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UNIVERSITY PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT SERVICES IN ALMATY

This article explores the organizational details of university psychological support services in Almaty city and region. The authors review the relevant literature to identify best practices in organizing and delivering mental health support services tailored to college students' needs.

Nine universities participated in the study and answered adapted interview questions from The Annual Questionnaire of the Association of Directors of Counseling Centers of Universities and Colleges. The questionnaire covers general university information, psychological support service information, counseling services, and additional services. The article also highlights the correlation of current practice to Standards for University and College Counseling revised by the International Accreditation of Counseling Services.

The article found out that mental health services are developing in Almaty region universities. They practice various roles at the university, provide individual counseling, and use online and offline outreach tools. It is established that in the Almaty region, the staff of services in universities includes from 1 to 4 psychologists; the average ratio is 1 psychologist to 3800 students. Thus, the quantity and quality of personnel is a growth point for further development. The analysis showed that mostly 1st-year students turn to psychological services. Top 4 students' problems are difficulties in relationships, self-esteem, relationships in the family and with parents, as well as problems with self-identification. Most screenings are conducted for adaptation (50%), motivation (37.5%), anxiety (37.5%) and depressive states (37.5%). 50% of the services do not offer any programs or resources on the current problem – suicide prevention.

Key words: university counseling, psychological support center, higher education, Almaty, students.

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Алматы қаласындағы жоғарғы оқу орындарындағы психологиялық қолдау қызметі

Мақалада Алматы қаласы мен облысы университеттеріндегі психологиялық қолдау қызметтерінің жұмыс атқару ерекшеліктері қарастырылады. Авторлар жоғарғы оқу орындарындағы студенттерінің қажеттіліктеріне сай менталды денсаулықты қолдау қызметтерін ұйымдастыру мен ұсынудағы ең жақсы тәжірибелерді анықтау үшін тиісті әдебиеттерді көрсетті.

Зерттеуге тоғыз университет қатысты. Олар университеттер мен колледждердің консультациялық орталықтары директорлар қауымдастығының жыл сайынғы сауалнамасының сұрақтарына жауап берді (AUCCCD). Сауалнама университет туралы жалпы ақпаратты, психологиялық қолдау қызметі туралы ақпаратты, консультация қызметтерін және қосымша қызметтерді қамтиды. Сонымен қатар мақалада университеттердің қазіргі таңда жасалынып жатқан психологиялық қолдау қызметтерінің халықаралық консультациялық қызметтер стандарттарына сәйкестігі қарастырылады (IACS). Зерттеу нәтижесінде Алматы университеттеріндегі психологиялық қолдау қызметтері дамып келе жатқаны анықталды. Олар университетте әртүрлі рөлдерді атқарады, жеке консультациялар өткізеді және өздерін онлайн және офлайн құралдары арқылы танытады. Алматы өңірінде жоғарғы оқу орындарындағы қызметтердің штаттық құрамында 1-ден 4-ке дейін психолог жұмыс істейді; орташа есеппен 3800 студентке 1 психолог келеді. Яғни, қызметкерлердің саны мен сапасын арттыру – қызметтердің одан әрі дамуындағы өсу нүктесі. Талдау көрсеткендей, негізінен, 1 курс студенттері көбірек психологиялық қызметтерге жүгінеді. Студенттердің ең көп кездесетін 4 мәселесі: қарым-қатынастағы қиындықтар, өзін-өзі бағалаудың бұзылуы, отбасы мен ата-ананың қарым-қатынасы және өзін-өзі анықтау мәселелері. Көптеген скринингтер бейімделуге (50%), мотивацияға (37,5%), мазасыздыққа (37,5%) және депрессиялық жағдайларға (37,5%) арналған. Қызметтердің 50%-ы өзекті мәселе суицидтің алдын алу бойынша ешбір бағдарлама мен ресурстарды ұсынбайды.

Түйін сөздер: психологиялық қолдау қызметі, консультация, жоғарғы оқу орны, Алматы, студенттер.

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Службы психологической поддержки университетов г. Алматы

В статье рассматриваются организационные вопросы работы служб психологической поддержки в университетах города Алматы и области. Авторы провели анализ научной литературы, чтобы выявить лучшие практики в организации и предоставлении услуг по поддержке психического здоровья, адаптированных к потребностям студентов высших учебных заведений.

