CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDENT COUNSELLING PRACTICE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PROFESSIONAL WORKERS

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ABSTRACT

Higher education policy emphasizes the social dimension of education, aimed at increasing the accessibility and affordability of education and raising graduation rates, particularly for disadvantaged students in higher education. Various measures support this goal, including guidance and counselling services. Student counselling services provide academic, career, and psychological counselling to support students who encounter various challenges and issues during their college studies, preparing them for a successful transition into the labour market. Over the past decade, Croatia has made significant efforts to establish support and counselling structures at higher education institutions. This paper aims to examine the characteristics of counselling practice from the perspective of counselling professionals and provide recommendations for its improvement. Data collection relied on semi-structured interviews, followed by thematic analysis. The research results indicate a notable impact of counselling services at higher education institutions. In fact, the demand for counselling has increased as the

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student population has become more diverse and aware of the opportunities and benefits of guidance and counselling. The paper also offers recommendations for improving the existing practice, such as enhancing the availability and coordination of student counselling services, increasing investment in infrastructure and human resources, and supporting the provision of quality and professional counselling services. Finally, the results reveal the principal challenges of formal student support services and point to possible avenues for improving the counselling practice in the future.

INTRODUCTION

Acknowledging the need to improve higher education, the European Union prompted the establishment of the *European Higher Education Area (EHEA)*, accompanied by a dedicated student support mechanism that promotes the social dimension of education. This initiative aimed to reflect the diversity of the general population in Europe within the student population, encompassing individuals of different ages, genders, nationalities, and socioeconomic statuses (London communiqué, 2007.). In addition to various student support measures such as financial aid, simplified administrative procedures, subsidies for housing, transportation, food, and healthcare, social support services, including guidance and counselling, have proven to be valuable resources for students (Bergen communiqué, 2003.; Bucharest communiqué, 2012.).

The college period, specifically, brings about numerous challenges that have an impact on both the quality of life and academic achievement (Kurtović, 2013.). These challenges require adjustment, and a failure to adapt risks compromising the mental and physical health of students, which leads to difficulties in meeting academic demands and even potential dropout (Živčić-Bećirević et al., 2007.). Therefore, it is crucial to comprehend the challenges faced by students and provide adequate social support within the entire academic community in order to contribute to student satisfaction and academic achievement (Azam, 2018.).

The challenges of studying, adjustment to studies, and social support

During the college period, psychological development involves the consolidation of one's identity and self-esteem (Berk, 2007.). At this stage, a drive for independence contests the need for family affection. Additionally, individuals experience heightened emotional sensitivity and heightened sensitivity to the opinions of others. This psychological transformation occurs alongside academic and personal

(psychosocial) challenges. Academic challenges include time management, completing study assignments, adopting new learning techniques, navigating a different social environment, developing relationships with professors, public speaking and presenting, different methods of assessing learning outcomes, meeting course requirements, doubts about the choice of study program, difficulty handling study assignments, and failing exams. Furthermore, there can be a sense of competitiveness among students (Živčić-Bećirević and Jakovčić, 2013.). These challenges significantly impact students who are embarking on their college studies (Živčić-Bećirević and Jakovčić, 2013.; Clinciu, 2013.). On the other hand, the challenges related to personal and psychosocial aspects include romantic and family relationships, student health, illness or death of family members, relocation, forming new social connections (within student groups or dormitories), leaving the family home, independent living or living with new flat mates, self-care responsibilities (food, clothing, cleaning), fear of failure, meeting the expectations of others (family, friends), fear of unemployment, and concerns about life after graduation (Živčić-Bećirević et al., 2007.; Jokić-Begić, 2012.; Živčić-Bećirević and Jakovčić, 2013.). Adjustment serves as a response to these challenges. In broad terms, adjustment refers to achieving coherence or balance between individual demands and needs and the environment (Ivanov, 2008.). It is an individual's response aimed at meeting the demands and needs of the environment and establishing a harmonious relationship in new circumstances or environments (Brghandan, 2013. in Turkpour and Mehdinezhad, 2016.). Specifically, adjustment to studies commonly involves academic, emotional, social, and institutional aspects (Baker and Siryk, 1984. in Živčić-Bećirević et al., 2007.). Academic adjustment entails adapting to the demands of courses, including different learning approaches, exams, time management, and meeting other academic requirements. Emotional adjustment encompasses the psychological processes that affect students' mental and physical health. Social adjustment relates to creating and maintaining social networks within and outside of college. Lastly, institutional adjustment reflects a commitment to studies and an established relationship with the chosen higher education institution (Živčić-Bećirević et al., 2007.; Vrhovski, Fratrić Kunac and Ražić, 2012.).

