**Wake-up Call for Student Counselling**

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The world is evolving like never before. The social, economic, political, technological and educational scenarios are changing all over the world. The internationalisation of education encourages students’ mobility across countries and cultures. These trends are rationalising the competition in local and global professional and academic fields. Such competitive environment impacts university students’ academic performance as well as mental well-being.

Situation in other countries: To talk about students’ psychological health specifically, some statistics in developed countries like USA, for example, show that more than 1,000 college students per year take their own life; 60% think about committing suicide; and many more face depression and anxiety. Unfortunately, only 9% of college students in USA are reported to seek help about their mental issues. In developing countries like India, for example, 37% of university students suffer depression and stress. The suicide rate is also increasing every year. It will not be surprising to put Pakistan in such context. In the race of examinations, grades, degrees and finding a job, the mental well-being of university and college students is largely neglected.

What are counselling services?

Before we go through a short survey analysis, let us see how counselling services are being defined. These services are talking therapy that aim to help individuals to become self-aware about their potential capabilities. In educational context, through these services students are helped to deal with their academic stress, fear and anxiety to build self-confidence and motivation. These services are formally provided by professional counsellors and teachers; while informally by parents and friends. Counsellors may have a variety of responsibilities with empathy and expertise to meet students’ academic, personal, social and emotional needs.

Perspectives of university students:

Below is the analysis of the responses of randomly conducted survey with some students from different universities in Pakistan.

The evidence indicate that either students do not have or are unaware of any mental well-being counselling services available in their respective institutions. They reported to face continuous anxiety, stress and pressure throughout their academic time; while majority have never talked about to anyone. Other common problems students face is indicated as anger, low motivation, lack of self-confidence, favouritism from teachers and peers, fear of speaking wrong, thinking irrelevant things, insecurity and being vulnerable. As one respondent indicates: ‘I do not want to be vulnerable; do not want to feel insecure; so why I do not want to share my educational or psychological problems with anyone.’ A variety of reasons generate these challenges. The stress to cover lengthy syllabus in short time is the major obstacle for students. Other factors include teacher-dominated classrooms and fear of participation in group discussions. Some students report that classroom presentations impact negatively on their confidence level. They feel hesitant to speak in front of the class if they lack vocabulary and communicative English language skills. Students reported to face favouritism with neglected attitude from family and teachers inside and outside the educational setting.

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However, majority of students do realise the need to share their problems if given opportunity. Many show their willingness to share if they have face-to-face private counselling with professionals. Otherwise, they would prefer to share with friends rather than any family member.

These responses highlight the social, educational and parental pressure to do excel. The helplessness to meet the expectations makes students less motivated and less focused while adapting rote-learning and memorisation as learning solutions. These problems may also hinder subject content comprehension and the development of competent language skills. Conclusively, students’ academic performance is negatively impacted along with their familial, social, professional and personal well-being.

What is the possible solution? The possible solution lies in: promoting counselling services at educational institutions; students’ own willingness to share; teachers’ sympathetic attitude and making parents aware and knowledgeable on the issue. One significant start-up is the acceptance of mental health issue. Parents, teachers and friends in surrounding need to observe the changing attitude and behaviour of their children, students and friends. The professional counsellors must focus on mental and psychological health along with career and further study counselling. We need to talk to the individuals experiencing the problem while preserving their self-esteem and self-respect. Above all, they must be provided safety, privacy and confidentiality to make them feel sheltered. There is also a need to address trust deficit issues within families to better understand the prevailing issue. Hopefully, by considering the gravity of students’ mental health, we can escalate their academic and professional achievements in this competitive global world.

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