Девять университетов приняли участие в исследовании и ответили на вопросы интервью из ежегодной анкеты ассоциации директоров консультационных центров университетов и колледжей (AUCCCD). Анкета охватывает общую информацию об университете, информацию службы психологической поддержки, консультационные услуги и дополнительные услуги. В статье также подчеркивается соответствие текущей практики стандартам консультирования в университетах и колледжах, пересмотренным международной аккредитацией консультационных служб (IACS).

В статье описано, как службы поддержки психического здоровья развиваются в университетах Алматы. Они выполняют различные функции в университетах, предоставляют индивидуальные консультации и используют онлайн- и офлайн-инструменты в освещении своих услуг. Установлено, в Алматинском регионе штатный состав служб в вузах включает от 1 до 4 психологов; среднее значение 1 психолог к 3800 студентов. Таким образом, количество и качество персонала – это точка роста для дальнейшего развития. Анализ показал, что в основном в психологические службы обращаются студенты 1 курса. Топ-4 студенческие проблемы: это трудности в отношениях, нарушения самооценки, отношения в семье и с родителями, а также проблемы с самоидентификацией. Большинство скринингов проводится на адаптацию (50%), мотивацию (37,5%), тревогу (37,5%) и депрессивные состояния (37,5%). 50% служб не предлагают никаких программ или ресурсов по актуальной проблеме – предотвращению самоубийств.

Ключевые слова: служба психологической поддержки, консультирование, высшее образование, Алматы, студенты.

Introduction

Universities are places where students can pursue their academic and personal goals. However, the process of learning, growing, and adapting to a new environment can also come with challenges (Francisa & Hornb, 2017; Nair & Otaki, 2021). This is where counseling services come into play (Abelson, 2022; Schwitzer et al., 2018).

University counseling services provide a safe and confidential space for students to address their mental health, and emotional, and personal concerns (Glickman et al., 2021a). These services aim to help students develop coping strategies, improve their well-being, and achieve their full potential (Minakhmetova et al., 2019).

Organizing university counseling services is a complex and crucial task that requires the collaboration of several stakeholders (Bishop, 2006). In Kazakhstan, university counseling services have been gradually improving since the 2017 Decree of the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan declared that one of the goals is "to improve psychological service in organizations of higher and postgraduate education." However,

there are still challenges that need to be addressed. Here are some common challenges faced by university counseling services in Kazakhstan:

1. Limited Resources: University counseling services in Kazakhstan often face limited resources, including funding and staff, which can make it challenging to meet students' growing demand for mental health support.

2. The stigma around Mental Health: Mental health stigma is still prevalent in Kazakhstan, making it difficult for students to seek help and access counseling services.

3. Lack of Awareness: Many students in Kazakhstan may need to be made aware of the availability of counseling services and the benefits of seeking help, which can limit the usage of these services.

4. Limited Professional Capacity: There may be a need for more qualified mental health professionals, such as psychologists and counselors, in Kazakhstan, making it challenging for universities to provide adequate support to students.

5. Cultural Barriers: Traditional cultural attitudes towards mental health can be a barrier for students seeking counseling services in Kazakhstan.

Despite these challenges, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of mental health support in Kazakhstan in recent years. Some universities are beginning to prioritize counseling services and allocate more resources to meet the needs of students. By addressing these challenges, universities in Kazakhstan can help ensure that all students have access to the mental health support they need to succeed academically and personally (Kuandykova et al., 2022).

Some studies and research have been conducted on university counseling services in Kazakhstan (Akhtayeva, 2011; Nessipkaliyev, 2022). However, the research in this area may be limited due to various factors such as limited funding for research, lack of awareness of the importance of mental health, and cultural attitudes toward mental health. Despite these challenges, there have been efforts to increase research on university counseling services in Kazakhstan, focusing on understanding students' needs and improving the quality of services provided. These studies may cover topics such as the prevalence of mental health problems among students, the effectiveness of counseling services, and barriers to accessing counseling services.

Overall, the research on university counseling services in Kazakhstan is an essential step toward improving students' mental health and well-being. By continuing to research in this area, universities and policymakers can gain a deeper understanding of students' challenges and take practical steps to address their needs (Franzoi et al., 2022).