Difficulties with adjustment encompass various challenges, such as a »lack of motivation, ineffective learning techniques, financial pressure, or emotional dependence on parents« (Berk, 2007.: 436). These difficulties can result in lower academic achievement and an increased risk of dropout. When the discrepancy between personal needs and external circumstances becomes overwhelming, individuals often seek to leave the situation if possible. However, in cases where leaving or making personal changes through adjustment is not feasible, there is a risk of adverse effects on the personal system or its subsystems, accompanied by specific somatic effects. Prolonged or intense stress of this kind can easily lead to depression or anxiety, which can in turn affect cognitive and problem-solving abilities and reduce

self-efficacy in coping with the situation (Ivanov, 2008.). Dropout rates in higher education, both in Croatia and Europe, are notable, particularly during the first year (Mihaljević Kosor, 2010.). According to the Eurostudent VI survey (2016.-2018.), graduation rates in higher education in Croatia ranged from 50% to 60% (Rimac, Bovan and Ogresta, 2019.). Various research studies have highlighted the difficulties encountered by the student population in Croatia, including anxiety related to college studies, dissatisfaction with studies and lack of motivation, challenges in social relationships, feelings of tension and general frustration, personal dissatisfaction or dissatisfaction with one's appearance, a sense of inadequacy, romantic and sexual frustrations, as well as anxiety and depression (Bezinović et al., 1998.; Živčić-Bećirević and Jakovčić, 2013.; Jokić-Begić and Čuržik, 2015.; Lenz, Vinković and Degmečić, 2016.). While some of these difficulties may be temporary, others can have long-lasting effects that require careful consideration. Furthermore, mental disorders in youth can have implications for later outcomes in life, such as employment, family, and social relationships (Rutter, Kim-Cohen and Maughan, 2006 in Jokić-Begić, 2012.), which prevention often overlooked (Mamić and Nekić, 2018.). Therefore, the availability of social support plays a crucial role in facilitating the adjustment to college studies (Vrhovski, Fratrić Kunac and Ražić, 2012.).

Social support is defined as »a multidimensional construct encompassing physical and instrumental assistance, sharing resources and information, as well as emotional and psychological help« (Boyd, 2002. in Milić Babić, 2010.: 69). Social support plays a significant role in mitigating the negative effects of stressful events by influencing cognitive responses to stress, bolstering self-esteem, and enhancing perceived self-efficacy (Ivanov, 2008.). It facilitates adjustment to various life circumstances, including the challenges faced during college studies. Social support can be both non-formal and formal. Family members, friends, and other close individuals typically provide non-formal support, while specific groups or institutions, such as counselling services, offer formal support and support groups for individuals facing similar issues (Milić Babić, 2010.). Overall, non-formal support, particularly from family, is considered crucial for students. However, as students transition away from their families and gain independence, the importance of formal support becomes more prominent (Taub et al., 2005. in Milić Babić, 2019.). The establishment of student counselling services has become a widespread practice in higher education, providing psychological, career, and academic counselling to students at both the university unit and university levels. These counselling services aim to enhance students' self-reliance and capacities to navigate current and future challenges (Brlek, Berc and Milić Babić, 2014.). Academic counselling encompasses various aspects such as college orientation, particularly during the freshman year, through college advising, developing study plans, assisting with learning, writing papers, course selection, career guidance, monitoring student progress, time management, and additional training. Psychological counselling focuses on mental health counse-

lling, life skills development, decision-making, strategies for coping with stress, and addressing social anxiety, among other areas. Lastly, career counselling, typically towards the end of college studies, assists young individuals in career development through professional guidance, teaching practical business skills, and providing support with resume writing and conducting mock interviews with employers (Purnell et al., 2004.; University of Zagreb, 2014., 2015b).

Student counselling services in Croatia

All universities in Croatia, as well as most polytechnics and colleges, have established student counselling services. External evaluation of higher education institutions (HEIs) assesses the existence and the activities of counselling services (AZVO, 2017.). Periodically, Eurydice also gathers data on counselling services (Eurydice, 2018.). Additionally, national policies have actively promoted the development of counselling services in higher education. These policies include the Strategy for Education, Science and Technology from 2014 (Croatian Parliament, 2015.), the National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia 2019–2021 (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2019.), and the Strategy for Lifelong Professional Guidance (LPG) and Career Development 2016–2020 (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2015.).

In the past decade, several research initiatives and projects have analyzed the activities of counselling services, assessed student needs for counselling, and provided recommendations for improving counselling services and student centres. One noteworthy project is StuDiSupport (Advancing the quality of college studies for groups of disadvantaged students through student counselling services, 2013.-2015.), which conducted quantitative research analyzing counselling services at seven universities in Croatia (University of Zagreb, 2015.a). Additionally, the Agency for Science and Higher Education (AZVO) monitored the progress of career centres, resulting in analysis reports on career counselling services in 2016. and 2017. (AZVO, 2016.; Đorđević, 2017.).

RESEARCH AIM

Considering the existing research studies, qualitative research aimed to gain a deeper insight into the subject matter. The present research aimed to examine the characteristics of student counselling services and formulate recommendations for improving the counselling practice from the perspective of counselling professionals.

