

# Does the Training of Human Resource Officers in Malawi Include Counselling Skills Education and Practice for Workplace Mental Health? Human Resource Officers' Experiences

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## Abstract

The study aimed to explore whether training of Human Resource Officers in Malawi includes counselling skills education and practice for workplace mental health. This study has helped to understand the potential and knowledge deficits among human resources officers in provision of counselling services at workplace. A descriptive cross-sectional study design was used whilst utilizing qualitative methods. 29 participants were involved in this study. The results showed that there is a need to address mental health challenges among employees at workplace. This study observed that HR officers believe that there is need to address psycho-social problems among employees, that majority of curriculums for HR degree programs in Malawi do not include counselling module, and that HR officers should consider training in counselling and mental health. Therefore, HR Officers' curriculum in different universities and colleges has to address the gap of counselling concepts in their curriculum.

## Keywords

Training, Human Resource Officers, Malawi, Counselling, Skills, Education, Practice, Workplace, Mental Health, Perspectives

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## 1. Introduction

Psychosocial challenges have become increasingly prevalent across populations worldwide, and Malawi is no exception. However, studies have largely been done in schools and clinics and not at workplace (Kim et al., 2019; Kuyokwa et al., 2024;

Kuyokwa, 2023; Masulani-Mwale et al., 2019; Mateza & Moyo, 2023; Ng'oma et al., 2024; Phiri et al., 2023; Sengupta & Benjamin, 2004). Employees, as part of the general population, are experiencing rising psycho-social problems like stress, burnout and depression that affect workplace productivity, morale, health, life satisfaction, and happiness and overall well-being (Choobineh et al., 2011; Kozlova & Lakiša, 2016; Sengupta & Benjamin, 2004).

In this study, counselling skills education is defined as developing core counselling competencies such as active listening, empathy, and being ethical during counselling process. In addition, counselling practice is defined as professional application of interpersonal skills, use of psychological theories, and the application of ethics when helping employees who are experiencing psychosocial problems. While workplace mental health is a supportive work environment that prevents psychological distress, and promotes wellbeing. Psycho-social problems are psychological and social challenges that people experience in their daily life (De Oliveira et al., 2023; World Health Organization, 2022; Rugulies et al., 2023).

Traditionally, Human Resources (HR) officers in Malawi have been perceived as administrators, focusing on recruitment, disciplinary hearings, and compliance with organizational policies (Armstrong, 2014; Chikapa, 2025). However, with the increasing cases of psychological problems like suicidal thoughts, depression and burnout, and the evolving nature of workplace dynamics, HR officers are presented with opportunities to play a more supportive role and act as counselors in addressing employees' psycho-social needs (Boyatzis & Burrus, 1995; Junne et al., 2018; Rao & Manohar, 2010; Smith & Walz, 1984). This study aimed to explore whether training of Human Resource Officers in Malawi includes counselling skills education and practice for workplace mental health. The findings will provide insights into how HR officers can be empowered to support employees' mental health, thereby contributing to healthier workplaces and improved organizational outcomes.

## 2. Literature Review

There is growing prevalence of psychosocial problems globally and recent reports indicate an increase in psychosocial problems in Malawi's general population, with employees equally affected (Gabriel, 2000). Some of the common mental health problems employees may experience that may affect their performance at workplace include substance use, mood fluctuations, angry outbursts or aggression, excessive anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, inability to perform duties, inability to fall asleep or stay asleep, physical illnesses, and alcohol or other addictions (Gabriel, 2000; Gyawali, 2015; Kelloway et al., 2023; Maclean et al., 2015). Unaddressed psycho-social problems can lead to absenteeism, reduced productivity, strained relationships, higher turnover, reduced attention, reduced capacity to focus on the work, and fatigue that leads to diminished performance (Kelloway et al., 2023). While HR officers have traditionally focused on administrative functions, their position within organizations uniquely situates them to identify, manage, and support employees facing psycho-social challenges. Furthermore, HR de-

gree programs in Malawi and elsewhere may not adequately prepare officers with appropriate competencies like counselling or mental health management skills, limiting their capacity to provide psycho-social support and not that they do not want to help, but because they do not have the skills to help (Dimoff & Kelloway, 2019; Leka & Nicholson, 2019). This study is therefore necessary to explore if training of Human Resource Officers in Malawi includes counselling skills education and practice which is key for workplace mental health to be successful.

### 3. Methodology

A research methodology can be defined as a structured and scientific way of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data in order to answer a research question.

#### 3.1. Research Design

A descriptive cross-sectional study design was used while utilizing qualitative methods was adopted in this study in order to explore if training of HR Officers in Malawi includes counselling skills education and practices. This approach allows for in-depth exploration of attitudes and practices among HR officers (Ishtiaq, 2019; Weyant, 2022).

