

## Professional challenges and recommendations for improving student counselling services in Croatia

Marina Milić Babić<sup>1</sup>, Valentina Šipuš<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Marina Milić Babić, PhD, Associate professor at the Department of Social Work, Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb, Croatia

<sup>2</sup>Valentina Šipuš, mag. paed. relig. et catech., univ. spec. polit. soc., Croatia

### Abstract

Higher education has been high on the policy agenda in recent decades. The social dimension of education and the related social support for students aimed to raise the share of highly educated individuals and hence spur social development. In this respect, student counselling services act as an important mechanism of social support, notably considering a high risk of developing mental disorders for students and the objective to raise the quality of studies and graduation rates. Against the backdrop of dynamic social transformations and the growing diversity of the student population, student counselling services have become paramount. The present, qualitative research aimed to examine the challenges and obtain recommendations for improving the counselling practice from the perspective of professionals at student counselling services in Croatia. Research results indicated challenges concerning insufficient financial and human capacities, as well as tailoring counselling services to diverse student needs. In line with the research findings, the recommendations targeted human resource shortages; furthering prevention at counselling services, especially through training for the entire academic community; consulting with students to understand their needs and tailor counselling activities accordingly; networking among counselling services to share practices, enhance supervision, and initiate research to improve social support at higher education institutions; and finally, raising the professional standard of the counselling practice as a prerequisite of quality service provision.

**Keywords:** students, mental health, social support, counselling services

## **1. The role of student counselling services in higher education**

In the last couple of decades, higher education has become more open and accessible, aiming to increase the share of highly educated individuals in support of social development (UNESCO, 2021). Higher education policies in the EU (EHEA – European Higher Education Area), notably those promoting the social dimension of education, have aimed to widen access to higher education for different social groups, prevent dropout, support students, and facilitate the completion of college studies and an effective labour market transition (Yerevan Communiqué, 2015). In this respect, student mental health has been raising growing concerns, notably in the light of various challenges that put students at higher risk of developing mental disorders. Typical difficulties concerned entering a different system of education, leaving home and becoming independent, adjusting to the academic demands, creating new social networks, facing pressure to succeed, financial issues, as well as uncertainties over the future and the labour market transition near the end of college studies (Cage et al., 2021; ESU, 2020, A). For that reason, many policies have been promoting social support for students, notably through student counselling at education institutions (ESU, 2020, B; Brown, 2018). While student counselling services have traditionally focused on counselling and implementing different programmes, recent social transformations and developments in the world of education have entailed new challenges, which required an effective response from the counselling services, notably in terms of furthering prevention, identifying the emerging issues, and cooperating with the academic staff (especially teachers) and students (Laban, 2018). The present research aimed to gain a closer insight into the experiences of practitioners at student counselling services in Croatia and obtain their recommendations for improving student counselling.

## **2. Research results and discussion**

Conducted in 2019, this research aimed to examine the challenges in the student counselling practice and gather recommendations for improving the counselling activities from professionals at counselling services. Research participants involved thirteen practitioners, employed at eleven student counselling services at five universities in Croatia (University of Zagreb, University of Rijeka, University of Zadar, J.J. Strossmayer University in Osijek, and Croatian Catholic University). Research procedures relied on qualitative methods, notably semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis in data processing, and abided by the core ethical principles. Participants were 28 to 62 years old. Eleven participants were women; two were men. All participants had higher education, and nine had a PhD. Also, nine participants were psychologists. Other participants represented a social worker, a social pedagogue, an informatics specialist, and an education rehabilitation specialist.

### **2.1 Research questions and results**

Two research questions supported the research aim:

1.) How do professionals at counselling services describe daily challenges in the student counselling practice? 2.) Which recommendations do counselling professionals offer for enhancing the student counselling practice? Thematic analysis yielded two thematic areas corresponding to the research questions: Challenges in the student counselling practice (Thematic area 1) and Recommendations for improving the counselling practice (Thematic area 2) with the corresponding categories and codes presented in Table 1 and Table 2.