Two research questions supported the research aim:
1. What were the experiences of working at student counselling services from the employees' standpoint?
2. What recommendations did the employees have for enhancing the student counselling practice?

DATA COLLECTION AND RESEARCH METHODS

In support of the research aim, data collection and analysis relied on qualitative research methods. Qualitative research offers a detailed description and deeper insight and understanding of a phenomenon, while qualitative research techniques serve to examine the individual perceptions of participants in detail. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, with an average duration of 30 minutes. The research was conducted as part of a specialist graduation thesis at the Faculty of Law in Zagreb, and the ethical commission of the Faculty had given its consent to conduct the research beforehand. Research participants received written and oral invitations, and requests to conduct research were sent to the management boards of universities and colleges. The interviews were conducted with the consent of the university and faculty management boards, upon confirming interview arrangements with research participants. Prior to the interviews, participants were provided with information about the research study, they were guaranteed anonymity and data confidentiality and asked for consent to record the interviews. The interview proceedings followed standard ethical principles, including respecting human rights and dignity, as well as the right to privacy, confidentiality, and self-direction. Participants were informed of their right to skip questions and leave the interviews. They also signed informed consent forms. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and thematic analysis was conducted.

Participants

The research participants consisted of workers from student counselling services at major universities in Croatia who had relevant experience in counselling as part of their professional practice. The research included 13 participants, representing employees from eleven specialized student counselling services at five universities in Croatia (Table 1). Research activities concluded upon reaching theoretical saturation.

Table 1. Research participants

UNIVERSITY OF ZAGREB	Number of participants
Student Office at the University of Zagreb	2
Student Counselling Service at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	1
Counselling Service at the Faculty of Croatian Studies	1
Psychotherapy Practice at the Rehabilitation Centre of the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation at the University of Zagreb	2
Student Support and Career Development Centre (SPSRK), Faculty of Organisation and Informatics in Varaždin	1
Office for Students with Disabilities, Faculty of Organisation and Informatics in Varaždin	1
UNIVERSITY J.J. STROSSMAYER IN OSIJEK	
Psychological Counselling Service at the University J.J. Strossmayer in Osijek	1
UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA	
Psychological Counselling Service	1
Career Office	1
UNIVERSITY OF ZADAR	
Student Counselling Service	1
CROATIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY	
Student Counselling Service at the Psychological Counselling Centre	1

Research participants ranged in age from 28 to 62 years old, with an average age of 44. Eleven participants identified as women, while two identified as men. All participants had a higher education degree, with nine holding a PhD. Among the participants, nine were psychologists, while the others represented various professional backgrounds including social work, social pedagogy, informatics, and education rehabilitation. The participants had training in different psychotherapy techniques, such as cognitive-behavioural therapy and gestalt therapy. Additionally, one participant had training in psychodrama.

Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect the data, which was subsequently analyzed using thematic analysis. The interview topics were predetermined based on prior knowledge and research questions. Coding was performed after multiple readings of the interview transcripts, using thematic criteria and identifying key aspects of the content. The analysis followed the five stages of thematic analysis: reading the material, establishing the thematic framework, coding, organizing the coded units into concepts, and establishing connections and interpretations (Lacey and Luff, 2009.). The researcher herself carried out the coding process, as the research was part of her specialist graduation thesis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research results are presented in two thematic areas that correspond to the research questions and the thematic framework. The first thematic area, »**experiences from the counselling practice**«, offers a detailed examination of the counselling practice. It includes information on different counselling approaches and the assessment of the counselling practice by the counsellors (Table 2). The second thematic area, »**recommendations for improving the counselling practice**«, highlights the suggestions provided by the counsellors for enhancing the counselling practice (Table 3). The subsequent sections present the results and the discussion.

Table 2. Experiences from the counselling practice

CATEGORIES	CODES
Reasons for contacting counselling services	Psychological distress
	Academic difficulties
	Removing the stigma associated with seeking professional help
	Social transformation
Characteristics of students seeking counselling services	Student gender
	Students from other towns
	Students from other colleges
	Freshman students
	Senior students
	Students with disabilities

CATEGORIES	CODES
Role of counselling services	Guidance and student advising
	Identifying mental disorders and recommending psychiatric treatment
	Prevention
Motivation of counselling service professionals	Intrinsic motivation
Professional development of employees	Mandatory
	Career education
	Supervision
	Self-financed
Relationship between research and teaching activities and the counselling practice	Linking teaching and practice
	Difficulty balancing roles
Relationship between the academic community at higher education institutions and the counselling service	Familiarity with the counselling practice
	Referring students to counselling services
	Role of vice-dean and chair of teaching and learning
Cooperation of counselling services	Familiarity with the activities of other counselling services
	Networking of career counselling services