#### 3.2. Population and Sampling

The target population were HR officers working in public, private, and non-governmental organizations in Malawi and were purposively sampled in order to select HR officers from diverse sectors to ensure representation (Campbell et al., 2020; Rai & Thapa, 2015). 30 participants were approached and 29 HR officers participated in this study. We sent structured questionnaires to HR officers and they responded in their natural settings across the country. The recruitment of study participants utilized a snowball sampling approach where the initial participant (HR officer) at a nongovernmental organization was asked to refer other HR professionals in their network who meet the study criteria to respond to the study questionnaire. Eligibility to participate in this study was restricted to individuals aged above 18 years and with a minimum of two years' professional experience as HR officers.

#### 3.3. Data Collection Methods

Data was collected using self-report questionnaires in order to explore HR officers' skills, perceptions, and experiences about mental health challenges at workplace (Adams, 2015; Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021; Longhurst & Johnston, 2023).

#### 3.4. Data Analysis

Thematic data analysis was done; this was by identifying recurring themes related to counselling skills, practice, and training needs (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Curriculum documents were analyzed for content related to counselling and psychosocial health (Belotto, 2018; Vaismoradi et al., 2016; Vaismoradi & Snelgrove,

2019). Opened ended questionnaires and quotations were used in this study. In addition, the questionnaire was piloted among five participants in order ensure data quality, feasibility and clarity before starting the whole study. The process of thematic data analysis included the following steps; identification, analysis, and reporting of themes/patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2023; Braun et al., 2022). The process involved familiarization with the data, coding, developing and refining themes, and then writing the study findings.

### 3.5. Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants at all times, confidentiality and anonymity was maintained. This study has managed to explore the extent to which the training of Human Resource Officers in Malawi includes counselling skills education and practice for workplace mental health. However, given that this study was purely qualitative, with a few participants purposively sampled. Therefore, the study findings cannot be generalized to all HR officers in Malawi.

## 4. Results and Discussion

The study aimed to explore whether training of Human Resource Officers in Malawi includes counselling skills education and practice for workplace mental health.

The research aimed to address the following research questions

Research Questions

- 1) Do HR officers think there is a need to address psycho-social problems among employees?
- 2) Do HR academic programs in Malawi include a module in counselling as part of their curriculum?
- 3) Do HR officers consider training in counselling and mental health to be necessary?

In addition, 29 participants from diverse Human Resource practice background were involved in this study. All study participants had served as human resource officers over a period of five years and more. Generally, participants came from diverse background. Thus government, non-governmental organizations and private sectors. Furthermore, the results were analyzed based on the themes that came out of the participants' responses. The results are presented in **Table 1** below.

**Table 1.** Thematic analysis.

Theme	Agree N (%)	Disagree N (%)
Importance of addressing psycho-social problems in the workplace.	29 (100)	0 (0)
HR degree programs in Malawi include counselling modules.	26 (90)	6 (10)
The need for training in counselling and mental health.	29 (100)	0 (0)
<b>Total participants</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>29</b>

#### 4.1. HR Officers' Perceptions of the Importance of Addressing Psycho-Social Problems in the Workplace

The study observed that HR officers perceive that it is important to address psycho-social problems among employees in the workplace. Similar studies also found that is important for HR officers to be able to address the psychosocial challenges and promote mental wellbeing among employees at workplace (Andersen et al., 2018; Gyawali, 2015; Issalillah & Khayru, 2025; Sharma & Sharma, 2021). For example, Participant 1; *'As HR Officer, yes there is a need to address psycho-social problems among employees and you are able to identify psycho-social problems among employees. These problems, often stemming from the design, organisation, and management of work are classified as psycho-social hazards that can lead to physical and psychological hazards that can lead to physical and psychological harm'*. Participant 2; *'To some extent yes. I can assist in marital challenges and provide guidance on financial challenges. Deep psychosomatic challenges I refer them to professional counsellors'*. Participant 3; *'Yes there's a need for the management to pay attention to the psycho-social challenges since it affects the effectiveness and efficiency of company's productivity. Employees are the backbone of the company so addressing their psycho-social problems is prominent both for company's and employee's growth'*. Participant 4; *'Yes there's a need for the management to pay attention to the psycho-social challenges since it affects the effectiveness and efficiency of company's productivity. Employees are the backbone of the company so addressing their psycho-social problems is prominent both for company's and employee's growth. Absolutely. Addressing psycho-social problems is crucial for maintaining a healthy and productive workforce. Unaddressed issues can lead to decreased morale, reduced productivity, and increased turnover'*. Participant 5; *'Yes, there is a great need to address psycho-social problem because for an institution to be successful it depends on employees performance so when an employee is battling for example depression such an employee will not performance o the maximum hence affecting the institutional productivity and failing to achieve the objectives and goals hence it is very important to address such issues'*. Participant 6; *'Yes. There is a great need to address psychosocial problems among employees. Failure to address these challenges negatively affects employee well-being, productivity, morale, and overall organizational performance. Addressing psychosocial issues contributes to a healthier work environment, reduced absenteeism, improved job satisfaction, and overall organizational effectiveness'*. Participant 7; *'Absolutely. When psychosocial issues go unaddressed, they can snowball into absenteeism, disengagement, turnover, and even safety risks. By proactively tackling stress, burnout, conflict, or mental-health concerns you protect both the individual's wellbeing and the organization's productivity'*. Participant 8; *'Yes, there is a strong need to address psychosocial problems among employees. Psychosocial challenges such as work-related stress, burnout, interpersonal conflicts, anxiety, depression, and work-life imbalance can significantly affect employee well-being, job performance, morale, and overall organizational productivity.'*