*Table 1: Challenges in the counselling practice*

CATEGORIES	CODES
TAILORING ACTIVITIES TO STUDENT NEEDS	Identifying needs
RESOURCE MANAGEMENT	Furnishing space
	Financial support
	Human resource management
	Ensuring unbiased counselling

*Table 2: Recommendations for improving the counselling practice*

CATEGORY	CODES
ESTABLISHMENT AND PRACTICE OF COUNSELLING SERVICES	Establishing counselling services at all higher education institutions
	Improving the counselling service space
ACTIVITIES OF COUNSELLING SERVICES	Furthering prevention
	Tailoring the services to student needs
	Training
	Cooperation of counselling services
HUMAN RESOURCES	Introducing permanent employment position(s) at counselling services
	More external associates
	Professionalism in the counselling practice

Thematic area 1 – Challenges in the counselling practice discusses the difficulties encountered by professionals at counselling services. The first category elaborates on the challenge of tailoring counselling to student needs. In particular, challenges consist in identifying student needs, ensuring the effectiveness of student counselling and expanding service provision: “Choosing a topic...that would interest most students, regardless of their study field, to understand what students find useful and interesting“ (i1). The following category describes challenges concerning resource management, notably issues related to space, finances and staff. Counsellors are aware of the impact of facilities on creating a pleasant ambience, requiring distinction from the rest of the working environment. Accordingly, they suggest furnishing the

space in line with the counselling purpose: *“In terms of furnishing, I mean, the furniture and the general impression, I am not satisfied. I find that the space used for counselling should reflect its purpose, which is counselling; the service user should feel comfortable, whereas this room rather resembles an office.”* (i8). Inadequate financial support for effective service provision represents another challenge: *“Well, issues of financial nature, concerning permanent employment of staff.”* (i4), *“...the finances are a major challenge, and besides that, the number of counsellors, which is interconnected. If we had more financial resources, we could have more colleagues working, we would ask for another room. More funding, more space.”* (i7), *“Finances are always an issue.”* (i8). Managing human resources is also a challenge. To some extent, that involves understaffing and time constraints: *“I wish we had more workshops... however, as there are only a few of us, some things just do not come into focus.”* (i8), *“It feels terrible when people contact you and you cannot admit them; there is the counselling service, and yet it cannot accommodate everyone. We used to have, in times of wide outreach, around 20-25 students on the waiting list. That is... you never know what could happen, so it is a great risk, in fact.”* (i9), *“Unfortunately, we do not have the capacity, nor the resources, to provide counselling to students from other colleges, we cannot admit them. They keep writing; we should transfer them, but there is nowhere we can refer them to. The waiting list is also long...”* (i7). Moreover, human resource management also concerns employee retention: *“I think the current organisation is not sustainable in the long run with four external associates engaged pro bono. At some point, they could pursue a different path in life; perhaps, they will no longer manage and stop working with us. If we wanted to keep the counselling service as such... This “juggling” is definitely not good; at some point, people might become exhausted and unmotivated; they will no longer manage to wear different hats and have all these roles”* (i8). For counsellors who are also teachers, a major challenge consists in the conflict of interest while counselling students they used to teach or they are currently teaching (code ensuring unbiased counselling): *“However, I do not counsel students from my study programme... at the Faculty, I represent somebody else; and here, again, I represent another person, and I view them differently too... They are no longer just students. For me, this is the biggest challenge”* (i13).

The second thematic area, recommendations for improving the counselling practice addresses the challenges of working at counselling services, alongside counsellor needs and requests based on their counselling experience. The first category in this thematic area concerns the establishment of counselling services at all higher education institutions: *“Each unit is responsible for setting up psychological counselling at the unit level or career centres (also at the level of each unit). Of course, every unit has specific needs given its scientific field, the avenues of future employment, activities, and so on...”* (i1). *“Foremost, it should be established. This should become standard, like it is abroad, where it represents a common part of every university...”* (i3). The practice could also benefit from redesigning the counselling service space: *“...also, the space should be refurbished”* (i13). The category Activities of counselling services comprises the codes concerning counsellor activities. Namely, practitioners find the counselling services should step up their efforts in furthering prevention: *“Also, I believe counselling should focus much more on preventing undesirable behaviour”* (i10). Moreover, counsellors call for tailoring the services to specific student needs: *“tailoring activities to student needs. In every institution... students are unique, each study programme is specific; we have noticed that approaches that work for our students... do not help students in other study*