The **category reasons for contacting counselling services** examined the motivations behind students seeking counselling. According to the counsellors, there was a significant increase in **psychological distress** among students: »*Many students face different family and emotional issues, as well as quite severe mental disorders*« (i3); »*...nowadays, mental and other specific disorders are quite widespread among students across counselling services, including our counselling service; this was not the case, for example, ten years ago.*« (i6). Social anxiety was identified as a particularly prevalent issue: »*Over 80% of students struggle with social anxiety, confronted with the demand for frequent presentation during college studies, either in seminars or in discussions. Students find it very stressful. Of course, not all students develop symptoms to the point of a disorder; however, about 30 - 40% of them are affected*« (i6). Counsellors further depicted a range of **academic difficulties**: »*Either they are entirely unable to assess the amount of studying necessary to pass the exams, or they struggle with studying, finding information and organisation*« (i10); »*...they need support to perform in the academic environment… how to send an email, to whom to address the email, how to address the professor to whom they write…*« (i2).

The **removal of the stigma associated with seeking professional help** may also explain the increased utilization of counselling services: »*Young people seem to hesitate less nowadays before seeking some form of help… it seems less stigmatised*« (i7); »*Students appear much more open to the idea of counselling and seeking help… there is an open attitude of students, and the general population, towards seeking help*«. (i9). **Social transformation** also acted as a contributing factor: »*Everyone is in college nowadays. Selection is quite liberal so there are more students with difficulties and disorders*« (i3). »*Well, this could mean that counselling services have simply evolved, that they are more available; as a result, students reach out for help more often. It could also have ensued from widened access to universities and college studies, entailing a higher prevalence of students experiencing difficulties. Finally, perhaps everything has just become more stressful; overall, life seems more stressful nowadays than 15-20 years ago; this affects young people too. There are probably several reasons; however, an increase is evident*«. (i6). A research study titled »Assessment of student needs for support in college» conducted in 2012 (Drusany et al., 2012.) highlighted the academic challenges faced by students, particularly inadequate academic skills. The research also signaled insufficient readiness among freshmen to meet academic expectations, indicating the need for support to facilitate their integration and adjustment to the college environment (University of Zagreb, 2014.). The study involved 1,150 participants, including students from various units of the University of Zagreb across all years of study. The findings revealed that 53% of students required academic counselling, 48% sought assistance with learning, and 51.5% needed support in managing their time and obligations. Additionally, 36% expressed a desire for support in dealing with personal issues. Another relevant project, the IPA 4 project »Improving the quality of studying for groups of disadvantaged students through student counselling services« conducted between 2013. and 2015., examined student needs among a sample of 9,962 freshmen at 33 colleges and universities in Croatia. The research findings indicated that students appreciated receiving information about their studies (85.2%) and the development of academic (80.5%), social, and communication skills (78.4%). Support for coping with stress (70.0%), time management (70.4%), and career development skills (78.8%) were also well regarded. Counselling services were valued by 72.9% of students, while 33.3% acknowledged the importance of support for students with difficulties. Other activities such as sports, creative expression, and social interactions with fellow students were valued by 62.0% (Divjak, 2015.). Furthermore, psychological distress among young people in Europe and America was on the rise, against the backdrop of an increasing student population, social media, and financial difficulties (Brown, 2019.). The UK monitored the growing trend of psychological distress among youth, leading to the development and implementation of measures for prevention and support (Hubble and Bolton, 2020.). On the other hand, after the National Strategy for Mental Health Protection for the

period from 2011. to 2016. (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2010.), Croatia only adopted the Strategic Framework for Mental Health Development by 2030. (referred to as the »Strategic framework«) in 2022. (Ministry of Health Care, 2022.). Prevention, however, was deemed crucial due to the impact of mental health issues and disorders on academic achievement, hindering personal development and intellectual potential, and sometimes leading to severe psychological disorders later in life (Bezinović et al., 1998.; Brown, 2019.). In 2016, mental health disorders, including depression (25.9%), alcohol addiction (17.1%), and anxiety (14.6%), represented the fourth most common medical condition affecting the population in Croatia, and these conditions were also prevalent among students (Jakovčić, Živčić-Bećirević and Birovljević, 2015.; Lenz, Vinković and Degmečić, 2016.). The new Strategic framework emphasized the high incidence of mental health disorders in early adulthood (Ministry of Health Care, 2022.), which aligns with the **characteristics of students seeking counselling services**. Some of these characteristics were dependent on the students' gender: »*Young men also contact us, proportionately to enrolment… nevertheless, young and adult women seem more ready to acknowledge the difficulties and decide to seek help*« (i3)… »*Young men reach out later, once they have hit the wall. In fact, men tend to seek help only when the situation becomes quite critical*« (i2). Bojanić, Gorski, and Razum (2016.) confirmed that men were less likely to seek help, which was consistent with research studies conducted with students from the University of Rijeka and the University of Zagreb (Jakovčić and Živčić-Bećirević, 2009.; Ostović et al., 2012.). Additionally, **students from other towns** expressed a need for orientation and support to cope with feelings of loneliness: »*The needs of students from other towns are more pronounced, given the extent of the disruption they face, the required adjustment, and separation from family and friends. Until they create new social support networks, it is much more difficult for them*« (i3). Loneliness had a significant impact on the mental health of the student population, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research study »Students and the pandemic: How did we cope?« (AZVO, 2021.) found that 50% of students identified loneliness and social isolation as major contributors to psychological distress. **Students from other colleges and universities** without available counselling services at their own institutions sought assistance from other institutions (for example, when counselling service had not been established, or they were unable to establish contact with counsellors). In this regard, research participants made the following remarks: »*Students from other colleges contact us when counselling is not available at their institution*« (i7); »*Many colleges do not offer counselling; I learned this because many students reached out to us having heard that we offered counselling; they came from the Faculty of Science and Mathematics, the Faculty of Agronomy, the Faculty of Forestry, the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Computing, and the Faculty of Machine Engineering*« (i8). In the above-mentioned research study (AZVO, 2021.), 37% of students stated they would

