Original Article

Mental Health Conversations with Students: The Place of 21st Century Skills among University Students Today

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ABSTRACT

Mental health is a fundamental component of overall well-being, particularly within the dynamic and demanding environment of the 21st century. It reflects the cognitive and emotional state of an individual, where optimal mental health contributes to a balanced, meaningful, and productive life. However, individuals experiencing mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and mood disorders—often encounter stigma and marginalization within educational institutions, healthcare systems, and the broader workforce. The escalating mental health crisis among university students necessitates immediate scholarly and institutional attention. Findings from this study indicate that numerous students struggle with mental health challenges stemming from high parental expectations, internalized pressure to excel, peer influences, and idealized portrayals of success and lifestyle on social media platforms. This study demonstrates that integrating 21st-century skills such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and social competence into university curricula can significantly enhance students' capacity to develop resilience. These skills foster adaptability, responsibility, and perseverance, equipping students to effectively manage academic pressures and professional uncertainties. They also strengthen self-awareness, emotional regulation, and problem-solving abilities, all of which are essential to sustaining mental well-being in a complex, fast-changing world. To effectively address these concerns, Universities must implement institutional policies on mental health and allocate sufficient funding for student support services, including counselling programs, peer mentorship initiatives and awareness campaigns.

INTRODUCTION

Mental health is an important topic in the world today as a lot of people suffer from mental health issues, particularly the young generation. Globally, it is estimated by the World Health Organization (WHO) that there has been a 13% rise in mental health conditions and substance use disorders in the last decade, with 1 in every 8 people estimated to have been living with a mental health condition as of 2019 (WHO 2019). Additionally, WHO further approximates that around 20% of the world's children and adolescents have a mental health condition, with suicide being the second leading cause of death among 15-29-year-olds. Arguably, the state of mental health has not gotten any better especially due to the prevailing global and national economic crises that continue to affect people's lives and livelihoods. (KNCHR, 2023). A report by the Taskforce on Mental Health of 2020 in Kenya revealed that mental illness such as depression and suicide, substance use disorder, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and other psychoses accounts for 13% of the entire disease burden in Kenya.

Over the years' industrialization has brought about a lot of changes in the world. The movement of people from rural to urban areas has brought changes to the family structures, industries have also brought changes to the employees as they have to deal with emerging technologies, just to mention but a few. The education sector has not been left behind and it has undergone radical changes over time. These changes have brought concomitant challenges to the students as they have to learn to adapt quickly in a fast-changing world. It is a fact that Education is an engine for the growth and progress of any society and it is responsible for building human capital which sets technological and economic growth hence it is paramount to get it right in the education sector before proceeding to the industrial sector.

Care (2018a) reports that most employers are concerned with the competencies and characteristics that individuals bring to the workplace and are particularly concerned about the preparedness of the youth to the workplace. She adds that there is a need for students to come to the workplace with competencies that go beyond the accumulation of knowledge in schools which was highly valued in the 20th Century.

Education Commission (2016) reiterates that technology, globalization, and demographic shifts are changing every aspect of society. In the previous centuries, students needed skills such as the ability to memorize facts which seem not to be sufficient today. Child Trends (2015) suggests that skills such as collaboration, communication, problem-solving, critical thinking and social skills are highly valued by employers today.

Failure to acquire these skills and competencies can then become a predisposing factor to depression as

they grapple with anxiety and worry about the future. It is against this backdrop that the study was undertaken as it wanted to seek a way of understanding how the 21st century skills can therefore act as a gap to empower the University students to have skills that will empower them and make them better placed in the job markets. The skills are communication, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, media, technology, flexibility, leadership, innovation, productivity and social skills. The study is cognizant of the mental health issues that act as a barrier to attaining productivity by the students and seeks to link mental health to the workplace by using the 21st century skills are a bridge.

Once the students have mastered these skills, they will be able to effectively communicate about the issues facing them as well as collaborate with others in classrooms and outside classrooms which will boost their confidence. This in turn will help them take initiative in projects where they will be in a better position to demonstrate their leadership skills and finally bring change to their communities (community participation) In an era where technology is pervasive, having digital literacy may leverage a students' ability to share information with other people easily and solve problems faster.

