

The Role of Counseling Service Center and Its Implementation in Madda Walabu University: Qualitative Research

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Abstract

Background: University students often face challenges to adjust to a new environment. The challenges include: - adjustment to university, peer groups, and new academic atmosphere. These challenges possibly lead students to personal crisis, emotional disturbance, stress, and academic failure. Counseling service can help mitigate adjustment problem facing university students. The main objective of this study is to identify the roles of counseling service center and its implementation in Madda Walabu University (MWU).

Methods: Explorative qualitative research was conducted on Madda Walabu University (MWU) students' counselor and concerned management bodies in March 2016. Accordingly, four management bodies; the President, the Academic Vice President, the Student Dean and Student Counselor were purposefully selected for in-depth interview. Besides, international, national and organizational documents were analyzed on thematic basis.

Results: Result of study showed that the counseling center of MWU lacked intra-organization network, administrative independence and autonomy. Besides, the service providers were not counselors by profession; the center did not have network with relevant domestic and international organizations, and there was poor client data base management. In addition,

MWU counseling center fell short to meet national and international standards.

Conclusion: There is increased need for counseling service in university. Standardization of counseling service center, allocation of sufficient materials and human resources, collaboration with relevant bodies is needed to improve the role and practice of the center. Lastly, the importance of crisis interventions, professional development, and academic skills training are recommended to be included under the functions of the center.

Keywords: Role of counselling, Counselling service center, University students

1. Introduction

Guidance and counseling can be defined in different ways by different scholars. However, guidance and counseling can be generally defined as the process of assisting students to know themselves, discover their interests, and maximize their capacities in realizing their goals (Nweze & Okolie, 2014; Ojo, 2006). Guidance and counseling programs are effective in assisting students of higher education institutions in various ways (Abdulai & Inkoom, 2016; Zeleke, 2000). It is believed that guidance and counseling interventions improve students' academic achievement, help to cope with more demanding courses, help to develop career plans, and make educational settings more conducive for learners (Nweze & Okolie, 2014; Yilfashewa, 2011, Mbabazi & Bagaya, 2013).

According to Adane (2015) and Abdi (1998) counseling services in Ethiopia are mainly confined to educational settings, especially high schools. In contrast, these counseling services are underutilized in non-academic settings such as clinics, hospitals, industries, organizations, and private agencies (Zeleke, 2000 & Abdi, 1998). Scholars in the areas of counseling have identified that the counseling profession is not at its expected level; neither the name nor the concept and relevance of counseling services are well known in Ethiopia (Abdi, 1998; Alem, Desta & Araya, 1995).

Higher Education Relevance Quality Assurance Agency (HERQA, 2008; 2009) indicated that most universities in Ethiopia recognized guidance and counseling as an important service of a student support structure and included it in their legislations. However, their efforts to develop counseling service were not effective. In some universities, guidance and counseling offices were totally non-functional, and in most universities, counseling services were merged with other offices such as student services (HERQA, 2008, 2009).

Therefore, the relevance of conducting a study on this issue will offer an important contribution for the improvement of counseling service centers in Ethiopian higher institutions. Any higher education institution that fails to address psychosocial and academic problems of students through effective counseling services will severely hurt the overall quality of education. This, in turn, affects the entire national development.

1.1 Objectives

The main aim of this study is to investigate the role of counseling service center and its implementation in Madda Walabu University.

1.2 Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of the study are to:

- Explore the role of student counselors in MWU
- Assess MWU administrators' awareness towards the role and function of counseling services
- Evaluate counseling services of MWU in relation to organizational, national, and international university counseling standard

2. Methods

2.1 Study Setting

The participants of the study were selected from Madda Walabu University in March, 2016. Madda Walabu University is one of the public universities in Ethiopia. It was established in 2007. It is found in Bale Zone, Oromia Regional State, located at a distance of 430 km away from Addis Ababa to Southeast of Ethiopia. The university has two campuses: the main campus in Robe Town and the Medicine and Health Sciences College campus in Goba Town.

2.2 Research Design

According to Creswell (2003), qualitative exploratory design can be used in order to collect data from concerned officials, key informants, and other relevant people in organizations. In this study the concerned management bodies (president, vice president, and two student counselors) were chosen as data sources. Accordingly, the study used exploratory design in order to examine the roles and implementation of counseling center of MWU.

