

“National Consultation on University and College Counselling Services in India”: Key Recommendations

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Background

Youth is considered as the strength of any nation. Youth not only contribute in building the economy of a nation as a human resource, but they also act as agents of social change and leaders of tomorrow. At present, India has the largest youth population in the world. In fact, by 2020, India is set to become the world's youngest country with 64 per cent of its population in the working age group (Shivkumar, 2013). Despite population being a prime cause of concern for the nation, many experts believe this 'youth bulge' to be a demographic blessing. This is because, economically speaking, the percentage of population earning is more than the percentage of dependent population. However, there are others who speculate that given the current social inequalities, this demographic blessing may actually turn into a disaster because of deteriorating quality of education, inadequate infrastructure for health, non-existing social support networks, dearth of job opportunities '—(Chatterjee & Karunakara, 2016). If the young members of the society are not given adequate direction, support, and opportunities, they may engage in destructive rather than constructive activities. The growing discontentment in youth may be discerned from their growing suicide rates. “India has one of the world's highest rate of suicides among people aged between 15 years and 29 years accounting 40/1,00,000 population and a third of all suicides in the country” (Samapthirao, 2016, p. 142)(Mukunth, 2014). Increasing rates of substance abuse in youth and increasing rate of suicides due to substance abuse among youth are becoming cause of concern for the government as well (Bhowmick, 2014). Increasing instances of violence among youngsters is also making

headlines. Given this scenario, experts are of opinion that if concerted policy level changes are not made in the area of human resource management and planning at this stage, very soon the country might be facing “backlash from the growing numbers of disgruntled and unemployed or unemployable youth” '—(Chatterjee & Karunakara, 2016).

In the context of the holistic development of youth, health and education emerge as two paramount focus areas. However, if one reflects on the existing policies of health and education in India, the understanding and vision of both health and education is rather limited and myopic. When we speak of health, it is the preventive medical model that occupies the centre-stage and the promotion of well-being takes a back-seat. When we speak of education, the focus is on education for career-building rather than education for living a healthy fulfilling life. Thus, it is not surprising that the issues related to mental health and well-being remain unaddressed in health policies and the concerns related to values education, soft skill development, creativity and innovation are ignored in education policies.

In this age- marked by competition, conflict, and pressure- it has become imperative for us as a nation to create support systems to nurture the young members of the society. It is of the utmost importance that the governmental agencies take the growing psychological problems and mental health concerns of the youth seriously and deploy professional services to provide adequate support to bring about holistic growth of the young members of our society. It is also the need of the hour that the policy makers expand their vision of health and education to include the idea of mental



health and well-being so that we are able to address the psycho-social concerns of youth within the ambit of our education and health policies. In order to advocate for the above stated issues and to establish a firm need for the policy level change, 'Expressions India' along with their academic partner 'Association of Indian School Counsellors and Allied Professionals (AISCAP)' organized a 'National Consultation on University and College Counselling Services in India-Emerging needs, challenges and good practices' on 7th June 2016 at India International Centre (New Delhi).

Aims and Objectives

The overall aim of the consultation was to develop a comprehensive list of recommendations and demands that could be shared with the governmental agencies to bring about the envisioned changes in the arena of counselling services in higher education in India. The key objective of this national consultation was to bring together professionals, educators, counsellors, academicians, researchers, students and university administrators together on a single platform to delineate and prioritize the mental health concerns students in higher education are experiencing. Apart from discussing the concerns and prioritizing the intervention areas, the experts from different fields shared the leading practices that their institutions have adopted with regard to counselling youth in the institutions of higher education.

Participants

This advocacy initiative that took form of a national consultation led to a unique gathering of experts from the disciplines of medicine, psychology and education. The program was organized under the leadership of Dr. Jitendra Nagpal who is a senior consultant psychiatrist at VIMHANS and Moolchand Medcity. He has keen interest in the area of adolescence and childhood mental health and disorders. Dr. Nagpal has been serving in the capacity of Program Director at Expressions India and is associated with National Adolescence Education Program as Technical Coordinator. The honourable chief guest of the program was Prof (Dr.) Kavita Sharma who is a well-known academician, presently acting in the

capacity of President, South Asian University, New-Delhi. She served as the principal of Hindu College, University of Delhi for about ten years and also acted as the Director of India International Centre for about six years. Prof (Dr.) Saroj Yadav who is currently serving as Dean (Academics) at NCERT was the guest of honour for the program. The other expert resource persons and panellists in the inaugural session were Prof. Jawahar Lal Pandey (Former Head of NCERT and Founder of National Adolescence Education Program, Delhi), Prof. (Dr.) Namita Ranganathan (Professor, Central Institute of Education, University of Delhi) and Prof. (Dr.) Rajni Kant (Director, Ramnagar Campus, University of Jammu). All these experts have been associated with higher education and mental health issues and brought their wealth of experience to the national consultation.