## 4.2. HR Degree Program Curriculums in Malawi and Inclusion of Counselling Modules

The study found that Majority of curriculums for HR degree programs in Malawi do not include counselling module while other participants said that their curriculums have some counselling concepts. Also, similar studies on HR degree programs' curriculum and counselling have not reported on inclusion of counselling modules in HR degree programs (Zandi et al., 2019; Soika & Vronska, 2023). For example, Participant 1; *'No, Most HR academic programs in Malawi focus on traditional HR functions, but there is a growing recognition of the need for counselling and mental health modules. Some institutions are incorporating these topics into their curricula'*. Participant 2; *'No, it is critical for transitioning human resources from a purely administrative function to a strategic business partners. It equips future professionals with the theoretical knowledge, practical skills, and ethical framework needed to manage the modern digitally enabled, and diverse workforce'*. Participant 3; *'No, From the look of things, it appears HR is focusing only on the social welfare not psychological welfare. The need is so huge. Psychosocial problems affect the productivity of an employee. The more a person is disturbed the lower the productivity'*. Participant 4; *'No, I really have no idea on this issue of mental health inclusion in HR curriculum'*. Participant 5; *'No, according to my knowledge, I don't think these programs are included otherwise they would have been implemented or institutionalized'*. Participant 6; *'No. In Most cases, HR academic programs in Malawi do not adequately include a full counselling module. This creates skills gap among HR professionals in managing psychosocial problems'*. Participant 7; *'No, I'd say it's a mixed bag. The University of Malawi's BA in Human Resource Management lists \*conflict resolution\* and \*industrial relations\* but doesn't explicitly name a counselling module. Yes, there is need, e.g. to improve organisational productivity, improve employee quality of life'*. Participant 8; *'No, From the look of things, it appears HR is focusing only on the social welfare not psychological welfare. The need is so huge. Psychosocial problems affect the productivity of an employee. The more a person is disturbed the lower the productivity'*.

However, some participants said there are some counselling concepts in the modules in HR curriculum. For example, Participant z *'Yes, to some extent HR academic programs in Malawi include module in counselling as part of their curriculum for example University of Malawi (UNIMA) their BA in Human Resource Management covers aspects like employee relations, organizational behavior or even psychology/sociology modules where counselling is also taught'*. Participant 10; *'Yes, our Bachelor's degree in Human Resource Management and at school we have covered a course called performance management and counselling so yes, it is included in the curriculum'*.

## 4.3. HR Officers' Views on the Need for Training in Counselling and Mental Health within Their Services

The study found that HR officers perceive that there is need for training in coun-

selling and mental health within their services. Similar studies have also observed that there is need for mental health support of the employees at workplace and therefore HR officers have to be competent in counselling and mental health (Al-Twal et al., 2025; Hennekam et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2023). For example, Participant 1; *'Yes. Training in counselling and mental health is considered highly necessary and increasingly essential for HR Officers to foster a supportive, productive, and resilient work environment. It is necessary because this will help HR officers to be holistic in their profession. The psyche part of an individual is very important and it controls the individual'*. Participant 2; *'Absolutely. When dealing with different people from different back grounds and different life experiences I feel that the training in counseling will be very necessary'*. Participant 3; *'Yes, I consider training in counseling and mental health as this assist an employee to focus on the job since he has a stable mind hence effective performance of the company'*. Participant 4; *'Yes training in in counselling and mental health is essential. Cases of suicide will reduce; employees will be equipped with skills on how to deal with these challenges'*. Participant 5; *'Yes. Training in counselling and mental health is necessary for HR officers. Given the increasing prevalence of stress, depression, burnout, and other psychosocial issues in workplace, HR officers require formal training to effectively support employees'*. Participant 6; *'Yes. In today's workplace, stress, burnout, and mental-health concerns are common, and they show up in absenteeism, turnover, and reduced productivity. Having basic counseling skills—active listening, empathy, and knowing when to refer someone to professional help—lets HR intervene early, support employees, and protect the organization's health. So yes, I see training in counseling and mental-health awareness as essential for any HR officer'*. Participant 7 said *'While HR officers are not expected to replace professional counsellors or psychologists, foundational training enables them to respond appropriately and contribute to improved employee wellbeing, productivity, and organizational stability'*.

## 5. Conclusion

There is need to address mental health challenges among employees at workplace. This study observed that HR officers believe that there is need to address psychosocial problems among employees, majority of curriculums for HR degree programs in Malawi do not include counselling module, and that HR officers should consider training in counselling and mental health. Despite the fact that some participants observed that counseling concepts are not covered in their curriculum. Therefore, it is important to provide formal training for HR officers to ensure that they are prepared with the necessary knowledge in counselling which is required for them to refer employees with psycho-social challenges for professional counselling.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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