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Problems and Awareness of Support Services Among Students at an Urban Australian University

Robert D. Schweitzer, PhD

Abstract. Although Australian universities have allocated significant resources toward the development of student support services, administrators have little systematic information about the problems undergraduate university students experience or students' knowledge about available support services. The author surveyed 441 students in an urban, nonresidential university to examine the prevalence of difficulties associated with learning, sexual harassment, discrimination, emotional distress, health problems, course and career concerns, financial difficulties, and difficulties with lecturers; he also assessed students' knowledge of support services in each of these areas. Course concerns were the most common problem, followed by emotional distress, worry about career choices, financial difficulties, and problems with lecturers. More than half of the students were unaware of the support services available to them to address a range of concerns from sexual harassment and discrimination to emotional distress. Approximately 20% of the students reported having used university counseling or career services. Implications for targeting specific areas for outreach programs are discussed.

Key Words: awareness, stressors, student problems, support services

Federal government funding initiatives to Australian universities encourage the institutions to develop a more diverse student profile and to encourage students from nontraditional or disadvantaged backgrounds to participate in university programs. Australian universities have thus become increasingly proactive in addressing social justice issues, including sexual harassment and discrimination. All of these initiatives have an impact on the provision of student support services, whose mission is to "assist and enhance the educational experience and outcomes of the diverse range of students participating in quality Australian higher education."¹

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The Australian university system has been based upon the British model of university education, and there is no tradition of private universities. Responsibility for funding and coordination of education has remained largely with the federal government, which plays a significant role in directing university development, policies, and research. With the election of a Labour government, which was in power from 1983 to 1996, however, a number of dramatic changes to the structure of the higher education system took place. These included increasing the number of public universities from 19 to 37 and adding 2 private institutions. Most of the changes were made by amalgamating and upgrading previous teacher-training institutions and technical schools. Universities therefore experienced a 64% increase in enrollment, together with a significant increase in the number of foreign students, mainly from Asian countries, between 1983 and 1993.

In 1990, the federal government published *A Fair Chance for All: National and Institutional Planning for Equity in Higher Education*.² The authors of this report identified a range of support services, such as childcare, counseling, language and study skills, and support programs, as important factors to improve participation and success rates for disadvantaged students. In response to the initiative, Australian universities currently provide various student-oriented support services, including medical, financial, counseling, and academic support and career and employment advisory services. However, university officials still have relatively little information about the prevalence of the specific problems students experience.

Access to university and medical services in Australia is quite different from current practice in the United States. Until 1988, Australian students were not required to pay fees. In 1989, the government introduced partial fees. Students have the option of paying these fees up front or repay-

ing them after they have completed their studies and are earning an income in excess of A\$26,853. Australia has a universal healthcare system that may also be used by students seeking healthcare on or off the university campus.

Most existing data on student support services are based on North American experience. Because we have little systematic knowledge about the prevalence of problems, I explored the data from North American and English institutions as a basis for this study of problems and awareness of support services in an Australian University.

Increasing Psychological Problems

In the 1990s, university counseling services reported an increasing incidence of students with complex and serious psychological problems. Stone and Archer³ argued that the level of psychopathology in students has increased over the past decade, citing a study by Johnson et al that used the Symptom Check List-90, Revised. Depending upon the norms used, the research team found that between 30% and 65% of male students and between 26% and 62% of female students had diagnosable psychiatric ailments. In their review, Stone and Archer also cited studies indicating that from 21% to 27% of college students were heavy drinkers, 22% of students had been directly involved in an incident of date violence, and one woman in three had experienced some form of childhood sexual abuse.

Although these seemingly high figures might be attributable, in part, to an increasing awareness of psychological problems, the numbers might also be related to the increasing diversity of the student population, which reflects the diversity of the population as a whole.

Wechsler et al⁴ undertook a study of common concerns and feelings of 7,000 undergraduate students in New England. They found that 47% of the respondents reported that they had experienced at least 1 of 21 concerns listed in a questionnaire. The most frequently cited concerns were anxiety (33%), interpersonal problems (23%), motivational problems (20%), and depressed affect (14%); women reported more problems than men did. Neither Wechsler nor Johnson provided specific details about the nature or severity of the problems.

