

A review of KDU Support Centre

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Abstract: The aim of this study is to find the nature of problems and the demographic characteristics of the service seekers of KDU support centre which was established 2019. It will also look at the required future directions of KDU support centre. Mental health issues among the university students are becoming an alarming problem worldwide. Recent reports reveal that the situation is the same in the Sri Lankan student community. Foreign and local studies indicate that there are multiple contributing factors to these issues including academic, relationship, logistic (food and accommodation, adjustment etc). Kotelawala Defence University has its unique culture compared to any other university in the country being the only university which produce military professionals to the nation, enlisting student not only based on their Z score and conducting psychological assessment before students are selected. After reporting few suicidal incidences among the students and various behavioural issues among the KDU the department of psychiatry and administration decided to establish a support center in August 2019 with the aim of helping the KDU students and the staff with psychological counselling and psycho therapy. This paper summarises details of only the psychological issues reported to the KDU support center by 35 KDU students 10 staff members and their demographic and other related information without divulging their identity. Findings indicated that the most common psychological issue among students was depression. It was observed that most of the service seekers had several comorbidities. Further, relationship

issues, adjustment issues and anxiety were prominent in this sample. It was observed that stigma towards mental illness is still playing a considerable role for not seeking help for mental health issues. It is recommended to take necessary actions to minimize stigma within the university community. KDU helpline which was recently started will be main referral pathway for KDU Support centre in future.

Keywords— *KDU support center, psychological issues in University students, prevalence*

Introduction

Education is a “public good” and it provides benefits to the society as well as the individuals (Saxton, 2000). Education in current world has become more competitive, complicated than ever before. Hence, the mental health of university education is challenged by this competitive nature of education and other psycho-social issues faced by the student community as a cross section of the eroded society. Emerging researches indicate that there are diverse factors contributing to increase the prevalence of mental health issues among university communities around the globe. Researches also reveal that some of these factors play a precipitating factors role for those who are already vulnerable to mental health issues while other factors become perpetuating factors to maintain mental health issues in student. According to stress diathesis model, when individual perceive a high level of stress or pressure to perform which is beyond their

comfort zone, that individual starts breaking down.

Prevalence of Mental Health Issues Among University Students

A study conducted by Peltzer & Pengpid (2015) on Depressive symptoms and social-demographic, stress and health risk behaviour among university students in 26 low, middle and high income countries including 2020 university student revealed a prevalence of 24.0% moderate and 12.8% severe depressive symptoms. They further found that demographic and social variables (being female gender, low organised religious activity, lack of social support, and lack of personal control), stressful or traumatic life events (sexual violence, physical child abuse) and health risk behaviour (tobacco use, insufficient brushing of teeth, irregular sleep duration, increased salt intake, infrequent meals a day, heavy internet use and having sustained an injury) were associated with severe depressive symptoms. College Report of Royal College Psychiatry (2011) revealed that 4% of university students in the UK seek counselling help at their respective universities. Some other studies in the UK have shown high rates of mental ill health when this is assessed by screening instruments such as the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ). MacCall et al (2001) found that 65% of female and 54% of male undergraduate students attending a student health service scored positive on the GHQ.

Ibrahim, Kelly, Adams & Glazebrook, (2013) conducted a systematic review using 24 international journal articles. They concluded that university students experience rates of depression that are substantially higher than those found in the general population. Foreign students are more vulnerable to develop psychological issues due to cultural, financial and other logistic issues (Sandu, 1995). Some local studies suggest that there are multiple contributing factors to these issues in Sri Lankan university students including academic, relationship, substance use, adjustment issues and logistic (Rasanjali, 2013; Sriyalatha, 2016).

Despite showing high prevalence of mental health issues such as depression, university students prefer to seek assistance for their depression from informal sources, such as their friends, rather than seeking professional assistance (Amarasuriya, et. al., 2013). This is a common issue even in general public. To address this issue universities should set up mental health services to help the student who need such services. The stigma towards mental health which can affect negatively on help seeking behaviour of the student (Amarasuriya, et.al 2013) Hence, such services should be able to face this challenge.

Sir John Kotelawala Defence University is a unique government higher education centre in Sri Lanka. It is the only university which provides professionals to the military service in the Nation both undergraduate and Post Graduate levels. It also cater to their military organizations in Asian and South Asian region. With recent reforms KDU enrolls private candidates as day scholars to meet the high demand for quality higher education in the government sector. Currently there are nearly 4000 student reading for their undergraduate level degrees in seven different faculties at KDU. Eventhough military cadets have different routine for their training purpose both day scholars and cadets follow same academic courses. Cadet's comparison of daily routine and other disciplinary limitations with the day scholars' routine is inevitable. This may lead to extra stress in cadet officers.