2.3 Participants of the Study

The participants of the study were purposefully selected as key informants to assess the roles and implementation of counseling services of MWU. All the selected management bodies were directly related to the counseling services in terms of access to reports on student services and proximity to student problems. In addition, the President and the Vice President play a direct role in resource allocation for the office. Therefore, the key informants were the University's President (PhD), Academic Vice-President (MA), and two student counselors (BA holders). In terms of gender, all the four participants were males.

2.4 Instruments of Data Collection

Documents checklist and semi-structured interviews were the main instruments of data collection.

Semi-structured interviews: The interview items were 152. The items were prepared to investigate the role and implementation of counseling services, functional inputs, counseling work environment, intra/inter-organizational network and communication, and other relevant issues. The interview participants were key informants drawn from MWU administration and counseling center. English language was used for data collect from the study participants.

Documents: In addition to interviews, MWU legislation, MWU strategic plan, MWU BPR document, MOE proclamation, and International Association of Counseling Services (IACS) documents were reviewed in order to check the implementation of MWU counseling services against these organizational, national and international documents. IACS (2011) has offered standardized guidelines for college counseling centers. However, there is no single compiled document prepared to dictate the nature and standards of Ethiopian university counseling standards. Therefore, this study reviewed various organizational and national documents on counseling services to be compared to the standards of IACS (2011). The reviewed national and organizational documents included:

- MWU BPR document (2010): a document prepared by the university as one of the change tools to bring about quality of education. The document also explains student services; including guidance and counseling.
- MWU senate legislation (2007): a document that includes organizational structures, roles and responsibilities, and job descriptions of the concerned bodies in the university.
- MWU strategic plan (2011): a document that contains the 5-year strategic plans of the university.
- Higher Education Proclamation (2009): a proclamation prepared by the Ethiopian Government on higher education stipulates that counsellors be assigned to higher education institutions to enhance students' academic success.

2.5 Method of Data Analysis

Thematic qualitative data analysis was used. Creswell (2009):, states that semi-structured interviews can be used when researchers record and transcribe responses as per written interview guidelines. Accordingly, the study used written interview guidelines, and the responses from the interview were recorded in hand written notes. Then, the findings were thematically presented to show the roles and functions of counseling center and assess the existing network and communication patterns within and outside the university.

In addition, document review was used. MWU documents (such as legislation, strategy, and policy documents), MOE proclamations, and international university counseling center standards were analyzed in relation to MWU counseling service center. Document review was used as a supplementary tool to obtain the data to support the data collected through qualitative survey. In the present study, key legal documents, Business Processing Re-Engineering (BPR) document, university legislation and strategic plan Ethiopian Higher Education Proclamation (No 650/2009) and (IACS) documents were reviewed to triangulate the data collected via

semi-structured interview. These international, national and organizational policy documents were used as a reference point to see the overall situations of guidance-counseling service center in focus and its implementation in MWU.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from Ambo University Ethical Review Committee. Supportive letter was obtained and consent of study subjects were obtained prior to data collection from study participants. The aim of the study, benefits and risks as well as maintenance of confidentiality in reporting the findings and in publications were explained to the participants before obtaining consent. No identification such as names and no linking information to the participant were kept on the questionnaire. All the data collected were accumulated, organized, and stored in a locked cabinet guaranteeing confidentiality. No one other than the researcher had access to any of the information.

3. Findings

This study tried to assess the roles of student counselors, university administrators' awareness about counseling services, and evaluated MWU counseling services in relation to university counseling service standards. Hence, the main findings of the study were presented as follows.

3.1 Roles and Functions of Counseling Service Center

In the semi-structured interview, eight Madda Walabu University administrative personnel stated that counseling services should be designed in a way that addresses students' experiences such as personal adjustment, vocational guidance, and developmental and/or psychological problems requiring professional attention. This indicates that most of the university administrators were well-informed about the roles and responsibilities of university counselors. Moreover, the interviewees believed that counseling services support and enhance healthy growth and development of students through consultation and outreach.