Different thematic sessions of the national consultation were chaired by senior experts from different universities. The consultation benefitted from the presence of Prof (Dr.) Neerja Chadha (Director-School of Continuing Education & Professor, Child Development at IGNOU, New-Delhi), Prof. (Dr.) Marshal Mukesh Sahani (Dean-Students Welfare, Amity University, Noida) and Dr. Neera Pant (Associate Professor, Psychology, Gargi College, University of Delhi) as chairpersons. Other noted academicians who participated as panellists in the discussion were Prof. Rajani Dhingra (Dean-Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Jammu) and Prof. Naved Iqbal (Head-Department of Psychology, Jamia Milia Islamia, Delhi). The consultation was greatly enriched by the inputs from the mental health practitioners associated with different academic institutions and they included Ms. Bhuma Krishnana (Chief Counsellor, Jamia Milia Islamia), Dr. Harminder Gijral (Head Consortium, Amity Centre for Guidance and Counselling), Ms. Rupa Murghai (Counsellor, Indian Institute of Technology), Ms Karuna Chandrashekhara (Counsellor, Centre for Individual and Group Excellence, Ashoka University), Ms. Swati Munjal (Director-Admissions, BML Munjal University, Gurgaon) and Mr. Kush Kulshreshtha (Principal, Vibrant Group of Academics, Surat). Ms. Ayesha Banerjee (Editor-HT Education, The Hindustan



Times) and Ms. Pushpinder Kaur (Director & GM-CE, Employment News Publications) added great value to the discussion as media experts.

Though the consultation took place in Delhi, there was adequate representation of the experts, students and the universities from different parts of the country. Academic institutions, both from the government and private sectors, were well-represented. Participants included both seasoned and experienced practitioners, academicians and researchers as well as young, dynamic and creative students, scholars, counsellors and teaching aspirants. The scholars, university and school teachers and students who participated in the national consultation were from different colleges and departments of the University of Delhi, IGNOU, Jamia Milia Islamia, Ambedkar University and Amity University. Many mental health practitioners and counsellors were also present from Expressions India, VIMHANS and Moolchand Medcity. Some counsellors and teachers from different schools of Delhi also participated in the consultation.

Key Outcomes

At the macro-level, all the resource persons and experts, based on their field experience and perspective, highlighted the need for providing counselling support to youth enrolled in the institutes of higher education all over the country. They all emphasized that providing psychological support through academic institutions is crucial and thus, setting up of guidance and counselling centres and rolling-out of counselling services through trained professionals should be given top-most priority in the upcoming education policy. All the experts expressed their concerns over the increasing rate of suicides, psychological disorders, gender-based violence and drug abuse problems among the youth in the country and indicated that might be an indication that youth is already cracking-up. The experts also underscored a need for self-reflection and introspection to uncover the reasons for our collective failure as a society in providing adequate nurturing environment to the future generation. This section presents in detail the overarching themes, specific concerns, key learnings and concrete suggestions

that emerged through the national consultation.

Counselling services in Universities and Colleges: Existing issues and challenges

Lack of infrastructure and trained professionals

It was noted by most participants in the consultation that the existing counselling services being offered by the universities and colleges are inadequate and insufficient. Not only counselling centres are non-existent in many government universities and colleges but also even where such centres exist, there is a dearth of trained professionals to extend these services. Even when there is a counsellor engaged by the institution, the availability is a problem. Usually, irrespective of the number of students, institutions engage only one or two counsellors, that too on a part-time basis, which clearly does not meet the requirements of the whole institution. Many participants, particularly from government institutions, also admitted that they do not even have adequate infrastructure to set up a counselling centre in their institution.

The scenario at private universities, however, is quite different. Most private universities are developing or already have a state of the art counselling and guidance centres that cater to the needs of the students, faculty members and non-teaching staff members as well. Not only there is investment in the infrastructure but also trained professionals are being engaged on a full-time basis to offer their services. This indicates that the significance of addressing the mental health concerns is being understood and appreciated by the private universities.