Problem Statement

Mental health is not a new concept although it has gained traction in recent years. Traditionally people have had mental issues where they would be considered bewitched or cursed by their ancestors. Families would go to the extent of preventing their members from associating with such people. Some families would even go further and hide their children who exhibited mental issues by putting them under house arrest for fear of stigmatization. This then denied these children freedom of association and the right to education among other basic human rights. In Universities today, mental health still remains a large issue calling for attention from the society. Auerbach et al. (2018), in the World Health Organization's World Mental Health

Survey, revealed that over one-third of university students worldwide met the criteria for at least one common mental disorder. Despite this, many students refrain from seeking professional help due to various barriers such as stigma, lack of awareness, and insufficient mental health resources (Eisenberg et al., 2017). These obstacles are particularly significant in low- and middle-income countries, where mental health services are often underdeveloped or inadequately integrated into higher education systems (Okanlawon & Ahmad, 2022).

In response to this growing crisis, universities have implemented various measures, including counselling centres, peer support programs, mental health awareness initiatives, and online mental health tools. Xiao et al. (2017) observed that U.S. college counselling centres have experienced a sharp rise in demand, prompting institutions to expand and innovate their services. Technology-driven solutions, such as teletherapy and mental health applications, have become increasingly valuable, particularly during the pandemic.

However, merely responding to the crisis is insufficient. A proactive and holistic approach is essential, involving the integration of mental health considerations into academic policies, training faculty and staff to identify distress signals, and cultivating a campus environment that promotes mental well-being. It is against this backdrop that the study was done so as to find out how 21st-century skills such as communication, critical thinking, collaboration and use of technology can help the students overcome mental health challenges.

Study Objective

To explore how equipping students with 21st-century skills can help them navigate mental health challenges.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mental health is a key concern in each and every country as it influences every sector of the economy. This literature was divided into four parts namely: analysis of mental health, mental health and education and the last part dealt with mental health, job market dynamics and the research gap.

Analysis of Mental Health

According to the Bill of Rights which is chapter four of the Constitution of Kenya (2010), there are rights appertaining to the people of Kenya and these include freedom of association, freedom of expression right to education as well as right to have their human dignity protected. Furthermore, the constitution in article 43 (1) (a) provides that "every person has the right to the highest attainable standard of health, which includes the right to healthcare services" This necessarily includes mental health.

Students in all levels from Primary to Secondary to Higher education are not exempted from mental health issues which can range from anxiety to mood disorders. In spite of this, it is imperative for them to know how to handle the issues since a healthy mind is the bedrock of a productive mind both in class and outside class. The KNCHR (2020) reiterates that the youth and adolescents are adversely affected by mental ill health. This could be attributed to youth unemployment, pressure to perform in school, social media exposure and human rights violations. Additionally, poor investment and lack of access to mental health services leads to a decreased ability among youth and adolescents to make rational choices and an increase in their probability of engaging in risky sexual behaviour and substance abuse further worsens their mental health and life outcomes.

The Kenya Mental Health Policy (2015-2030) provides a framework for interventions for securing mental health systems reforms in Kenya. This policy seeks to address the systemic challenges and emerging trends and mitigate the burden of mental health problems and disorders. It aims to ensure people have access to comprehensive, integrated and high quality, promotive, preventive, curative and rehabilitative mental healthcare services at all levels of healthcare and strengthen mental health systems, especially from the community level.

To realize these in an effort to narrow the human resource gap, the Ministry of Health (MOH) has been training community health volunteers (CHVs) on how to deal the common mental health problems so they can effectively offer assistance to people suffering from the same. The training focuses on a new cost-effective method for treating common mental illnesses – such as depression, anxiety and chronic stress – known as Problem Management Plus (PM+) which has been approved by the World Health Organization (WHO). This is in the view that effective mental health interventions must be cognizant of the diversities in our environment.

Additionally, the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3.4 states that by 2030, countries should reduce by one-third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and well-being. This implies that mental well-being is a global concern and there is a need not only to address it but also to reduce it.

Mental Health and Education

Education is a very important sector in the economy of any country because the future of any country relies on its ability to transmit knowledge to its young ones as they are the future leaders of tomorrow. Kenya Students usually face many challenges that may affect their learning and these include but are not limited to fear of unemployment, financial challenges, fear of failure, high expectations from parents, terminal diseases and peer pressure from their friends especially those who have succeeded in life but have minimal education.