seek psychological help if it were available at their higher education institution. Among the respondents, 20% confirmed that psychological counselling was available at their HEI, 16% claimed that it was not available, and others were not aware of its existence. **Freshman** issues encompassed the following aspects: »*...freshmen generally struggled with adjustment, social anxiety, loneliness, academic performance, etc.*« (i6). **Senior students** often experienced feelings of uncertainty and apprehension about their future. For some, previously unaddressed issues could intensify during this time: »*Obviously, this correlates with the overall social situation; they go into major crises near the end of their studies, for several reasons: ...they have to make important decisions at this point. When you enroll in college, you know what to expect - things are predictable and relative. Everything becomes unpredictable upon completion of studies*« (i3). »*Senior students again had greater needs or entered a crisis... suddenly, certain issues from the past reappeared...*« (i7). Moreover, senior students sought career counselling more often: »*Closer to the end of college studies, students tend to seek career counselling more often*« (i2). An international research initiative WISE (2015.-2016.), which involved students from Finland, Poland, Italy, and Croatia, supported the previously mentioned student needs at the beginning and near the end of their college studies, particularly regarding preparation for the labour market and the role of career centres (Pilato, 2018.). The Strategy for Lifelong Professional Guidance and Career Development in the Republic of Croatia (2016.-2021.) (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2015.) also acknowledged this need. As a result, the Agency for Science and Higher Education initiated a workshop series called *Karijeriranje* (Careering) (AZVO, 2019.) to support the development of career centres (AZVO 2016.; Đorđević, 2017.). Additionally, the CAREER (2005.-2006.) and ECAS (2007.-2009.) projects by the Institute for the Development of Education (IRO a; IRO b) provided an initial impetus for the establishment of career centres. **Students with disabilities** also sought assistance from counselling services, as observed by the counsellors: »*Students with disabilities are frequently associated with limited mobility and physical disabilities. However, there are also students with different psychological issues*« (i3). »*Of course, they are entitled to counselling when they need it, psychologically; in fact, as any other student, they experience various difficulties related, or entirely unrelated, to their disability*« (i7).

The category addressing the **role of counselling services** reflected the perception of counsellors regarding the counselling practice. In this regard, counsellors provided advice and referrals to other services and procedures, further described under the code **guidance and student advising**: »*We are here to advise, refer and inform them of their rights and opportunities...*« (i2). Counselling services also assisted in **identifying mental disorders and recommending psychiatric treatment:** »*or whether they should be referred to a different institution, a psychiatrist...*« (i7). Counsellors recognized the role of counselling practice in **prevention:** »*I believe the*