Problems related to awareness of mental health issues and social stigma

As highlighted by the experts, probably one of the biggest reasons that youngsters not seek help and support regarding their mental health problems is lack of awareness. Unlike physical health issues, which are well-understood, psychological problems are misunderstood as regular ups and downs of life and are ignored. Sadness, despair, aggression, suicidal thoughts, relationship problems, hopelessness are all mistakenly viewed



as part and parcel of the adult life. Awareness of mental disorders such as depression, schizophrenia, OCD, phobias, personality problems etc. is almost non-existing, even among university students and teachers. Due to the lack of awareness, despite engaging with students closely, teachers miss out on even the most apparent warning signs and are unable to sense the psychological problems that a student might be facing.

Another issue that emerges out of ignorance about mental health issues is stigma. Due to their misguided and erroneous beliefs, people look down upon and stigmatize people who experience psychological issues. As a result, people are reluctant to admit that they might be having psychological problems and are ashamed in seeking professional help. As a result, even in those institutions where counselling services exist, many students do not come forward to seek help, rather they keep on suffering in silence. Even when these problems spin out of control among students and the matters are brought to the attention of the parents, their response is usually not constructive. They either deny the problem or get aggressive at the very thought of seeking professional support.

Lack of political will and institutional support

Promotion of mental health & well-being and education for character building has never been the top priority for the policy makers. Prevention of disease and education for career building has been the key concerns. As a result, institutions do not prioritize counselling and guidance services. The funds at hand are usually directed towards updating the computer labs instead of establishing the counselling centre for example. Training in life skills and soft skills is also falling way below in the priority list of the policy makers as well as the institutions. The policies of the government and the practices of the institutions are themselves reflective of the social mind-set which is characterized by lack of awareness and stigma towards mental health issues. Experts agreed unanimously that this mind-set needs change as it cripples the possibilities of a future where mental health and well-being would be the top-most priority.

Counselling services in Universities and Colleges: Emerging focus areas and priorities

As per the feedback received from the participants, key concerns highlighted by the panellists and opportunities sensed by the subject matter experts during the consultation, following key areas of interventions emerged as priorities for rolling out the counselling services for youth:

Career guidance and counselling: It emerged as the need of the hour during the consultation. Especially keeping in view that the counselling services would be provided by the institutions of higher education, it is but natural for students to approach counsellors for help in making career related choices. Experts emphasized that youth from underprivileged and marginalized backgrounds sometimes find it difficult to make informed choices due to lack of exposure and information about available options. It was emphasized during the consultation that the counsellors may play a key role helping students identify their true potentialities and guide them towards a better person-subject-job fitment which is likely to strengthen the human resources of the nation.

Understanding and managing relationships: Youngsters these days are undoubtedly enmeshed in complicated relationships, be it with their family, friends, or romantic partners. Due to the changing values, culture and belief systems; the younger generation is experiencing constant conflict with the older generation and their communication is breaking down. As a result, family relationships are getting strained. Friendship patterns are also changing drastically. Youngsters are entering romantic relationships at an early age and thus, they are sometimes not able to handle the emergent stress. Thus, experts feel that relationship counselling is an important area of intervention.

Stress Management & Time Management: Due to excessive competition and pressure to excel, more and more youngsters are finding themselves burdened and depressed. Many find this stress overwhelming and start crumbling under the



excessive work-load. This is especially true for the students who have enrolled in demanding professional courses in the most reputed universities of the country. It is increasingly being felt that the students are likely to fare much better if they are able to manage their stress and time better. Psychologists and counsellors could provide valuable support to students in this regard.

Anger management: With the increasing instances of violent outbursts, road rage, bullying, hate-crimes and violence among youth making to the headlines, it is more than clear that the anger management and violence prevention is emerging as an important area of intervention. It is important for counsellors to introduce programs that make youth more composed, reflective and tolerant towards the 'other' so that they are better positioned to handle their negative emotions and frustrations.

Drug abuse and alcoholism: Dependence on drugs and alcohol is jeopardizing the careers and futures of many students in institutes of higher education. The problem of substance abuse is also at the heart of many other social evils and crimes and thus, requires immediate attention from all stakeholders including mental health professionals. These professionals are especially equipped to identify the cases and provide attention and care so that the addicts could be rehabilitated and reintegrated into the system. Counsellors can also organize a range of awareness building programs as preventive measures.

Issues related to gender, sexuality and violence: The growing rate of violent crimes against women is also a cause for concern. The number of rapes, gang rapes, acid attacks, and hate crimes are growing at an astounding rate especially among youngsters. It is because of the patriarchal mind-set and the cultural images that get propagated through media that the subjugation and objectification of women and their bodies seem so acceptable to both young men and women. In order to create a more peaceful, unbiased and safe institutions for youth, the patriarchal mind-set of both young men and women needs to be challenged. As expressed by the experts during the consultation, there is a need to create programs to sensitize youth with issues related to gender, identity, patriarchy and sexuality so that they become more sensitive and open-

minded. Counsellors could be particularly trained to deal with sensitive issues such as coping with sexual abuse and trauma.