To achieve this, the student's mental health needs to be given priority and issues affecting them dealt

with so that they can drive the economy effectively and efficiently in the future. Aabala (2017) posits that the guiding principle underpinning the 21st-century skills concept is that students need to be taught skills that are both in demand and broadly applicable in the world today. As a result, effective instruction of these skills to students must be given top priority by educational establishments such as schools, colleges, and universities. In other words, students in the twenty-first century should not learn skills that are still relevant today and reflect the demands of a globalized world; instead, they should learn skills that are relevant to today's needs. This will enable them to become relevant not only in the job market but also in improving the economy so as to realize Vision 2030.

Kenya's Vision 2030 seeks to establish a connection between education and the labour market, with the ultimate goal of transforming Kenya into a middle-income, newly industrialized nation by 2030, offering a superior standard of living to all of its inhabitants. Strong public-private sector partnerships, the need to develop entrepreneurial skills and competencies, and the connection between education and the labour market are all highly prioritized. (GoK, 2007).

In order to achieve this vision and to "nurture every learner's potential," the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development designed a new curriculum (2-6-3-3-3) for students in order to shift from the 8-4-4 one. The new curriculum is based on values and theoretical perspectives on learning and development to identify seven core competencies that every learner in basic education can achieve. These core competencies are embedded in subject areas such as English, mathematics, science and technology, and include: Communication and collaboration, Self-efficacy, Critical thinking and problem-solving, Creativity and imagination, Citizenship, Digital literacy and Learning to learn (KICD 2017)

Care (2018b) echoes the importance of teaching 21st-century skills to the students. These skills include communication, collaboration, critical thinking, media, productivity, flexibility, innovation, entrepreneurship, social skills and leadership among others. These skills can therefore be viewed as an antidote to many issues affecting the mental well-being of students for example if students learn effective communication skills, they will share their problems with relevant people such as counsellors without fear or shame before the problems escalate.

Mental Health and Job Market Dynamics

Mental health has become a major issue of concern, not only in Kenya but across the world as well. A survey conducted recently by the United Nations agency responsible for international public health, comprising 130 countries reveals that while mental health problem and their attendant negative impact continues persistently, over 93 percent of countries globally are experiencing an interruption or a cessation in the provision of critical mental health services. Consequently, this poses a challenge for individuals in need of vital mental health services to access the same.

The trends in Kenya seem to reverberate the global pattern. The Kenya Mental Health Investment (2021) estimates that close to half of Kenyan adults have experienced at least one mental health condition in their lifetime. These conditions often cause a lot of human suffering, and public health burden, and are known to contribute to adverse social and economic outcomes including a heavy financial burden on the country's health sector and loss of productivity among the workforce due to absenteeism, premature death, or disability.

The former president of Kenya, Uhuru Kenyatta was cognizant of the fact that mental health was a fundamental impediment to productivity and directed the Ministry of Public Service, Gender and Affirmative Action, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Labour and Social protection to collaborate and develop a strategy that would provide policy direction on mental health

matters. The State Department of Public Service was given the responsibility of executing the planned activities. To date, the state department has trained 410 mental health champions across the public service. These champions play an essential role in supporting the counselling services and also in advocating for the awareness of mental health. (Ministry of Public Service, Performance and Delivery Management, 2023).