Recognition of the problems faced by students, particularly female students, related to unwanted sexual behavior has been increasing. In the university context, this behavior may range from harassment to sexual assault and rape. A large survey by Koss et al⁵ used an anonymous self-report questionnaire administered to North American college students. She and her colleagues indicated that 53.7% of female respondents reported some form of sexual victimization. Furthermore, 27.5% of the women reported events that could be considered attempted or completed rape. In a survey of female college students in Florida, Yegidis⁶ reported that 10% of the respondents had been victims of unwanted sexual behavior in the year preceding the survey. The authors of a mental health needs assessment survey at Columbia University⁷ reported that 19% of their respondents mentioned concern with sexual assault or harassment

(or both assault and harassment), although data on the prevalence of sexual assault are not available. There are no comparative data for Australian universities at this time.

A number of studies of depression and suicidal ideation among university students in the USA and in Australia have been published. Sherer⁸ reported that 40% of the clients seen in a university counseling service in the United States were rated as exhibiting depression of sufficient severity to interfere with optimal academic and social performance; 16% of these students were rated as posing some risk of suicide.

In a nonclient student sample, Sherer⁸ found that 11% of the students rated themselves as depressed at the time of the survey; 22% said they had needed treatment for depression at some stage. Westefeld and Furr⁹ examined both the prevalence and the specific causes of depression, suicidal ideation, and suicidal behavior among university students. They reported that 81% of the students in their sample said that they had experienced depression at some point since beginning their studies. The most frequently cited causes were grades, relationships, loneliness, and money problems. Loneliness was also cited as the most frequent factor contributing to suicidal ideation or behavior. In an Australian study of a large sample of undergraduate students, Schweitzer et al¹⁰ reported that 62% of the students reported some degree of suicidal ideation; 6.6% reported they had attempted suicide during the previous 12 months.

For a study of life stress among first-year students in Australia, Robertson and Farnhill¹¹ developed a stressful life events scale. A significant number of students said they had experienced stressful events during the previous 12 months, including losing contact with friends (69%), family conflicts (50%), and worry about physical appearance (50%). Other significant stressful items were worry about sexual matters (31%), family illness (29%), trouble with a lecturer (25%), going into debt (19%), and fear of insufficient money (9%).

These studies are particularly significant in the academic context because students' problems affect their academic studies, test performance, personal functioning, and career progress.¹² If support services in Australian universities are to respond to the needs of contemporary students, it is vital that university officials have information about the nature and the prevalence of the students' problems. Similarly, if we are to argue that support services help students achieve their full potential, it is important that students be aware of the available support services and know how the services can respond to particular problems.

As a prerequisite to the continuing development of responsive services, particularly in a time of financial constraint, I sought to identify a profile of student support needs in an Australian urban university by exploring (a) the prevalence of particular problems experienced by undergraduate university students, (b) the students' awareness of support services available to help them deal with problems, and (c) gender differences in the problems experienced and in the students' awareness of support services.

METHOD

Participants

Four hundred forty-one undergraduate students (49% men and 51% women) from the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), an urban, nonresidential, multicampus university, participated in this study. The university is one of the "new" universities in Australia that resulted from the 1990 amalgamation of an institute of technology and two advanced teacher-training colleges. It has an enrollment of 24,000 students and a staff of more than 3,000 persons. The university is a high-profile leader in developing vocationally oriented programs in the Australian context. Participants in the study were from six university courses in three faculties—humanities, law, and engineering—and were broadly representative of students in an Australian university. (A faculty is comparable to a school or division in most US universities—eg, law school, engineering school, division of humanities).