Managing Diversity and Inclusion: Often students move from remote areas and rural areas to metropolitan cities to pursue higher education. This change not only tantamount to a shift in geography or a movement away from home, rather, this shift is more of a cultural transition. Sometimes, youngsters do not feel equipped to manage this transition in a healthy manner. They find themselves as misfits in terms of language, clothing, inter-personal skills etc. There may also be a clash of culture, norms and values. They may also face prejudices, labelling and discrimination at the hands of the students who represent the dominant culture. As a result, students from diverse backgrounds may feel marginalized, targeted and isolated. In this context, it is the responsibility of the institutions to create an inclusive learning environment where diversity is embraced. This can be achieved by counsellors by organizing sensitization and diversity management programs. The experts also advocated for the rights of students with special needs and highlighted that the counselling services in higher education should look into their concerns on priority.

Life skills and soft skills training: Apart from training the students on the technical aspects, it is becoming increasingly essential to equip them with life skills and soft skills so that they are able to cope with the challenges of day to day living and work in a healthy manner. All the experts underscored the need for organizing regular skill based programs for students. These programs should aim at developing the communication skills, leadership skills, team-building skills, personality development, negotiation and conflict management etc. Psychologists, counsellors and life skill trainers are uniquely positioned to cater to these requirements in the institutions of higher education.

Counselling services in Universities and Colleges: Key Recommendations

Taking inputs from the leading practices in the field, learning from the field experience of the experts and drawing insights from the future vision



of the experts, following recommendations have been culled out from the proceedings and discussions of the national consultation:

Increasing outreach of mental health services: It was strongly felt by the experts that each and every institute of higher education should have a counselling centre to cater to the needs of students. Universities that operate out of remote campuses should also ensure that the counselling support is available there. Universities operating through distance learning mode may also provide online counselling support to students in addition to setting up nodal counselling centres. Given the lack of infrastructure, resources and institutional support, this large scale development is only possible through policy intervention and thus, all the participants in the national consultation advocated for mental health being included as one of the top priorities in new education policy. The participants also strongly advocated that the government should make it mandatory for all the institutions of higher education to set up formal counselling centres on the line of ruling that makes it mandatory for each school to appoint counsellors for students.

Increasing the number of institutions and programs for training mental health professionals: As expressed by all the experts during consultation, there is a paucity of trained counsellors, clinical psychologists and life-skill trainers all over the country. It is imperative that the ministry of Human Resource Development should work towards establishing more institutes offering a range of courses related to mental health so that the demand supply gap with respect to mental health professionals could be bridged without any further delay. There should also be provisions of regular in-service training and skill upgradation programs for already practicing professionals. The counsellors should be trained to be sensitive to the socio-political context of the youth so that they are able to address the concerns emerging out of different socio-political realities that greatly influence youth. Use of technology in counselling may also be promoted to increase the outreach of the professionals especially for youth in the rural areas where there may not be physical presence of

trained counsellors.

Building awareness and creating mental health literacy programs: Since lack of awareness and stigma are the biggest roadblocks in people seeking help for mental health problems, these issues should be tackled on priority. The institutions of higher education in collaboration with relevant departments should work towards developing and implementing mental health awareness programs. This could be achieved through organizing mental health awareness week/day, developing and screening documentary films and videos on mental health issues, designing and distributing pamphlets on common psychological disorders and their symptoms, organizing interactive sessions with experts from the field, showcasing street plays and short skits etc. Though some universities and institutions are already engaged in such activities, they need to be systematized, regularized and should be brought in the ambit of the counselling centres

In addition, modules on mental health literacy and common psychological disorders should be built into the curriculum at the level of the university and colleges so that the superstitions and myths surrounding these problems could be busted. This step is also likely to empower both the students and teachers to identify the issues and seek support at the right time. With help of these modules and programs, the institutions should work towards fostering a culture where mental health problems could be discussed openly without any fear of judgement or stigmatization.

Advocating for mental health issues: The mental health professionals and experts from schools, colleges and hospitals should get together with students and teachers from institutes of higher education to create advocacy groups fighting for policy level changes in the area of mental health. These groups would be uniquely positioned to bring about the much needed change due to their collaboration. One such example of advocacy effort that is being carried out by different colleges of Delhi University in collaboration with Expressions India was presented during the national consultation. The project is named 'Initiative for Mental Health and Awareness in



India (IMHAI)' and is being carried forward by youth crusaders from the field of psychology. The experts expressed a need for many more such initiatives to mobilize the change. Media and social media could be used to make these advocacy initiatives more potent.