Research Gap

Despite the growing emphasis on 21st-century skills in education, there is a lack of research investigating how these competencies specifically influence university students' ability to cope with mental health challenges. Most existing studies are either theoretical or focused on academic performance, leaving a gap in understanding their role in promoting emotional resilience and psychological well-being. Taylor et al., (2020) study on promoting emotional well-being of primary and secondary students but did not focus on University students. Similarly, (Voogt & Roblin, 2018; Care et al., 2019) conducted a study on integrating the 21st Century skills into the curriculum but did not focus on how these skills will lead to mental health being. This study is therefore vital as it examines how equipping students with 21st-century skills can help them navigate life's challenges and enhance their mental well-being.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The Research was conducted at Alupe University and the Research Design used was Phenomenology Design which is Qualitative in nature as it sought to find out the in-depth experiences of students in handling life's challenges. Qualitative research tends to develop an empirical understanding of a phenomenon "that is contextual and situational, in contrast to quantitative research where work is multivariate but often weak on context and in-depth understanding" (Strauss, 2008). A sample of 20 students was used in the study and the number was arrived at by using saturation. The sample size was small as the study is qualitative in nature and the main aim was for an depth understanding of the study and not a generalization. The students in the study were mainly Undergraduate fourth-year students as they are in their final year of study and are just about to get into the job market. They were from age 22-24 with the average age being 22. They have also done teaching practice or Industrial attachment in the third year of their study therefore have a clue of the needs of the job market. The students taking Bachelor of Education Arts and Science usually go for teaching practice in Secondary Schools in the third year where they teach for three months in the third semester of their study. The rest of the students in the University go for Industrial Attachment still in third-year third semester but majorly go to organizations and industries relevant to their field of study. This can range from hospitals, NGOs, County Government offices, Hotels, Banks and Microfinance institutions. The sampling method used was purposive sampling as the students selected for the study were mainly final-year students who had done courses where elements of 21st-century skills had been embedded in them. The data collection methods used were in-depth interviews and one focus group discussion. Each interview took between 45 minutes to one hour. The data obtained was audiotaped, recorded and transcribed verbatim. From here, it was organized into themes mainly reflecting the 21st Century Skills such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking, social skills and Technology. To ensure the trustworthiness of data, member checking was used when the transcripts were sent to respondents so that they could verify whether what was written was actually what they had responded to. The resulting themes are discussed below:

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Mental Health and Communication Skills

Communication is the passing of information from one person to another by the use of a medium. A student interviewed admitted that communication

had helped her deal with issues affecting her as she was in a position to share with a student counsellor and this is shown below:

> In first year we studied Communication skills and this knowledge has helped me in dealing with alcohol problems that as I have often seen the student counsellor to help tackle challenges facing me. It is only in sharing that you can be assisted. I believe this is what is also needed in the world out there in the job market so that productivity can be achieved. (Respondent 3: Female Economics student)

The same sentiments were echoed by a responded who reported the following:

> Sometimes last year I panicked so much when going for Teaching Practice because for the first time I was going to stand in front of students and teach yet I did not believe in my public speaking abilities. I shared this with my Educational Psychology teacher and she re-assured me that all will be well. This boosted my confidence and when I went for teaching practice, I was able to face my fears and taught the students so well. I not only got an A in teaching practice but also developed a great rapport with both students and teachers.

(Respondent 7: Female Education Science student)

Similarly, another respondent reported the following:

> I am in a club called Amani Club where we usually carry out outreach programs to the community by visiting children's homes, and rehabilitation homes among others. There we talk to the children where the majority of them are battling life challenges ranging from physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect etc. There I am in a position to integrate what I learn in class about principles of counselling with communication skills which is what I learnt in the first year. I believe these

> skills will come in handy when I start working as a Counsellor/therapist.

(Respondent 10: Male Counselling Psychology student)

The students above reported that communicating about the issues facing them led to them getting help to solve their issues. The first respondent got help from the student counsellor, the second one from their lecturer and the last one was a help to the children in a children's home. The students further acknowledge that they believe these skills are useful in the job market as it is only in communicating that the other party is aware of your thoughts. These findings are similar to those of a study on Convergence between 21st Century Skills and Entrepreneurship Education in Higher Education Institutes in UAE by Ghafar (2022) who found out that when students get feedback from their lecturers after taking exams, they are in a position of understanding where they went wrong in the exams. This emphasizes the importance of communication where one lets the other party understand clearly what you meant so that they can correct where appropriate. For communication to be complete encoding and decoding have to happen so that what the sender intended to communicate is what the receiver gets and decodes. He also adds that communication helps to apply, synthesize and analyse information received which in turn leads to creativity, critical thinking and problem-solving.

Crosling et al. (2015) emphasize that the core purpose of 21st-century skills is to transform individuals who can 'use' and 'apply' knowledge beyond the customs in a particular context. Given the dynamic nature of the workplace changing from rapidly changing technologies, it has become of utmost importance for higher Education Institutions to produce work-ready graduates equipped with the skills of socialization, creativity and innovation, communication and collaboration, research and information fluency, critical thinking, problem-solving, and digital citizenships to sparkle and excel in the workplace.