Materials

The survey, which was approved by the Institutional Research Ethics Committee, was designed to obtain biographical data; identify problems experienced during the previous 12 months; and assess students' awareness of university support services and systems for dealing with problems. The nine categories identified problem areas typically encountered by university students and experienced during the previous 12 months. They were learning difficulties, sexual harassment, discrimination, emotional distress, health problems, course concerns, career concerns, financial difficulties, and difficulties with a lecturer. Sample questions included the following, which were to be given a yes–no response:

1. Have you experienced any difficulties relating to the following items during the past 12 months?
 - a. Learning difficulties ☐ ☐
 - b. Sexual harassment ☐ ☐

2. Would you know who to contact at QUT if you were experiencing any difficulties in relation to
 - a. Learning difficulties ☐ ☐
 - b. Sexual harassment ☐ ☐

If you answered yes, whom would you contact?

Procedure

The purpose and voluntary nature of the study were explained to the students in a lecture. The survey was undertaken during the first half of the second semester in 1993; 441 students completed and returned the questionnaire, a response rate of more than 95%.

RESULTS

Problems Experienced

Course concerns, expressed by 56% of the respondents, were the most common problem. This result was fairly consistent across the faculties and courses surveyed. Other problems identified by at least one third of the participants were emotional distress (45%), career concerns (43%), financial difficulties (37%), and difficulties with a lecturer (33%).

Twenty-six percent of the students identified problems associated with learning, although I found considerable disparity across courses of study. The lowest level of perceived difficulty with learning was among students in the law faculty (11%), the highest levels were in human development (33%), applied electronics (33%), and engineering (38%). Overall, only a small percentage of students reported difficulties related to sexual harassment (4%) and discrimination (10%). For details, see Tables 1 and 2.

Sex Differences

Female students reported significantly more problems related to sexual harassment, emotional distress, and health problems. The men reported significantly more problems related to difficulties with lecturers.

TABLE 1
Percentage of Students Identifying Problems Over Past 12 Months

	Men %	Women %	Overall %	χ^2 , by sex (<i>df</i> = 1)
Learning difficulties	25.8	26.9	26.2	<i>ns</i>
Sexual harassment	1.9	6.8	4.3	6.4*
Discrimination	10.3	9.6	9.9	<i>ns</i>
Emotional distress	29.9	61.4	45.7	42.9***
Health problems	20.5	35.6	28.1	12.3**
Course concerns	51.4	60.6	56.0	<i>ns</i>
Career concerns	39.5	46.3	42.9	<i>ns</i>
Financial difficulties	33.6	39.9	36.8	<i>ns</i>
Difficulties with lecturer	40.2	25.6	32.8	10.5**

p* < .01; *p* < .001; ****p* < .0001.

TABLE 2
Percentage of Students Identifying Problems Over the Past 12 Months, by Course of Study

	Justice studies (Law)	Land law (Law)	Social science (Humanities)	Human development (Humanities)	Applied electronics (Engineering)	Engineering (Engineering)	Overall %	χ^2 , by course (df = 5)
Learning difficulties	10.8	10.9	25.0	33.1	33.3	38.2	26.2	6.4*
Sexual harassment	2.7	4.7	4.7	6.4	5.6	1.3	4.3	ns
Discrimination	10.8	7.8	14.5	8.1	14.8	7.8	9.9	ns
Emotional distress	31.1	37.5	65.9	61.5	41.5	32.1	45.4	33.3***
Health problems	18.9	20.3	45.2	36.8	31.5	17.9	28.1	20.1***
Course concerns	52.8	53.1	64.3	56.8	63.0	51.3	56.1	ns
Career concerns	37.8	50.0	35.7	44.4	37.0	47.4	42.0	ns
Financial difficulties	35.1	29.0	30.2	43.5	35.2	38.5	36.8	ns
Difficulties with lecturer	29.7	17.5	23.3	23.4	53.7	53.8	32.8	40.2**

Note. Faculties are indicated in parentheses.

* $p < .01$; ** $p < .001$; *** $p < .0001$.

Awareness of Services

Responses to the questions about whom to contact indicated that the following percentages of students knew where to go for help with specific problems: financial difficulties, 24%; discrimination, 26%; sexual harassment, 31%; emotional distress, 38%; and health problems, 47%. The corresponding figures for the remaining categories were course concerns, 61%, career concerns, 40%, and difficulties with a lecturer, 41%. Although 61% of the students knew whom to consult about their course concerns, fewer than half of those surveyed indicated that they knew where in the university they could seek advice in relation to the other eight categories listed in the questionnaire. Students enrolled in law and engineering reported below-mean levels of service awareness for all nine categories I examined.

