2012, 2021). Literature has decorated scholars who have written about and studied ways of making thematic analysis, whose scope and unanimity clearly gives it credit [24], [25], [26], [27], [23], [28].

VI. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section details findings of the study. They are segmented into thematic areas derived from the earlier set objectives.

A. Demographic Data

Findings revealed an absence of counselling units and or departments in all the three private universities sampled. At least, 2 out of the 3 public universities had structures and some officers seconded to man (operate) the units.

B. Counselling policies in universities

4 (ALU, HALI, UMA & MARU) of the 6 universities reported having deliberate institutional policies related to ratifications on counselling for students. 1 out of the 4 is a private university, with the 3 being public universities. Notwithstanding the aforementioned, Deans and HoDs from 3 of the 4 universities unanimously observed that their universities have not operationalised their counselling units; and are manned by seconded personnel who are not trained. Findings show that 2 of the 6 universities recorded no policy on counselling services for students.

C. Counselling service provision in HEIs

Findings revealed that private universities sampled had different names of units that somewhat provide some form of counselling to students. These were: learner support unit, academic support unit, heads of departments, lecturers, Dean of Schools, Dean of Student affairs, and tutors. During interviews, all the support staff designated to these units unanimously said that they did not receive any training in counselling. As such, they counselled students based on student circumstances, intuition, consultation when need arise.

- Head of Departments (n=6)
 - Even though Heads of Departments participate in academic counselling of learners, the University has a Counselling Unit that offers many other counselling services to the student populace (ALU & UMA Universities)
 - Heads of Departments play an instrumental role in counselling students since the Counseling Centre is still in its infancy (HALI University)
 - There exist many issues from Heads of Departments counseling students, some are: sexual violence reports, sexual harassment, inappropriate, coercing and abusive language use. This shows that there is need to constitute a centre for counselling at the University (MARU University)
 - Heads of Departments are heavily involved in counselling students but are not oriented to do that well. As such students opt to go lecturers and or fellow students to seek solace and or confide in them whenever aggrieved (SAKI University)
 - Counselling students is complex and needs trained personnel (ALU, HALI, UMA, ZALI, MARU & SAKI Universities)
- Lecturers (n=12)
 - All lecturers counsel students (ALU, HALI, UMA, ZALI, MARU & SAKI Universities)
 - Lecturers counselling students has often been a source of huge debate among staff, especially female academics and gender activists (ALU, HALI, UMA, ZALI, MARU & SAKI Universities)
 - Use of improper, compromised spaces / venues to counsel students, which compromise the counselling sessions (ZALI, MARU & SAKI Universities)
 - Lack of confidentiality as lecturers give examples of students they counselled (ALU, HALI, UMA, ZALI, MARU & SAKI Universities)
 - There are many issues about lecturer counseling students, which include: sexual favours, exploitation; solicitation of money; corrupt practices; sexual violence reports; sexual harassment; intimidation; inappropriate, coercing and use of inappropriate language (ALU, HALI, UMA, ZALI, MARU & SAKI Universities)
- Learner Support Officer / Academic Support Officers (n=6)
 - Among our core duties is to counsel students (ALU, HALI, UMA, ZALI, MARU & SAKI Universities)
 - We have never received any formal training and or orientation on counselling students (ZALI, MARU & SAKI Universities)
 - The University trained us for one week on basics in counselling students (ALU, HALI & UMA Universities)
 - Counselling students is complex and needs trained personnel (ALU, HALI, UMA, ZALI, MARU & SAKI Universities)
 - Students do not take us seriously, even though they still frequently come to us for some form of counselling (ALU, HALI, UMA, ZALI, MARU & SAKI Universities)

Table 1: Comments on counselling service provision in both private & public universities

Counselling Officers (N=30)	Comments
Dean of Schools (n=6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The University does not have a designated counselling room / unit (ZALI University) - The University has a counselling room / unit (ALU, HALI & UMA Universities) - We see lecturers counsel students. University has no counselling department /unit (SAKI Universities) - Deans of schools, Heads of Departments and lecturers use their officers to counsel students (MAR University) - Counseling students is complex and needs trained personnel (ALU, HALI, UMA, ZALI, MARU & SAKI Universities) - Counselling of student rarely takes because Heads of Departments also have a heavy teaching and administrative workload (ZALI University)

D. Cyber counselling

The following was evident in all the universities: absence of high-tech to facilitate and support cyber counselling; inconsistent engagement of students by the existing counselling units, no counselling plans, lack of models with guidelines in cyber counselling which is age appropriate.