Role of University Setting In Student Mental Health

Psycho-social environment in higher education institutions is unique and play a significant role in students' mental health. This is most probably only time in a person's life in which education, leisure, accommodation, social life, medical care, counselling and social support are all provided in a single environment. This facilitates opportunities to develop and evaluate new interventions for the prevention and treatment of mental disorders that may be

difficult to achieve elsewhere. The university is seen not only as a place of education but also as a resource for promoting health and well-being in students, staff and the wider community. Hence, most of the higher education institutions both government and private sector now eager to set up their own psychological counselling centres in addition to career counselling service usually done with the support and guidance of the psychiatric and or psychology department of the university. This has become a vital part of student wellbeing.

Kdu Support Centre

Inresponse to few completed suicidal incidents and few attempts reported among the KDU students and also increased number of students reported to UHKDU Psychiatric clinic, KDU medical faculty established a support centre in August 2019 which was free for both military and civil students and staff. A confidential room at KDU Medical Centre was allocated for this and a clinical psychologist occupied this room on every Tuesday and Friday. Awareness on this service was created among students and staff via KDU website, powerpoint slide played on every class room and notices put on departmental notice boards. This awareness welcomed all the students both cadets and day scholars and military and civil staff at any level. Records were kept confidentially under the clinical psychologist. If the clinical psychologist decides that the client needs psychiatric intervention they were referred to the psychiatric clinic at the UHKDU. This report summarises the number of students reported to KDU support centre, their demographic details and nature of the problems. This will be an initial baseline data for future research to understand the mental health issues among KDU student.

Outcomes

There were 35 KDU students including both cadets and day scholars who sought help from this center from August 2019 to March 2020.

Demographic data revealed that all of them were between the age of 20-25 years.

Approximately 60% of them were representing urban and sub urban areas and had attended to popular schools. At least 80% were fluent in English and had done their school education also in English. Majority (78%) of them were children of government workers (Military services, teachers, other government workers. Others were from business and private sector families. Hence all the students represent lower and upper middle class.

When look at their psychological issues presented depression was the commonest issue among this unique group of people. There were 11 (36.6%) who presented with depressive symptoms some of them had other issues such as relationship issues and academic. Nine students (30%) sought help for relationship issues and 3 of them had other commodities such as depression and anxiety. Seven students sought advices for their academic issues which 5 of them had adjustment problems. Adjustment was a common issue for cadets due to the restricted routine and physical training. There were two students sought help for anxiety, phobia and stress related problems. However, it was observed that some of the service seekers with depression and adjustment issues also presented with personality traits such as Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder traits, dependency and borderline personality traits.

Implication of The KDU Support Centre And Current Data

According to the data obtained so far depression is the commonest psychological issue among the university community and this finding confirms the findings in the other countries too (Peltzer & Pengpid, 2015). Significance of differences of psychological issues among different demographic aspects were not calculated due to the limited data at hand at this level. This would be possible in future with the increase of the service seekers. Some of the demographic aspects such as age education background were homogenous in this group.

KDU support centre was a timely intervention by KDU to support students and staff to ensure their psychological wellbeing. However, it was observed that still there is a hesitant to seek help among the KDU community. Cadets perceive their schedule extremely tight and whenever they make a move they need to inform it to training staff. This may impact on the help seeking behaviour of the students. Another factor contributing to prevent help seeking behaviour is the stigma toward mental health. Despite of the mechanisms employed to ensure the confidentiality, still students and staff are reluctant to see a mental health professional due to fear of stigmatisation. University needs to take extra steps to remove these barriers.

The Way Forward

KDU just established 7 24 helpline since 1st of July with five qualified volunteers. This will enable student and staff to discuss their issues over the phone and then get an appointment at KDU centre or psychiatric clinic at UHKDU. Helpline will help to reduce the stigma issue as students don't have to walk in to Support centre. After developing the rapport with the counsellor they can make an appointment for one to one session. Not only the clinical psychologists any volunteer counsellor can use the support centre as a meeting point with the students. As a part of this project it is expected to train a pool of academic counsellors so that students can discuss their academic or other issues with them before problems become complicated. As academic counsellors have frequent contacts with the students they also can observe changes in behaviour of the student such as deterioration of performance, interaction with friends etc. Academic counsellors will be trained in several screening methods so that they can identify who needs further psychological and or psychiatric help. They would refer those students either to the KDU support centre or to the psychiatric clinic directly. However, referral pathway is not rigid

allowing students to contact the psychologist should they feel so.

KDU support centre also expect to do a general mental health survey with all the students to get an idea about the prevalence of issues, their social-economic and other demographic information related to mental health issues. It is also possible to correlate these finding with the scores of the psychological assessment which conducted at the enlistment stage. These data can be used as baseline data for longitudinal study on KDU. Findings of this study also will be able to inform the higher decision making authorities to make informed decision about student wellbeing and do periodic changes to curriculum.

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