DISCUSSION

More undergraduate women in an Australian university environment reported emotional or health-focused problems, whereas more men reported problems with a lecturer. The overall frequency of emotional distress (45%) is high and needs to be examined further to improve our understanding of the nature and the precursors of distress. These Australian findings are in keeping with Wechsler's previously reported findings from the United States.⁴

The course of study was associated with differences in student responses. Students enrolled in justice studies and land law reported fewer problems than the overall mean for the sample. Students enrolled in human development and social science courses reported significant problems in the areas of emotion and health, whereas students in applied electronics and engineering reported problems related to

learning and to interactions with significant others. This last finding may be related, in part, to the extensive academic demands on students in the applied sciences.

The data on the prevalence of sexual harassment (6.8% of the women who responded) are of particular interest because this study is the first reported systematic survey of its kind in Australia. The figure is significantly lower than that reported in data from the US, which ranged from 19%⁷ to 53%.⁵ However, the methods used in the US studies and those used in the current study are quite different. The disparate findings could derive from this. On the other hand, the discrepancy could be a result of genuine differences in the frequency of incidents of sexual harassment or differences in what the participants perceived as harassment. The definition of harassment should be clarified in future studies to eliminate this ambiguity.

The incidence and nature of discrimination (9.9%) also need to be further investigated. Sexual harassment and racial discrimination are potentially serious, affecting students' academic studies. Universities in Australia are bound by legislative mandate to provide an environment free from all forms of discrimination.

The data on awareness of support services revealed some alarming findings with implications for the public relations aspects of support services. Students seem to have poor knowledge of the support services and procedures for addressing a range of issues they may confront in the academic environment. The lack of knowledge may impede students' ability to obtain the services they need. During the initial orientation week, administrators have traditionally told the incoming students about services available on campus. It appears that this strategy has not been effective, pos-

sibly because the students feel overloaded with information during their 1st week at the university.

In drawing inferences from the above data, I should note several significant limitations to the study. First, the data are based on a sample of 441 students drawn from six courses across three faculties. The study would need to be extended to a representative sample of students from many institutions before the findings could be generalized to all university students in Australia. In this sense, the research described here needs to be viewed as a pilot study.

Second, many of the problem categories listed were not restricted to the students' university experiences. For example, students may have indicated that they had had some difficulty related to sexual harassment, but this may have been unrelated to their experience at university. In the future, it would be prudent to address both of these issues by extending the study to include a representative sample of respondents in other institutions and to frame the questions to indicate the specific context of the reported difficulties.

Third, future studies should be extended to include information on the specific nature of the difficulties, as well as data on the severity of the problems. An examination of contributory and mediating factors in the development of difficulties would be of significant benefit. The methods used by Westefeld and Furr⁹ and Robertson and Farnhill¹¹ might be useful in developing such a study. Finally, it would be interesting to compare student problem profiles in an international context. This would require adopting common methods for all studies.

Overall, the profiles of student problems and awareness of services are both informative and a cause for concern. Australian students reported significant problems in a range of areas (especially emotional problems), yet their awareness of support services available to them in the university was quite low in relation to the prevalence of reported problems. If Australian universities are to achieve their goals in terms of a more diversified student population supported by a range of student support services, they need to address these issues.

Service providers are currently addressing the awareness issue with a high-profile poster and computer-notice campaign alerting students to the services and systems available. One tactic has been to include a notice on the library index computer at key times during the year. Every time a student uses the library computer to look for a reference, he or she sees a brief notice on screen indicating the availabil-

ity of student counseling services. Another strategy has been to designate counselors to individual faculties to work more closely with the faculty. In one instance, the services are available from a faculty office. A similar proposal is currently being explored to address the needs of aboriginal Australians attending the university.

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NOTE

A copy of the survey is available from the author upon request.

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