Moreover, communication is an important skill in the 21st century as it helps one articulate their ideas properly. Roekel (2011) describes communication as expressing thoughts clearly, crisply articulating opinions, communicating coherent instructions and motivating others through powerful speech – these skills have always been valued in the workplace and in public life. In the 21st Century, these skills have been transformed and are even more important today. This implies that if one can communicate issues clearly, then they can be helped and it will help reduce friction with colleagues caused by misunderstanding.

Mental Health and Collaboration

This elicited a lot of interesting discussions and this is shown in the excerpts below;

> Our lecturers usually love giving us tasks to discuss in groups and then present them in front of the class. Initially used to have panic attacks when I would present solo in some courses, and the attacks would be so bad that I would lack sleep at night. Nowadays I have really improved because when we discuss assignments and present together, there panic is reduced as we are many. My confidence has boosted and I believe when I get a job and start working, then I will pitch presentations in front of management and make sales. (Respondent 10: Male, Business Management Student)

Another student shared the sentiments as shown below:

> Our classes normally have a lot of role-play classes hence we have to work in groups. I am introverted and when I joined Campus in my first year, I had a difficult time adjusting as this was mandatory to get marks in the specific courses that required us to role-play. I would get anxious. After some time, I got the hang of it acting in front of the class and eventually enjoyed every single lesson. With practice, one gains confidence. I believe this skill will be useful since the job market requires people to work in teams and have togetherness. (Respondent 17: 4th Year Female Medical Psychology Student)

A student also echoed the following:

> In one of the micro-teaching classes we had last year, we had to work in groups where we would simulate a class setting and one person would be a teacher and the others would take the role of students. The student teacher would teach for 30 minutes and after that, the other students would note the mistakes and give feedback when appropriate of course with the help of the lecturer assigned to us. This boosted my confidence and when I went for teaching practice, I did not have anxiety attacks as we had really practised for long with my colleagues.

(Respondent 5: Male Education Arts Student)

The excerpts above demonstrate that working with others makes work easier and objectives of the course are easily attained. Ideally, some students are shy owing to their personality but with frequent collaboration, they are able to overcome this fear. This resonates with a study on the assessment of academic stress and its copying strategies of medical students in Mid-Western Universities (Joseph et al. 2020) where they suggested that students need to learn how to collaborate so that they can avoid stress. It is only by working in groups that collegiality and intelligence are enhanced. This is actually a fundamental principle in the workplace and one of the principles of scientific management by Fredrick Taylor.

Mental Health and Critical Thinking

Thinking is a communal activity that helps learners recognize that they are in a community that shares common questions and concerns. In the education realm, this is also a skill that is considered vital as it teaches one how to think and this is discussed in the excerpts below:

Sometimes I tend to think so much about the future in terms of employment and it normally sends me into panic. This is because many graduates are complaining about unemployment in the country. However, when I think deeply about life, I give myself hope that maybe, just maybe I could start a business with all the knowledge that I have learned in school. You know, start a café and sell food in a busy strategic place.

(Respondent 13: Male Hotel and Hospitality Management student)

Another student reiterated the following sentiments:

Early this year I had problems at home dealing with finances. My mother is a single mum and usually does 'vibaruas' to make ends meet. I sympathize with however as she has to take care of 5 children single-handedly. The knowledge I have obtained in a Philosophy class on critical thinking helped me think of ways of supplementing income so that she does not suffer. I thus decided to start online writing and this has helped me pay my fees so that I do not burden her unnecessarily. Eventually, I see myself starting a business as it has so many advantages as compared to being employed. The key being flexibility.

(Respondent 1: Female Community Development student)

The sentiments below mirror this sentiment by the respondent 1:

There are classes where we are usually problem-based tasks. This helps us think deeply about them and I usually use this knowledge to handle problems that I face as a student, especially relationship issues. I think over and over about my issues till I come up with an appropriate solution and it normally works.

(Respondent 9: Female Business Management student)

The excerpts above show that the students are put in a situation where they have to exercise their brains critically and creatively in class so as to do the assignments. From here they put their minds together and come up with solutions to the tasks assigned to them.

A study by the Nuffield Foundation (2015) in Durban on whether teaching philosophy to young children would enhance their mathematics, writing and science capabilities, reported that critical thinking skills (or philosophizing) made learners confident, patient when listening to others, self-motivated, better, happy, and enlightened. Critical thinking skills enabled the students to participate in class discussions and contribute to the construction of new knowledge confidently.