fields. I also have a recommendation for staff at counselling services - be ready to learn and adjust. That means not to insist on a set course of action if students do not benefit from it. To maintain a continuous conversation with students... what we can do for you" (i12). The specific training needs of teaching staff, student mentors and students imply understanding student issues: "Notably, cooperation with teachers who can offer the expertise, define goals and psychological processes that support learning, memorisation and distinguishing the relevant content" (i1). "Collaborating with the teaching staff, sharing experiences, informing teachers of our services" (i4). "...training student mentors. Freshman orientation by senior students is most effective. They are familiar with the specific details of study courses, particularities of each study programme... these young people need more training in approaching freshmen" (i1). Counsellors also recognise the potential for enhancing the cooperation of counselling services in research: "... perhaps, initiating research activities. Intensifying research work"(i10). "Developing models for assessing the practice, considering different schools and methods; this presents an opportunity. Namely, if we had more counselling services on board, to apply the same approach, we could have more clients, and I think we could do great things" (i13). Further suggestions concern sharing best practices: "Networking among colleges is essential; sharing best-practice examples, applying the best practices" (i12). Finally, counsellors recognise the value of supervision: "I think peer supervision would be great...it would be great if we had another two counselling services interested, to involve more people. That would facilitate organisation as well"(i13). The final category, human resources, discusses counsellor views on introducing a permanent employment position, more external associates, and the importance of professionalism. Introducing a permanent employment position at counselling services is considered pivotal: "Having a team here is essential to develop student support strategy, and other activities we discussed... currently, people come, have their session and go home... We are not the general practice, our services should not come down to that" (i3). "We call upon the university to recognise this need and assign one person to this activity... to sit there, to answer the phone and the emails regularly, to organise, prepare materials, service contracts, funding proposals for different calls at the municipal and state levels; funds are available, there are different calls for proposals" (i7). Moreover, counsellors suggest hiring more external associates: "Hiring more external associates; we try to offer our students opportunities to talk with people they do not know; for students, this seems easier, somehow... we would like to have many different people at disposal; these are sensitive matters, and sometimes people do not click" (i8). Finally, counsellors considered professionalism indispensable for the counselling practice: "Having experienced people, competent in the field, is quintessential. Qualified people..." (i7). "Overall, professionalising the counselling practice is vital; that is, hiring people whose job description consists in counselling only" (i8). "Training is crucial; supervision is pivotal. It requires full commitment" (i9). "As for any other profession, having set professional criteria is central - defining, monitoring, and assessing the counselling criteria. The main recommendation is to work to a high-quality professional standard" (i11).

## 2.2 Discussion

High-quality counselling services should rely on the identified student needs, high professional standards and corresponding adjustments to the counselling plans. Moreover, counselling