With respect to program functions, all the interviewees reported that individual guidance and counseling should be included in program functions of the counseling center of MWU. Thus, the respondents believed that group guidance and counseling, drug and alcohol program and HIV/AIDS programs and services should be included under the services of the center. The respondents also justified that consultation interventions, training programs, academic consultations, and placements services are crucial. Lastly, they recommended outreach interventions, referral resources, professional development, tutorial programs and academic skills training for the normal functioning of counseling center of MWU. Two of the interviewees reported that crisis interventions and emergency services, research and program evaluation should be incorporated under the services of MWU counseling center.

3.2 Counseling Service Center Network and Communications

In addition to providing guidance and counseling services for university students, counseling centers should independently establish intra- and inter-organizational networks.

Intra-organizational network refers to the collaboration of the counseling service center with relevant sister units within the university such as schools of law, psychology, public health, and sociology departments. Concerning intra-organizational network, the university management bodies reported that the counseling center of MWU lacked intra-organization network, administrative independence and autonomy to establish these networks. The respondents also pointed out that MWU should give administrative independence and autonomy to the counseling center in order to establish intra-organizational network to enrich its services.

Similarly, counseling centers should have inter-organizational networks or partnership with governmental and/or non-governmental organizations outside of the university. The university management bodies were asked if the university had autonomy to establish links with other organizations outside the university. Accordingly, they responded that the counseling center was autonomous to create links with various partners outside the university. However, practically, the analysis of the data from the interview showed that the counseling center of MWU lacked inter-organizational network/partnership with international and domestic organizations outside of the university. In addition, there was no document of MWU that granted administrative authority of the counseling center to establish inter-organizational networks. As a result, the respondents believed that the counseling center should be given direct access to an office mandated by MWU to endorse inter-organizational network to facilitate the establishment of inter-organizational network.

The counseling center of MWU is accountable for and reports to students' service directorate. The student counselor quarterly reports its basic activities to the student service directorate. This shows that less emphasis is given to the center. However, the respondents recommended that the counseling service center of MWU directly report to the office of the President or the Academic President. In addition, they recommended that the counseling center should have a referral system with Mada Walabu University Referral Hospital.

3.3 Administrative Features of Counseling Service Center

Mada Walabu University's BPR, five-year strategic plan, and senate legislation documents were reviewed. These documents were assumed to be pertinent to the implementation of counseling service center of the university. The documents deal with issues such as the establishment of student council committee, counseling services, student health policy; education, training and research; community service and program budgeting. In addition, the documents dictate general roles, duties and responsibilities of the counselor (BPR document, 2010, Strategic plan, 2011, Senate legislation, 2007).

Nevertheless, these documents did not clearly state the specific duties, roles, and responsibilities of the counselors. Similarly, the counselors revealed that the university did not give due attention to the counseling center. Budget was not allocated for trainings, and there was no periodic evaluation and follow-up.

1. Human Resource Inputs Required to Deliver Counselling and Guidance Service Center

Counseling services require independent reception room, separate counseling office(s), well-trained counselors, and various forms of guidelines and policies. Accordingly, the university employed two psychologists and provided them a separate counseling room. However, there was no reception room, and the student counselors were not well-trained in professional counseling. Furthermore, the respondents suggested that the university did not give them a mandate to hire qualified professionals, and the counseling rooms were not conducive to deliver counseling services.

According to the BPR document (2010) and the strategic plan (2011) of MWU, in order to deliver the comprehensive guidance and counseling services, different inputs including human power (guidance–counselor, social worker, statistician, manager, secretary, special needs psychologist), material inputs (office furniture electronics materials, psychological tests and stationeries), technical inputs (professional advancement, training, attending different meetings, using up dated information, and team work) and financial inputs (plan and budget allocation for provision of counseling service) are all required to deliver effective counseling services. In contrast to these documents, MWU counseling center had no well-trained personnel, well-furnished offices, and financial resources.

2. Functional Inputs that Exist at International, National and Organizational Levels of Counselling Service Center

In addition to semi-structured interview, document analysis was conducted in order to evaluate counseling services of MWU against national and international documents. According to (IACS, 2010); in giving counseling services, counseling centers should meet international standard in terms of administrative neutrality. With regard to national level document review, *Higher Education Proclamation 650/2009* of the *Federal Negarit Gazeta* suggests that every institution assist students in the course of their study by providing them with specialized academic advice and counseling. Furthermore, the proclamation states that institutions shall explore and establish as necessary a system of pre-admission counseling of students on study choice (FDRE, 2009). In addition, academic units shall take remedial actions where academic advice and counseling are found to be compelling for special academic support and follow up.