counselling services play an important part... especially in terms of prevention»
(i10). The Strategic framework emphasized the importance of collaboration with
professionals beyond healthcare services and the promotion of prevention, consi-
dering a projected 20% increase in the incidence of mental disorders in the next
decade (Ministry of Health Care, 2022.). Furthermore, the **motivation of the coun-
sellors was primarily intrinsic**: »*For me, it is important; it is entirely inner motivati-
on*« (i6). »*It pertains to the counsellor's interest*« (i7). Continuous **professional de-
velopment** was **mandatory** for all psychologists in counselling to maintain
accreditation from the Croatian Chamber of Psychology: »*If one does not collect, so
to speak, the points, one can get barred from the Croatian Chamber of Psychology.
The accreditation, therefore, attests to my professional development training*« (i11).
»*All of us continue our professional development according to our approaches in
psychotherapy*« (i8). Furthermore, the Agency for Science and Higher Education or-
ganized professional development workshops for career counsellors entitled
»workshop cycle *Karijeriranje* (Careering) of the Agency for Science and Higher Edu-
cation« (i4). In accordance of the Psychological Practice Act (19., art. 14)), licensed
psychologists had the right to and the obligation of professional development to
maintain and enhance the quality of professional procedures and interventions,
which counsellors adhered to, ensuring their personal growth and the quality of
counselling practice. **Supervision** was crucial for counsellors; all counsellors had su-
pervision: »*Therapists, the external ones, are supervised*« (i9). Regarding the finan-
cing of professional development, research participants generally mentioned **se-
lf-financing**: »*...Mostly, it is me. In fact, I am financing the training that I am
currently attending*« (i6). The **relationship between research and teaching activi-
ties and counselling practice** is highly relevant for understanding counselling practi-
ce, especially when considering teaching staff employed by higher education insti-
tutions who also work at counselling services either on a service contract or on a
voluntary basis. There are two distinct perceptions in this regard, both positive and
challenging (but not negative). The positive perception revolves around **linking tea-
ching and practice**: »*I find it great that I can apply everything I do here to teaching;
I can draw from my practical work with clients. This enriches my lectures and I con-
sider it significant and beneficial*« (i13). However, the challenging aspect involves a
heavy workload. In this regard, counsellors mentioned the **difficulty of balancing
roles** as a challenge that they were nonetheless managing to overcome: »*It is diffi-
cult, but I manage. For now. One simply has to find a balance*« (i3). »*Balancing all
the roles is tough: it becomes exhausting when you have to teach, provide guidance
to students, mentor graduates with their theses, complete an article, meet a dead-
line, and have two clients scheduled in the afternoon*« (i9). Several research studies
have highlighted the challenge of work overload as a significant stress factor for
employees in higher education, often leading to professional burnout (Ogresta,
2013.). This issue deserves careful consideration, especially when examining the

relationship between the academic community at higher education institutions and the counselling service. Since the counselling practice is integrated into these institutions, the attitudes of the entire academic community, including management, teachers, professional services, employees, and students, have an impact. Several codes provide insights into this relationship. For instance, the level of **familiarity with the counselling practice** indicated how well the academic community at higher education institutions is acquainted with the activities of the counselling services. In this regard, counselling service employees have observed that management is generally aware of their activities, primarily through work reports and the allocation of funding to support the counselling practice. They also acknowledged that teachers were well-informed about the counselling services: »*Managers, particularly those responsible for student affairs, certainly had information about our activities*« (i1); »*All employees are aware of the counselling service*« (i7). Management support was pivotal in ensuring effective counselling practice. In fact, the lack of support from superiors, particularly the absence of feedback, was identified as one of the stressors contributing to professional burnout (Ogresta, 2013.). The code **referring students to counselling** indicated that both teaching and non-teaching staff occasionally recommended counselling to students: »*Our activities are widely known, so teachers sometimes refer students... Teachers recognize the need, so they usually recommend counselling*« (i13). Participants also expressed positive views regarding their collaboration with the student administration: »*Students initially go to the student administration service. The service typically refers them to the vice-dean for student affairs or teaching; the latter are generally aware of our services and direct students to us*« (i2). **Vice-deans for teaching and learning** played a pivotal role in promoting and informing the academic community about counselling services: »*vice-deans for teaching and learning, who are highly involved in student matters; I am occasionally invited to professional council sessions, where they ask me to present our...*« (i3). According to the social capital theory, strong internal relationships within educational institutions can compensate for students' limited financial and human resources and lead to improved learning outcomes. This is particularly relevant for disadvantaged groups, underpinning the social dimension of education (Rogošić, 2018.). Turkpour and Mehdinezhad (2016.) highlighted the benefits of positive relationships between professors and students outside the classroom, as a form of social support that facilitates adjustment and improves student retention. Practical guidelines for training teaching and non-teaching staff have been published to support staff development, which can also inform the academic community at higher education institutions and support counselling activities (Jokić-Begić and Čuržik, 2015.; University of Zagreb, 2015. b; University Counselling Centre, 2016.). The code **familiarity with the activities of other counselling services** provided additional insights into the **cooperation between the services**. Some participants indicated a low or no familiarity with the activities of other coun-

selling services: »*Well... not really. I used to be familiar when we were networking and had a joint project. But now... I am much less familiar*« (i3); »*I have to admit that I am quite unfamiliar with the activities of other counselling services*« (i8). On the other hand, some participants mentioned a certain level of cooperation among counsellors during training: »*We attend training sessions that always involve sharing experiences*« (i1). Communication and **networking of career counselling services** have significantly improved through an initiative by the Agency for Science and Higher Education: »*workshop cycle entitled Karijeriranje (Careering); we networked through workshops...*« (i12). (i12). The active involvement of career centres was also highlighted, facilitated by the Agency for Science and Higher Education.

The second thematic area centred on **recommendations for enhancing the counselling practice**.