Teacher training on basic counselling skills: It was highlighted by numerous panellists during the discussion that most of the students feel comfortable seeking support and guidance from teachers for their problems rather than approaching the counsellors. Often teachers are also the first ones to sense the irregularities in the behaviour of students at the time of the crisis. Keeping in view the extensive interaction students have with teachers on a regular basis, experts suggested that the teachers should be trained on basic counselling skills so that they are able to address the concerns of the students with greater efficacy. Therefore, well-trained teachers are in a unique position to enhance the outreach of mental health services in universities and colleges. It was also felt during the consultation that teacher training on counselling skills also makes a lot of sense for the time being given the unavailability of trained counsellors particularly in remote areas. The training on mental health fundamentals and basic counselling skills could be easily imparted by introducing dedicated modules in orientation and refresher courses that are mandatory for all teachers to attend. In this regard, it is important to mention that the experts cautioned that teachers should not be considered as substitute for trained counsellors as they may not be able to bring mental health expertise which is needed in an institution.

Mentorship programs by teachers: In order to further extend out-reach of the counselling services, trained teachers could be vested with the responsibility to act as mentors for a small group of students. As mentors, the teachers should take keen interest in holistic growth of the students and provide them support in both professional and personal problems. The mentorship programs, if implemented properly, could be a great support system for students staying away from home in cities where there is minimal support. The mentorship programs are being implemented in

universities all over the world and are proving to be very effective.

Training students as mental health ambassadors: Due to fear of being labelled, often students do not seek out professional support for their problems either from counsellors or teachers; they feel much more comfortable talking about their concerns with their peer group. Hence, the students in the institution itself, when trained adequately, can provide emotional and psychological support to their peers. Also, considering the huge number of students enrolled in the institutions of higher education, despite best of the efforts, it may not be possible for counsellors to be there for each and every student, while students could be there for their peers in personal capacity. Thus, during the consultation, the experts suggested that the counsellors should work towards identifying and training high potential students from the institution itself to act in capacity of mental health ambassadors. The role of the ambassadors would be to create awareness about mental health issues through formal and informal channels, flag high priority cases and refer them to college counsellors/teachers for formal intervention and provide basic counselling support to their peer group. These students could also be engaged to roll-out buddy schemes in college to facilitate integration of new students, foreign students, marginalized students or students with special needs. The counsellor can also work towards creating peer-support groups for various issues such as alcoholism, drug-abuse, gender based violence etc. to create spaces where students can learn from experience of each other. These schemes could particularly prove effective in addressing problems of students residing in hostels. By engaging students as experts, the institution can create ownership among students and motivate them to take mental health issues more seriously.

Engaging parents and family members in counselling initiatives: Often the identity of youth and their parents is enmeshed in Indian context. While the youth benefit from familial support at one level, they also suffer due to familial pressure and emotional abuse at other level. Given this



context, many experts emphasized during the consultation that adopting an individualistic approach to counselling in a collectivist culture like ours may not prove effective. They added that counselling in India is likely to be much more useful when carried out using systems approach with special focus on family as a unit. Thus, it is advisable that orientation programs be conducted not only for the students but their parents as well so that they understand the institutional culture and course requirements and provide adequate support to their wards. Workshop addressing inter-generational issues and communication problems could also be organized by the counsellors for parents from time to time. Counsellors can organize special sessions for family members to broaden their mind-set and create awareness with respect to mental health issues. Counsellors can also create collaborative therapeutic alliance with parents to address the high risk cases to prevent substance abuse, high risk behaviour, aggression and suicides.

Adopting a preventive approach to mental health and well-being: Experts felt that once the counselling centres are in place in institutes of higher education, the centres should be driven by a vision of promoting health and well-being rather than just 'disease' management. Thus, workshops and training programs focussed on developing life skills and fostering positive psychological capital should be organized regularly to promote well-being. Sessions on yoga, meditation and breathing techniques may also be organized periodically to promote both physical and psychological health.

Conclusion

The 'National Consultation on Counselling Services in Higher Education in India' proved to be an effective exercise. During the consultation, a lot of ideas were discussed, concrete suggestions were made, concerns were shared and leading practices

were highlighted with regard to providing counselling services in institutions of higher education in India. These discussions led to formulation of a set of recommendations discussed in this concept note, which would be shared with Government of India and UGC for further action. Fortunately, this advocacy initiative does not conclude here. As the next step, an international summit on establishing effective linkages between school and college counselling services in India is being planned by 'Expressions India' in the month of November this year.

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