Problem Statement

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of mental health and well-being in higher education, many university counseling services need help delivering practical and comprehensive support to students. These challenges include limited resources, mental health stigma, lack of awareness of counseling services, and cultural barriers (Gutova T.S., 2020). As a result, many students may not have access to the mental health support they need to succeed academically and personally (Dogan, 2018).

This research aims to investigate the current state of university counseling services in Almaty city and region, including the challenges these services face and best practices for delivering practical and comprehensive support to students. The research aims to identify benchmark data about common practices for mental health counseling in universities and

determine organizational aspects of psychological counseling services. Organizational aspects include service presence, outreach strategies, number and quality of professionals, psychologist: student ratio, and common counseling topics. The purpose of the article is to analyze the current state and problems of psychological services of universities and to develop directions for the improvement of psychological services for students. The study's outcome will help build strategies for improving the organization of counseling services and overcoming the barriers to accessing these services to promote students' mental health and well-being in higher education.

Research Questions:

1. What is the psychologist: student ratio in universities having mental support services?
2. What are the practices for organizing and delivering counseling at universities?
3. What strategies have proven effective in outreach to accessing these services?
4. How does the demand for psychological support change?

These research questions provide a framework for exploring the current state of university counseling services and identifying strategies for improving the organization and delivery of these services. By answering these questions, the research can contribute to a better understanding of the challenges and best practices in the organization of university counseling services to promote students' mental health and well-being in higher education.

Literature Review

The organization of university counseling services is an essential aspect of supporting students' mental health and well-being (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). This literature review will examine the current state of research on the organization of counseling services at universities, including the challenges faced by these services and the best practices for organizing and delivering these services effectively (Murray et al., 2016).

One of the main challenges faced by university counseling services is limited resources, including funding and staffing (Velichko et al., 2022). It can make it challenging to meet students' growing demand for mental health support. Additionally, mental health stigma is still prevalent in many communities, making it difficult for students to seek help and

access counseling services (Turosak & Siwierka, 2021).

Many universities have implemented various strategies to address these challenges to improve counseling services organizations (Prince, 2015; Stallman, 2012). These strategies include increasing awareness of the availability of counseling services, training staff and students on mental health and wellness, and allocating more resources to support these services. Additionally, universities may partner with outside organizations, such as mental health clinics and community-based organizations, to provide additional support to students (Lockard et al., 2019).

Studies have shown that a proactive and comprehensive approach to the organization of counseling services can effectively improve students' mental health and well-being (Smith et al., 2014; Sonnone & Rochford, 2020). This includes creating a welcoming and non-stigmatizing environment for students seeking help, providing a range of services tailored to the unique needs of students, and engaging in continuous evaluation and improvement of counseling services.

Furthermore, research suggests that a collaborative and interdisciplinary approach to the organization of counseling services can also be effective (Hall et al., 2018). This includes involving students, staff, and faculty in developing and delivering counseling services and incorporating elements of mindfulness and self-care into the counseling process (Sharp & Theiler, 2018).

In conclusion, the literature suggests that the organization of university counseling services is critical to supporting students' mental health and well-being. By addressing the challenges faced by these services and implementing effective strategies and best practices, universities can ensure that all students have access to the support they need to succeed academically and personally.

Methodology

This research used a mixed-methods approach, including qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis methods. The Annual Questionnaire of the Association of Directors of Counseling Centers of Universities and Colleges (AUCCCD), updated in 2022, was chosen as the tool (Gorman et al., 2022). The questionnaire was translated and

adapted to the Kazakh context for the study. Some questions were removed, as they are irrelevant to Kazakhstan's practice and mentality, while others have been changed. For example, "Should psychologists working in psychological services have national accreditation for counseling or psychotherapy?" was changed to "... have a basic education?". Thus, the adapted questionnaire consists of 4 sections: general questions about the university, about the psychological service center, about providing counseling services, and about additional services.

The survey was conducted in an interview form by personal call with one of the psychologists working at the university. If no Counseling Services were on campus, the appropriate responsible face was invited to respond to section one only.

The participants included current professional staff at universities offering counseling services. Nine universities out of 40 located in Almaty city and region have participated in the study N=9.

The data collected from the interview surveys were analyzed using qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis, and the quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

This research adhered to ethical standards for research with human participants, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality and privacy, and avoiding harm to participants.

