

Strengthening Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Capacity in the Pacific Through Counselling Education: A Regional Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) has become an increasingly important component of health-care delivery across the Pacific Island Countries, where communities frequently experience the cumulative impacts of natural disasters, climate change, public health emergencies, economic challenges, and social transitions. Despite growing recognition of mental health needs, the availability of professionally trained counsellors remains limited in many Pacific nations. Pacific Technical and Further Education (Pacific TAFE) at The University of the South Pacific (USP) has responded to this need by offering accredited Certificate IV and Diploma in Counselling (Level 6) programmes across its regional network. This opinion article highlights the significance of counselling education in developing a sustainable mental health workforce, strengthening community resilience, and expanding access to culturally responsive psychosocial support services throughout the Pacific region.

Keywords: Mental Health; Psychosocial Support; Counselling Education; Pacific Islands; Capacity Building; Community Resilience; Pacific TAFE

Introduction

Mental health is increasingly recognised as an essential component of overall health and wellbeing. Pacific Island Countries face unique challenges in providing equitable access to mental health services due to dispersed populations, geographical isolation, limited specialist resources, and varying cultural perceptions of psychological wellbeing. These challenges have become more apparent following the COVID-19 pandemic, frequent cyclones, flooding, and the growing impacts of climate change. Psychosocial support services are fundamental in assisting individuals, families, and communities to recover from adversity while promoting resilience and social connectedness. However, these services require a competent workforce equipped with appropriate counselling knowledge, ethical practice, and culturally sensitive intervention skills.

Counselling Education as Workforce Development

Pacific TAFE, through The University of the South Pacific, delivers Certificate IV and Diploma in Counselling (Level 6) programmes that aim to develop competent counselling practitioners capable of responding to the diverse psychosocial needs of Pacific communities.

The programmes are coordinated through the Counselling Programme at Pacific TAFE and are accessible across USP's regional network, serving students from twelve member countries through fourteen campuses. This regional approach provides opportunities for individuals who may otherwise have limited access to formal counselling education. The curriculum combines theoretical foundations with practical counselling skills, ethical decision-making, communication techniques, crisis intervention principles, trauma-informed practice, cultural competence, and supervised experiential learning. Graduates are prepared to provide supportive interventions within education, health, social welfare, faith-based organisations, non-government organisations, youth services, and community development settings.

Addressing Regional Psychosocial Needs

The Pacific region continues to encounter complex psychosocial challenges that require coordinated responses. These include:

- Psychological impacts of climate-related disasters.
- Family violence and child protection concerns.
- Substance misuse.

- Youth mental health challenges.
- Suicide prevention.
- Grief, bereavement, and loss.
- Community recovery following emergencies.
- Workplace stress and burnout.

Professionally trained counsellors contribute significantly by providing early intervention, psychological first aid, referral pathways, emotional support, and community education while respecting local cultural values and indigenous knowledge systems.

Importance of Cultural Responsiveness

Counselling practice within the Pacific cannot simply replicate Western therapeutic models. Effective interventions must acknowledge communal living, spirituality, family systems, traditional leadership structures, language diversity, and cultural identity. Pacific TAFE's regional approach allows counselling education to be contextualised within Pacific realities while maintaining internationally recognised professional standards. Such contextualisation enhances both the relevance and effectiveness of psychosocial support services.

Future Directions

Expanding counselling education throughout the Pacific presents several opportunities:

- Increasing the number of qualified counsellors across remote island communities.
- Strengthening integration of counselling services into primary healthcare.
- Supporting school-based mental health programmes.
- Enhancing disaster preparedness and recovery through trained psychosocial responders.
- Promoting interdisciplinary collaboration among healthcare professionals.

- Encouraging evidence-based research on culturally appropriate counselling interventions in Pacific settings.

Continued investment in counselling education will strengthen national health systems while contributing to the achievement of regional and global mental health priorities.

Conclusion

The growing demand for mental health and psychosocial support services across the Pacific requires sustained investment in workforce development. Counselling education delivered through Pacific TAFE at The University of the South Pacific represents an important regional initiative that equips future practitioners with professional competencies to address emerging psychosocial challenges. By developing culturally responsive counsellors across twelve Pacific member countries, these programmes contribute to improved community wellbeing, resilience, and equitable access to mental health support. As mental health becomes increasingly integrated into public health policy, regional counselling education will continue to play a critical role in strengthening health systems and supporting sustainable development throughout the Pacific.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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