deserves particular consideration given the current social trends, including digital transformation, migrations, facilitated access to higher education for underserved groups, highly operational Erasmus scheme and the social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Ciobanu (2013), qualitative research indicated student services did not match the trend of continuous growth and increasing diversity of the student population. In line with the present research findings concerning a considerable challenge to identify student needs and tailor counselling services accordingly, Laban (2018) concluded student needs deserved careful investigation, followed by consistent adjustments to the counselling practice and staff training to respond to student needs more effectively. Research results equally pointed to the need to train student mentors. Acting as non-formal support and supported with adequate training, student mentors could provide effective counselling. As students appeared to prefer non-formal social support, such as conversation with friends and family, peer counselling might represent a promising avenue (Cage et al., 2021; Wiest & Treacy, 2019; ESU, 2020, A). Counselling services should equally become more accessible to students through online counselling, extended working hours (Cage et al., 2021), and intensified outreach, instead of letting the students seek counselling themselves (Laban, 2018). A major purpose of counselling services consists in ensuring access to counselling. Therefore, practitioners insisted every higher education institution should offer counselling services. Moreover, the present research suggested that more staff and adequate space were needed to achieve this goal, in line with the research findings involving professionals at student counselling services in America (Laban, 2018). Against a long-standing, advanced student counselling practice in the latter case, counselling might indeed require more consideration from the public policy standpoint in the national context. Furthermore, the finances also determined counselling activities, limiting the opportunities for hiring associates, staff training and professional development, and furnishing the counselling service space. For this reason, financial support from higher education institution management appeared pivotal, which was equally observed by other authors (Laban, 2018; ESU, 2020, A). Professionalism and continuous training of counselling practitioners are commonly considered a prerequisite of quality service provision, able to respond to the growing and ever more complex student needs (ESU, 2020, A; Laban, 2018). Considering human resources, the practitioners mentioned the challenge of balancing roles, notably for those acting as both research and teaching staff and student counsellors. In fact, research participants questioned the sustainability of such practice, as well as the services predominantly provided by external associates working for low wages. In that regard, Ogresta (2013) classified conflicting roles among professional stressors. According to the resource conservation theory (Hobfoll & Freedy, 1993 in Ogresta, 2013), high interpersonal demands at work, including conflicting roles and shortage of resources (that is, conflicting roles and work overload) may induce a loss of energy, emotional exhaustion, and job dissatisfaction. In this respect, WHO (2009) issued recommendations for increasing worker motivation, including higher remuneration, job incentives, encouraging and offering professional development training and career advancement, furthering supervision; all of which could be applied in counselling service management. Furthermore, counselling practitioners advocated opportunities for joint research provided that the cooperation between counselling services improved. Finally, pinpointing student needs, monitoring the progress of counselling services, and longitudinal research could further social support and prevention mechanisms directed at students (ESU, 2020, A; Brown, 2018). Prevention of mental health issues represented another crucial area for improving the counselling practice (WHO, 2018; Laban, 2018). That implied fostering a supportive

environment at higher education institutions, informing the academic community on mental health and student matters more effectively, supporting further development of non-formal support, teaching and guidance on academic and social skills, offering self-help resources, etc. (Cage et al., 2021; Giamos et al, 2017; Wiest & Treacy, 2019; ESU, 2020, A; Laban, 2018; Brown, 2018; ESU, 2020, A; WHO, 2009).

### 3. Conclusion

The contemporary, rapidly changing society calls for a continuous transformation of traditional approaches in different social areas, including education. Widening access to college studies represents one of the priorities in higher education, entailing greater diversity of the student population facing various challenges and needs. Under those circumstances, adequate and quality social support may facilitate and improve the college experience. In that regard, the focus is on protecting student mental health, notably through student counselling services. In the light of the challenges described, counselling practitioners offered an insight into student needs and suggestions for planning further activities within the academic community. The present findings, based on qualitative research with professionals at student counselling services in Croatia, are comparable to other international studies on student matters. It is recommended that the future practice relies on professionals engaging in continuous professional development. Counselling activities should respond to student needs, identified in a continuous conversation with students. The counselling practice should equally focus on prevention, notably raising awareness and informing the academic community about student challenges and needs, as well as training for the entire academic community to address student needs effectively. Finally, a supportive environment at higher education institutions could contribute to raising academic achievement. Strengthening non-formal peer support also required greater efforts as students preferred to seek support from friends and family first. In that respect, training student mentors was advised. Cooperation of counselling services was also advocated, notably to share practices, advance supervision and initiate research that could contribute to responding to student needs more effectively. That would serve to advance the counselling practice and plan the activities at higher education institutions. The institutions should also consider counsellor needs in terms of financial and human resources and refurbishing facilities, all of which would contribute to widening access to counselling for students. Overall, good cooperation within the academic community appeared vital for enhancing its performance, reaching high satisfaction among students and employees, and increasing graduation rates.

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