Table 3. Recommendations for improving the counselling practice

CATEGORY	CODES
Establishment of counselling services and their practice	Establishing counselling services at all higher education institutions
	Coordination of counselling services
	Improving the counselling service space
Counselling service activities	Furthering prevention
	Tailoring services to meet student needs
	Training
	More research
	Cooperation among counselling services
Human resources	Introducing permanent employment positions at counselling services
	More external associates
	Fostering professionalism in the counselling practice

Considering the category of **establishing counselling services and their practice**, counsellors have suggested that **every higher education institution should establish a counselling service**. »*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 based on its scientific field, future employment avenues, activities, and so on...*« (i1). »*In the first place, it should be established. This should be standard, like it is abroad, where it is a common part of every university...*« (i3). Another recommendation focuses on the **coordination of counselling services** through a centralized place that can provide comprehensive information

about the available counselling services. This would facilitate referrals for counsellors when they are unable to accommodate all students, allow for consultations with colleagues, and promote the exchange of best practices. »*I find the coordination of counselling services from the university level indispensable, from a single place, to facilitate the circulation of information*« (i13). The counselling practice could benefit from **improving the counselling service space**: »*...also, the space should be refurbished*« (i13). »*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). »*...getting closer to students... forming a student centre; it would be wonderful if we had dedicated space. Counselling services should be as accessible and visible as possible*« (i2). Under the category of **counselling service activities**, counsellors called for an increase in efforts to **further prevention**. »*Also, organizing workshops on healthy lifestyles; I believe the counselling practice should focus more on preventing undesirable behaviour*« (i10). They also advocated for **tailoring services to meet student needs**. »*At every institution... the students are unique, each study program is specific; we noticed that approaches that work for our students... do not help others... study field. A recommendation for people at counselling services is to be ready to learn and adjust. That means not insisting 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 are related to understanding student issues: »*Notably, cooperation with teachers who can offer the expertise, define goals and psychological processes that support learning, memorization, and identifying the relevant parts of work*« (i1). »*Connecting with the teaching staff, sharing experience, informing teachers of our services*« (i4). »*...training student mentors. Freshman orientation by senior students is the most effective. They are familiar with the specific details of study courses, details concerning that particular study program... Young people need more training for working with freshmen*« (i1). Counselling professionals also recognized the strong potential for **research** in their field. »*...perhaps, initiating research activities. Intensifying research work*« (i10). »*Developing models for assessing the practice, considering different schools and methods; globally, the literature is quite limited and little is known on the subject. This presents an opportunity*« (i13). In this respect, Jakovčić, Živčić-Bećirević and Birovljević (2015.) conducted a study on the benefits and effectiveness of counselling treatment at the Psychological Counseling Service of the University of Rijeka. The Strategic framework promotes intensifying training for mental health professionals and collaboration in research initiatives, which are in high demand (Ministry of Health Care, 2022.). Research, sharing best practices, and supervision were identified as common forms of **cooperation among counselling services**: »*Networking among colleges is essential; sharing best practice examples, good practice*« (i12). »*It would be great if we had another two counselling services interested, to involve more peo-*

ple. That would facilitate organisation; it is difficult among the few of us. However, if we had 20-25 people interested, perhaps five-six people could find the time for supervision or simply to share the information« (i13). Nowadays, it is possible to establish cooperation and even supervision online, which can be a timesaving model of collaboration. However, it is important to consider potential ethical challenges that may arise (Ajduković, 2020.). A model that promotes networking and maintaining professional relationships was needed. In line with this, the workshop cycle *Karijeriranje* (Careering) was initiated in 2019., inviting all counselling services and counsellors, and involving not only career counsellors but also other student support services. The purpose of this initiative was to build competences, strengthen their roles, and promote networking among the services. Ultimately, this approach aimed to continuously enhance the student experience, promoting student-oriented teaching and learning (AZVO, 2019.). The final category discussed in the study was **human resources**, focusing on the perspectives of counsellors regarding the introduction of permanent employment positions, involving more external associates, and raising the professional standards of the counselling practice. The **introduction of permanent employment positions at counselling services** was considered crucial: »*We call upon the university to recognize this need and assign one person to this activity... to be present, regularly answer phone calls and emails, organise and prepare materials, handle service contracts, and submit funding proposals for various opportunities at the municipal and state level. There are funds available, and there are different calls for proposals*« (i7). Furthermore, counsellors suggested the hiring of **more external associates**: »*Hiring more external associates, we try to offer our students the opportunity to talk to people they don't know, as it seems easier for students. We would like to have a variety of individuals available because these are sensitive matters, and sometimes people don't connect*« (i8). Moreover, counsellors considered **professionalism** to be of utmost importance in the counselling practice: »*Having experienced and competent professionals in the field is essential*« *(i7).* In accordance with the Psychological Practice Act (2019.), the respondents affirmed: »*...First and foremost, I believe student counselling services should have permanently employed professionals such as psychologists, therapists, and counsellors who practise the profession and receive continuous training. Training is crucial, and supervision is pivotal. It requires full commitment*« (i9).