Staff assigned to units that were designated to provide counselling to students had little knowledge about using cyber counselling. One interesting finding points to students' lack of orientation where cyber counselling services exist in their universities. The majority of the students interviewed showed desperation in seeking counselling services and sought it from anyone they thought would be of help. Female students said that such trends often lead to warranted sexual advances by staff on them. The researchers are inclined to propose that private universities should decline from letting students approach any lecturer for counselling services and urge them (universities) to strengthen the counselling service provision system, which should be made public to students. This coincides with the observation by both lecturers and students interviewed that the current counselling provision trends (of students going to any lecturer to seek counselling) breaches many counselling ethics, like lack of privacy when counselling, confidentiality. The narratives below depict some scenarios:

I approached Lecturer X for a school-personal problem I had. He called me into the lecturers office (a common room), where there were four other lecturers sited. I hesitated narrating my issue but he forced me to talk by trying to make me feel comfortable and continued saying all those I saw in there were qualified lecturers and adults. Even though I eventually opened up, I was really not at ease, not at all (Year 2, Student, BEd-Primary, MARU University).

If only the University had a room designated for counselling, we would be using it to hold counselling sessions. We are left with no choice but to meet students anywhere, open space, in staffroom, classrooms whenever they want to confide in us staff about their issues – academic and non-academic but affecting their academic welfare (Lecturer, ZALI University).

E. Staff Trained in Counseling

Findings further showed that all the private and public universities did not have trained staff in cyber counselling. Comparatively, the public universities had staff trained as counsellors following the traditional styles with only one private university claiming lecturers who teach a counselling peripheral course stand in as the counsellor who attends to students as well. What is more, is that there were few or no records of students either referred for counselling or identified by any staff as needing such service(s). Literature reviewed suggests that HEIs should invest in online

counselling to cope with changing times and dynamics in learning [29], [30], [31], [32].

F. Dynamism in counselling service provision to students in HEIs

What was established from both the students and lecturers was that counselling was provided to students in now evident ways such as 'learner support services', 'online student engagements', 'social media network engagements' and through the student union representatives. Indirectly, these were named, yet not categorized as constituting counselling services. This is consistent with what literature broadly categorizes as online/cyber counselling, which include instant messaging, synchronous chat, text messaging, video-conferencing, and asynchronous email [33], [34], [35], [36], [6].

G. Is Cyber counselling part of the Curriculum in HEIs?

Comparatively, one (UMA) of the three public universities and one (ZALI) of the three private universities indicated that it was making strides to design online counselling infrastructure and personnel. One of the rhetorical questions asked by the majority of lecturers interviewed was *since this kind of counselling is not a new one, why are our graduate students not learning about it? Why is this not included within counselling programmes? Should universities set up cyber / online counselling mechanisms?*

H. Concerns raised about cyber /online counselling

There is overwhelming evidence all the students pointing to them expressing likeness for online counselling, citing convenience and asynchronous advantage over the traditional counselling models. This was in harmony with data from all lecturers interviewed. However, literature antagonises this finding with experts within the field (counselling) expressing concerns regarding moral issues of online/cyber counselling, incompetence, compromised informed consent, privacy and security [35], [37], [38], [39].

VII. CONCLUSION

Findings have brought to light the online / cyber counselling practices in 3 public and 3 private universities. One public and one private university of the 3 apiece have infrastructure to promote cyber counselling. Findings have also uncovered the relevance of cyber counselling to students and universities. Seeing that the majority of students pursue studies virtually, through distance learning mode and blended learning, cyber counselling should be institutionalized. Findings also point to the need for universities to develop counseling policies that promote cyber counseling. Almost all students lamented the absence of counselling services during the Covid 19 period when many institutions did not allow them to be in residence.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that HEIs should:

1. designate units to coordinate cyber counselling service provision now that there are students who learn both synchronously and asynchronously.
2. include online/cyber counselling programmes in the curriculum.
3. Invest in cyber / online counselling infrastructure and personnel.
4. develop counseling policies that promote cyber counseling.

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