Results

General information about the university. Nine participants, including five national and four private universities, participated in the survey. 89% of responding universities provide mental health counseling services. For one private university that does not provide services, it refers students to a medical center contracted with the university. The average number of students enrolled in each university (n=8) is 7850, whereas the least number is less than 1000, and the highest is more than 20 000 students.

About psychological support services. In 75% of universities, the psychological support services have their own office, either in the student's center or at another place at the university, and the majority fall under the social, institutional division. All use online tools to reach students, most commonly Instagram pages and university websites. Moreover, outreach with the help of advisors, training,

and introductory events is also effectively used. Based on statistics from 8 universities, the average number of professional psychologists per university is 2 (max=4, min=1). Accordingly, the average psychologist: student ratio is 1:3800. Counselors work part-time in two universities and full-time in six others. 50% of universities do not require a bachelor in Psychology from counseling specialists. The survey reports that none of the schools do have on-campus specialists who can work with psychiatric cases.

About counseling services. Most common responses regarding utilization of counseling services: university psychological support services (n=8) serve, on average, 251 students with individual counseling services in an academic year. One-fourth see over 500 students annually, and half accept less than 100 students. The survey revealed that most visitors are first-year students (Figure-1). Most services are available during regular business hours (9 am-6 pm). Almost all centers take in clients by appointment. Appointments are made via messengers (50%), links (25%), and in the office (25%). 37,5 % say, "we welcome a combination of crisis and general walk-ins" for counseling.

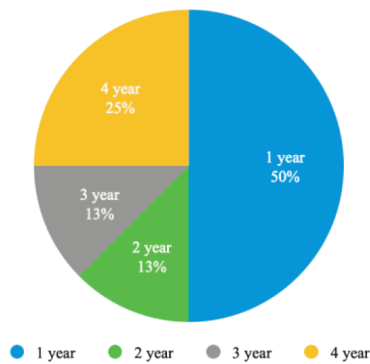


Figure 1 – Distribution of Students Seeking Psychological Help by Year of Study

The average number of sessions per student in an academic year is 3-5. The average weekly case-load size per psychologist is 17-18 hours weekly. 50% of schools do not have a session limit policy. 75% do provide on-call or after-hours emergency coverage if needed. The top 4 students presenting problems are relationship difficulties, self-esteem disturbances, family and parental relations, and self-identification problems (Figure-2). The survey reports that 75% of participants reported that demand from students toward counseling services had increased comparably to the past year. However, the universities need surveys or other instruments to evaluate the effectiveness of sessions. Only client feedback supports the evidence.

About additional services provided by support centers. All have regular duties and roles in addition to personal counseling. The principal duties are organizing training, seminars, and psychoeducational programs for students and staff and doing a screening assessment of students, and analyzing results once a semester. Most screenings are done on adaptation (50%), motivation (37,5%), anxiety (37,5%), and depression states (37,5%). 50% do not offer any suicide prevention programming or resources.

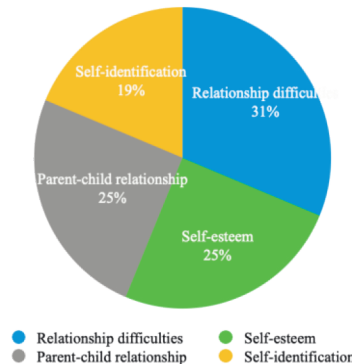


Figure 2 – Common Concerns of Students Seeking Counseling Assistance

Presentation of Findings and Discussion

The research findings revealed several key points of university counseling services in Kazakhstan. First, there is an increasing tendency to organize psychological support services in Almaty universities. With the help of the research, we could

answer the research questions put above. The average psychologist-student ratio now is 1 to 3800 students, which is twice higher than in the Standards for University and College Counseling revised by International Accreditation of Counseling Services in 2020 (International Association of Counseling Services, 2010). IACS recommends a ratio of at

least one mental health professional staff member per 1000–1500 students, depending on services offered and other campus mental health agencies.

The document on counseling service standards for universities and colleges from the International Association of Counseling Services (IACS) consists of six chapters. Each chapter addresses the relevant questions about the organization of university psychologists' activities. Below is the table of contents from the list of sections:

- Relationship of the counseling center with the university community;
- Roles and functions of counseling services;
- Ethical standards;
- Counseling service personnel;
- Methodological recommendations;
- Special provisions.