The *National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia for the period 2019.-2021.* introduced public policies to address the needs identified in the counsellors' recommendations. The third aim of the Plan aimed to ensure equal opportunities for students by establishing counselling structures at higher education institutions. Additionally, the fourth aim suggested »organising the activities of student support centres (academic and psychological counselling, career counselling and student internship) to enhance student competences for completing college studies and early career development«. The

related activities included »an initial stock-taking analysis and needs assessment at higher education institutions, financial support to institutions that have established the centres and invested their funds, for further development and networking, and the establishment of a network of centres in Croatia to develop and exchange programs, training materials, and consolidate virtual resources« (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2019.:13). The *International Accreditation of Counseling Services* (IACS) standards for university and college counselling services emphasize the importance of cultivating good relationships and maintaining a network of institutional connections within the academic community, particularly with student services (administration), vice deans for student and/or academic affairs, and related departments. The services should be central to institutions, easily accessible to students, separate from management offices, well-equipped, providing sound insulation, and featuring a relaxing environment for students (IACS, 2016.). These recommendations warrant attention, considering the feedback from experienced student counselling practitioners. Furthermore, it is important to give due consideration to recommendations for supporting disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in higher education in Croatia (Puzić, 2021.), as well as research findings on studying during the pandemic (AZVO, 2021.).

Research limitations and recommendations for further research

The present research study relied on convenience sampling, involving counselling services with longstanding, extensive professional experience. This approach ensured valuable insights; however, it also suggested opportunities for further research regarding less experienced counselling services, their issues, and suggestions. Despite obtaining consent from higher education institutions for research purposes and the confidentiality statement, participants seemed to provide somewhat hesitant and superficial answers to certain questions. Future research could involve students and the broader academic community to explore different perspectives on the issues affecting the student population, the role and activities of counselling services, as well as their recommendations for improving counselling support.

CONCLUSION

Qualitative research results, based on interviews with 13 employees at student counselling services in Croatia, provide insight into the practice of student counselling and suggestions for improving its effectiveness and sustainability. The research findings suggested a considerable impact of student counselling services

at higher education institutions and offered opportunities for further development, which required adequate financial and human resources. Investing in these services would enhance the quality of student life and contribute to society by increasing the number of highly educated individuals prepared to enter a dynamic job market. It would also empower individuals to seek support when needed, preventing serious issues that can affect various aspects of life, such as professional, romantic, and family relationships. Considering the long-term effects of the coronavirus pandemic, which has had a significant impact on the entire population, especially young people, the European Commission has declared 2022. as the European Year of Youth (mladi.hr, 2023.). Besides digitization, the initiative promoted support for mental health among youth (Youth Europa, 2022.). In light of this, higher education institution management and policymakers are encouraged to develop effective models for enhancing student counselling support structures.

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OBILJEŽJA RADA STUDENTSKIH SAVJETOVALIŠTA IZ PERSPEKTIVE STRUČNIH DJELATNIKA

SAŽETAK

U politikama visokog obrazovanja važna je socijalna dimenzija obrazovanja kojom se želi postići što veća dostupnost i priuštivost obrazovanja te što veća stopa završavanja studija u redovitom roku, s posebnim naglaskom na osobe koje dolaze iz podzastupljenih skupina u visokom obrazovanju. Ovi se ciljevi ostvaruju preko različitih mjera od kojih je jedna i podrška kroz usmjeravanje i savjetovanje. U studentskim savjetovalištima pružaju se usluge akademskog, karijernog i psihološkog savjetovanja koje pomažu studentima u rješavanju izazova i problema s kojima se studenti susreću tijekom razdoblja studiranja te ih usmjeravaju na uspješan i pripremljen izlazak na tržište rada. U Hrvatskoj se zadnje desetljeće značajnije razvija sustav podrške i savjetovališta na visokim učilištima. Cilj rada je prikazati obilježja rada savjetovališta iz percepcije djelatnika savjetovališta te predstaviti preporuke za unaprjeđenje rada savjetovališta. Podatci su prikupljeni putem polustrukturiranih intervjua te su podvrgnuti tematskoj analizi. Rezultati istraživanja pokazali su iznimnu važnost postojanja savjetovališta na visokim učilištima: sve je veća potražnja za uslugama savjetovališta uslijed veće osviještenosti studenata o mogućnostima i koristi od savjetovanja i usmjeravanja te heterogenosti studentske populacije. Rad donosi i preporuke za unaprjeđenje postojeće prakse: povećati dostupnost savjetovališnih usluga studentima, pokrenuti koordinaciju rada studentskih savjetovališta, osigurati dodatna ulaganja u materijalne i ljudske resurse savjetovališta te poticati kvalitetan i profesionalan rad savjetovališta. Zaključno: rezultati ukazuju na ključne izazove sustava formalne podrške studentima dajući smjernice koje u budućnosti mogu doprinijeti poboljšanju prakse.

Ključne riječi: socijalna dimenzija obrazovanja; savjetovanje; studentska savjetovališta