Critical thinking is among the seven core competencies in Kenya's new competency-based curriculum (CBC). KICD (2017) contends that critical thinking will help the learners to open their minds, and be in a position to accept and listen to new information and points of view that may sometimes be diverse from their earlier held opinions and beliefs. It is indispensable for all learners, in all disciplines and all subjects offered in the education curriculum.

A study by Crocket (2016) found that the critical thinking approach was the top skills gap for job applicants. Moreover, the study emphasized that Educational Curriculum Developers across the world should look for solutions and new ways to integrate critical thinking skills approaches, such as creativity, problem-solving, communication, collaboration, analytical thinking, action, ethics, and accountability, into secondary schools curriculum for learners to develop global awareness and become world citizens with enlarged minds.

This study found that the theme of critical thinking was closely related to problem-solving because thinking leads to decision making which eventually solves problems facing a person. Furthermore, innovation was included in this theme because

critical thinking leads to an emergency of new ideas which is what defines innovation, thus these skills were handled under critical thinking as they are intertwined.

Mental Health and Social Skills

A student reported the following:

> I have been diagnosed with a Bipolar condition which makes me moody at times. This sometimes makes it difficult to socialize with people since my mood may be all over the place. Nevertheless, a course we learnt in my second year called Social Psychology really assisted me in knowing how to interact with others and not letting my condition get in the way.

(Respondent 19: Male Computer Science student)

In the same vein, the following student mentioned the following:

> I am abled differently and as you can see I am an albino. This used to affect my esteem when I was younger because people would nickname me "mzungu mwitu" meaning a fake European. I have come to embrace my skin and I do not let it define me. In religion, we are usually taught that we are all equal and most of our tasks are usually in groups where we interact a lot. I must admit this has boosted my confidence.

(Respondent 12: Female BEd Religion Student)

Finally, on this theme, the following sentiments were echoed though contrary to the ones above:

> I am an introvert whereby I feel comfortable in my company. I tend to be anxious when we are told to solve tasks in groups as I hate socializing with people which I find draining as some talk too much but do not do the assignments. I wish we would just do individual work as opposed to group work.

(Respondent 18: Male Microbiology student)

Most of the 21st-century skills require the students to have a social relationship with others so that they can network and share ideas, seek clarification and get assistance. Jonson (2015) maintains that it is of paramount importance to build your networks since it leads to fruitful relationships in industries and also in entrepreneurship. He adds that mastering social skills adds to one net worth as your social networks leverage your net worth. This skill is also related to collaboration and communication as you cannot socialize without these two skills.

Mental Health and Technology

Technology has shaped the way we live our life in this century and it has brought both positive and negative consequences. The following sentiments were expressed by a student as shown below:

> I have a phobia of programming projects in Computer Science courses. This is because if you mess with a code, then the program cannot run and you will get a zero in that task. The thing with Tech is that it keeps changing and there are so many codes to master. Being a perfectionist always worsens the situation as I want my program to work by all means. (Respondent 6: Male Computer Science student)

> Lately, there has been a lot of pressure to look good, bleach your skin and wear the latest fashion in the market. This makes me have an inferiority complex as I am usually seen as "mshamba" by my Gen Z generation. I wish I could afford that lifestyle I see on Instagram and Facebook but I come from a poor background.

(Respondent 9: Female Business Management student)

> Early this month I had a lot going on as my dad was diagnosed with Cancer. I had no one to talk to and I stumbled across online counsellors who have journeyed with me. I did not know initially that one can use technology to access

counselling services. I prefer this because of the anonymity it upholds.

(Respondent 7: Community Development student)

However, a student expressed a divergent view as shown below:

When I was on attachment, many students indeed struggled with the Digital systems as everything was automated. Calculating books of accounts, and making any debit/ credit entry was all automated. I honestly had a difficult time since what we learnt in class involved calculating the books of accounts manually. I would dread every day going for attachment as I feared making mistakes and embarrassing myself.