When we evaluate MWU counseling center based on these standards, there was no administrative neutrality in proposing and executing different action plans obviously because of budget related issues. In addition, the center has no involvement in helping students to choose department that fit their interest and potential. The national technical and vocational educational and training (MOE, 2008) stresses that attention be paid to vocational guidance and counseling to enable future trainees, mainly the youth, to choose the right career and make full use of the initial and life-long opportunities.

Finally, academic staff shall have the responsibility to teach including assisting students in need of special support, and render academic guidance or counseling and community services and participate in counseling, and management of student complaints, grievances, and also counsel, assist and support students in acquainting themselves with the mission and guiding values of the institution as well as with the objectives of higher education (MOE, 2008, MWU, 2007).

3. Work Environments of Counselling Service Center

The respondents were asked if MWU counseling service was conducive in terms of international standards. Almost all of the interviewees responded that the existing MWU counseling center fell short of meeting the existing international standards. They responded that MWU counseling center was unable to meet 1 to 100- 1500 student-counselor ratios primarily because of the staff size and the workload.

The interview analysis also revealed that physical facilities such as central location and accessibility of the service, physical independence of the counseling service center, access of the staff, and in terms of technology that supports and maintains different activities were insufficient. Moreover, keeping clients' records, group sessions and staff meetings, adequacy of training components such as audio-visual records, storage spaces and ensuring confidentiality and malpractice insurance coverage were very limited compared to the international standard.

The respondents were asked to say whether MWU counseling center met the existing international standards and maintained standards for its personnel or not. All eight interviewees agreed that the existing counseling center of MWU was not up to the existing international standards. Similarly, the respondents indicated that the counseling center that meets international standards used in delivery of counseling center of MWU was highly neglected.

4. Discussion

University counselors are often engaged in counseling students to be successful in their academics and future career by tackling barriers that affect learning (Atik & Yalcin, 2010; Sahaya & Chamundeswari, 2013). The study participants also reiterated that the roles of counseling centers should include delivering individual and group counseling, referral service, creating intra-and inter- organizational network through communication, consultation, and academic counseling. In contrast, the respondents believed that MWU counseling center did not play these crucial roles effectively. The role of guidance and counseling is highly significant in dealing with academic, social and emotional problems facing learners in higher institutions (Day, 2004). Madda Walabu University students were suffering from psychological, social, and academic related difficulties due to absence of appropriate counseling services (Getachew & Tekle, 2018). However, this study found that MWU counseling service was not effectively assisting students to cope with these problems.

An effective university counseling center should have intra-organizational network, a link with other similar units or departments in the university; and inter-organizational network or link with other governmental and non-governmental organizations (Source, year). In contrast, the interviewees stated that MWU counseling center had no link with internal and external partners working on issues related to education, substance, abuse, career development, and other related factors.

With regard to administrative features of counseling, university higher officials should closely work with counseling centers. For a better result, counselors and other school personnel (teachers, school health personnel, and administrative staff) should have strong collaboration (Zelege, 2000; Onyinyeowuamanam, 2005). In the spirit of developing a higher education system, the Higher Education Relevance Quality Assurance (HERQA, 2009) points out that an institutional audit of the various academic sectors, including guidance counseling, is highly helpful to higher education institutions. In contrast to this suggestion, the findings of this study showed that there was loose connection between MWU higher officials and the counseling center.

Similarly, Mogbo, Obumneke-Okke, and Anyachebelu (2011) suggests that the leadership should provide comfortable rooms for counseling, monitoring and evaluating the work of the counselor(s), provide computers and other office materials. In relation to this, even though MWU counseling center had computers and two counselors, there was no comfortable room, close supervision and follow up, monitoring and evaluation from the leadership. Moreover, in some cases, certain resources such as office equipment, internet services, updated written reference, and phone cell were unavailable both for students and for counselors. Moreover, MWU counseling center had no annual budget to run basic activities related to counseling, training, research, crisis intervention, and outreach services.