The counseling service should play four leading roles in serving the university and student community:

1. To counsel students who experience personal difficulties, professional problems, developmental problems, and psychological problems that require professional attention;
2. To play a preventive role, helping students identify and learn skills that will help them effectively achieve their educational and life goals;
3. To support and enhance healthy student growth and development through counseling and working with the campus community;
4. To play a role in campus safety support.

IACS accreditation standards include the following nine psychological service functions: individual counseling; group counseling; crisis intervention and emergency services; information and awareness-raising activities; counseling interventions as training and education for university personnel; referral resources, i.e., the ability to refer to psychotherapists or psychiatrists when needed; research; regular assessment of center work; professional development of psychologists themselves; and educational programs, such as training and supervision, are appropriate and desirable duties of counseling services.

At the same time, Johns et al. (2019) state that the ideal ratio will partly depend upon such factors as the size of the student body and the location of the campus (i.e., rural, suburban, or urban).

Consulting services are an integral part of the educational mission and support the mission in vari-

ous ways, such as consultations, training, preventative and developmental interventions, and treatment. Although the relationship between the consulting service and other departments in the institution will vary depending on the organizational structure and individual campus needs, the service must be administratively neutral. However, psychologists must develop and maintain close relationships with academic departments, student service offices, campus medical services, and public mental health services. Psychologists should work with faculty, staff, and administration to achieve the goal of psychological and emotional development in many aspects of campus life.

The study's results on organizational aspects are consistent with previous literature on university psychological services by Yermentayeva (2012), which has highlighted four service directions. They are psychodiagnostic works, counseling, psycho-educational and correctional works. The study also revealed the implication of all directions in their work. While counseling takes up, on average, 17-18 hours a week (45%), which is in line with the recommendations of IACS about the clinical workload of each professional to be at most 65% on a continuing basis. However, the requirements asked from the educational background of professionals do not correspond to standards that claim a professional to have a minimum master's degree. Nowadays, in Almaty, psychologists without bachelor's but master's degrees in psychology are hired for the staff of university psychological support centers. In addition, adding one psychiatric staff to the service is the next step in improving the diversity and quality of psychological services.

This is a good beginning to start with. According to Glass (2020), in the long term, an outreach of the support center should be done along with a strategy to prevent the inability to meet the demand. The most effective outreach tools were identified as introductory visits, training events, and recommendations from advisors or friends. It was additionally stated by one of the participant universities during the interview.

While some universities had well-established counseling centers with trained professionals and various services, others needed more resources and relied on untrained staff or academic volunteers to provide counseling. In addition, the study found that 75% of participants state that the demand for coun-

seling services has increased across universities. The data is supported by Locke et al. (2012), Mull et al. (2020), and other research.

Overall, the findings of this study highlight the need for ongoing efforts to improve the organization and delivery of university counseling services in Kazakhstan. By addressing the challenges facing these services and incorporating best practices, universities can play an essential role in promoting their students' mental health and well-being. Despite these challenges, the results also highlight several best practices for improving the organization and delivery of university counseling services. These include increasing awareness of counseling services, reducing mental health stigma, and promoting a collaborative and interdisciplinary approach to counseling. The findings of this research have important implications for the practice of university counseling services. By addressing the challenges these services face and incorporating best practices, universities can improve students' mental health and well-being, helping them achieve their academic and personal goals.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has provided valuable insights into the organization of university counseling services and the challenges faced by these services in promoting students' mental health and well-being in the sample of higher education insti-

tutions of Almaty city and region. The results have shown limited quality and number of professionals as the critical challenge facing university counseling services. However, universities are improving mental health services with good practices such as increasing awareness, reducing mental health stigma by outreach, and promoting a collaborative and interdisciplinary approach. The development of psychological services in universities can be further enhanced through several measures. These include improving the personnel potential of services, ensuring compliance with international IACS requirements by including a psychiatric employee in the staff. Additionally, expanding areas of practical assistance such as consulting, psychotherapeutic and preventive work can be beneficial. Conducting scientific research and diagnostics of students' mental health can also aid in this process. Moreover, international and national cooperation and coordination of various areas of work with clients can be instrumental in achieving these objectives.

Further research of all Almaty universities is needed to examine the fuller view of support service practices. It is planned to continue the research further this year.

In conclusion, we, as a nation, underscore the work counseling services of universities in our country. By working together to address the challenges facing university counseling services and by supporting them, we can prosper students' academic and personal success in higher education.

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