(Respondent 10: Male, Business Management Student)

The above sentiments reveal the two sides of technology in relation to mental health. On one side consistent use of It particularly social media may cause mental issues and on the other hand, inadequate skills in the use of technology can lead to stress as one struggles to do basic work in a digitized workplace. The ability to read, comprehend, and interpret data is known as data literacy and is also an essential 21st-century skill that university students must possess. It is crucial to education as students will increasingly encounter data visualization due to technological advancements and increased accessibility. In this sense, Robertson & Tisdall (2020) acknowledges that educational centres such as schools are the best places to start learning about data literacy since it enables people to interact with the deluge of information at a younger age. This skill will also help students at the workplace and when they are confident in using technology, they will not have anxiety since most organizations are usually digitized.

Another study by Braghieri (2022) on social media use and mental health across USA Colleges found that there is a strong link between increased suicide rates and social media use. This could be attributed to the fact that there are highly unfavourable social comparisons of the young to their friends on social media such as Facebook. This is worse for the youth coming from families of low economic status. This is because they have a strong drive to fit in and when their finances do not allow, then they resort to suicide to avert the inferiority feelings.

These views above mirror those of Vogel et al. (2014) who reported that Facebook and other social media platforms make it easier for people to compare themselves to members of their social networks. However, when such comparisons are not favourable, their self-esteem is crushed often leading to mental health issues.

Conversely, technology helps as it makes work easier and more precise, students can keep in touch with family and avoid stress caused by being homesick and finally, it keeps one updated on events happening in the country and the globe at large.

CONCLUSION

Promoting the mental health of students is a priority issue as a healthy nation rests on the mental well-being of its people. There is a need to infuse the 21st-century skills in the curriculum taught so as to develop a learner who is academically fit and emotionally healthy. The skills encompass a diverse set of competencies, including critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity, digital literacy, and emotional intelligence. These abilities equip students to navigate complex situations and adjust to evolving environments, fostering resilience in the face of mental health challenges. Emotional intelligence, for instance, enhances self-awareness and empathy, enabling students to recognize emotional difficulties and seek support when necessary. Similarly, critical thinking aids in analyzing negative thought patterns, while strong communication and collaborative skills help build

meaningful connections, reducing isolation and promoting well-being.

At the workplace, there is a need to promote and protect the mental well-being of all staff so as to enhance their capacity for productivity. This can be achieved through legislation and regulations, training of mental health champions and creating awareness of mental health issues.

Recommendations

The government should allocate more money to campaigns advocating for mental health. They should also employ more mental health workers to help people suffering from mental health issues by demystifying stigma at the grassroots level. In Kenya, mental health is underfunded and there is no separate budget for mental health. The country has approximately 100 psychiatrists for a population of 45 million (ratio 1:450,000). Furthermore, clinical psychologists and medical social workers who are fundamental to the management and treatment of mental illness are very few. The Universities should also employ more professional student counsellors who can handle more students since mental health issues are on the rise among young people.

There is a need to revise the curriculum so that they are in line with the needs of the job market so that the students can adapt easily and quickly to the job. In a fast-changing world caused by technology and demographic changes, there is a need to change it so that the students are up to date with the current trends and well-equipped to handle any challenges befalling them. A healthy mind rests in a healthy body and when one is confident of their abilities because they are well prepared, then they can be in a better position to have confidence about their future prospects and use their skills in the job market without feeling like an imposter or underqualified.

Students can also attend in-person and online seminars on preparing for the workplace in an era where so much information is found online for free.

In social media platforms such as Facebook, X and YouTube there are many professionals teaching and enlightening people on how to be ready for the job market such as the award-winning Joan Thuo.

The students can also follow professional counsellors online and get valuable content about challenges facing the youth and how to deal with them for example Benjamin Zulu and Jennifer Kiarie write and talk extensively on social media platforms about mental health, career preparation and progression mainly targeting the youth.

Limitations and Future Research

- The sample size was 20 hence the data obtained may not be generalized to the whole nation as it is small in number. It was mainly meant to elicit in-depth information on attitude, perception and issues regarding the students' mental health and 21st Century skills.

- Only the fourth-year students were included in the study. In future, a study that involves students from other years right from the first year can be undertaken so as to get various views.

- The study only included the views of the students. A future study can be done to include the views of lecturers, psychologists and also curriculum development experts so as to get more opinions to have an enhanced perspective.

- The study focused on five 21st-century skills. A future study could be done to discuss the other skills as they will be of invaluable use in enriching the study.

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