According to IACS (2010) document, university counseling services should be neutral and free from administrative influences. The document further indicated that counseling service directors should have a direct line of communication with the university president, but MWU counseling center had no this privilege. MWU counselors' vertical communication was only with student service affairs directorate. Hence, the structure of the university did not provide the necessary operational autonomy. During data collection, there were only two counselors for about 6000 students. However, IACS (2010) recommend that the professional staff-student ratio should be 1 to 1000 or 1 to 1500. Similarly, the Ethiopian Higher Education Proclamation (2009) recommends 1:100 professional staff-student ratios. Compared to the national and international standards, MWU counseling center did not meet the minimum staff-student ratio requirements.

IACS (2010) recommended that university counselors have at least an MA degree and above in counseling psychology. In contrast to this, the counselors of MWU had BA degree in unrelated fields of study, specifically, geography and history. This clearly indicates how MWU counseling service deviated from international standards of professional counseling services.

5. Conclusion

This study indicated that lack of information about the types of services offered the need to have more professional counselors in university campuses and the greater number of intervention models, and little attention was given by the management bodies to the guidance counseling center. In addition, the study participants reported that students were suffering from various psychological, social, financial, and educational problems. As a result, the need for

collaborative work with administrative personnel, teachers, students, families and other relevant bodies to provide roles of counseling and restructuring the counseling center is strongly suggested by interviewee and limited reviewed documents.

Although the participants are not aware about the international and national functional inputs, the analysis of this study strongly suggests that the existing functional inputs at organizational level must be taken into account in the process of implementing the counseling center of MWU. With regard to counseling service's roles and functions, almost all the study participants realize the role of counseling in handling the students' problems, preventing the overall academic difficulties, in supporting and enhancing healthy growth. Additionally, the participants reported that individual and group guidance counseling, drugs and alcohol prevention, HIV/AIDS, consultation interventions, training programs and other relevant activities, must be functional in counseling center of MWU.

The existing counseling center did not meet international standards in maintaining standards for the personnel such as hire/assign director/higher professional counselor and hire administrative staffs (in research and consultation, ICT, training and outreach, professional development, monitoring and evaluation). Additionally, factors such as size of staff, workload, and physical facilities (location and accessibility of service, physical independence and neutrality of the center, office furniture, and adequacy of area/training components) were also short of international standards. Thus, it resulted in inability to maintain the standards for the working environment.

In relation to the above explanation, the detailed analysis of the document reviewed revealed that the study proposes the possible strategies that could help to deliver guidance-counseling services and other inputs such as human power, material inputs, working space, technical inputs and financial inputs help to meet the existing international counseling service center standards/ethical standards. The analysis of network and communication indicates that counseling center of MWU had no intra-organizational network and administrative autonomy that enable it to establish and collaborate with relevant sister within the university (e.g. Academic Faculties).

There is no report of inter-organizational network with governmental and non-governmental organizations outside the university. This indicates that there is lack of monitoring and evaluation mechanism of counseling services by the University. University has to take steps to develop policy documents and guidelines as well as train staff on international standards for promoting the counseling service and quality of life of campus members.

6. Recommendation

The funding allocated to guidance and counseling programs must be reviewed. Additionally, steps need to be taken to improve the facilities available for educational counselors. Each educational counselor should be provided with a private office. The design and building of new schools should incorporate adequate facilities for guidance and counseling; a reception/waiting area and adequate facilities for storage and display.

Training is a key element in building a good educational counselor. All educational counselors, in addition to having a degree in psychology, should take a post-graduate Diploma course in school counseling. Such courses should include an element of practical experience. The certification procedure must be revised and clarified, with counsellor competencies established and an appropriate system of examination/evaluation developed. The training of educational counselors should include public relations awareness and communication skills. Opportunities should also be provided for educational counselors to develop and update their skills by means of refresher courses, in-service training, and participation in workshops. Educational counselors should be encouraged to join professional organizations to keep abreast of trends in guidance and counseling.

Educational counselors must recognize their own responsibility for the image of the guidance and counseling service, and take steps to ensure that other parties are kept informed of the services available. Greater attention must be paid to the provision of in-service training and the holding of seminars and conferences, both to keep educational counselors up-to-date and to ensure that others understand and support their role.

Abbreviation

BPR: Business Processing Re- engineering, G-C: Guidance-Counseling, HEIs: Higher Education Institutions, HERQA: Higher Education Relevance Quality Assurance, IACS: International Association of Counselling Services, MOE: Ministry of Education, MWU: MadaWalabu University, NGO: Non- Governmental Organization, WHO: WorldHealthOrganization

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