

# University Counselling – History, Current Situation And Future Challenges

## University Counselling from the Counsellors’ Perspective

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**Abstract:** The article focuses on the current state of university counselling services in the Czech Republic and on changes in the needs of students and academic staff as perceived by counselling professionals. The introductory section outlines the historical development and institutional establishment of counselling services, including the legislative framework and the professionalization of the field. The empirical part is based on an online questionnaire survey conducted among 22 counsellors working at four Czech universities. The results show that counselling services have become a stable and respected component of the higher education environment, with a significant increase in demand, particularly for psychological support. Predominant student-related issues include anxiety, uncertainty, overload, academic difficulties, and weakened social skills, with counsellors also reporting long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study further highlights the expansion of counselling services toward supporting academic staff, especially in working with students experiencing difficulties. Despite these positive developments, structural barriers persist, including uneven availability of services, limited capacity and unclear expectations regarding the role of university counselling centers. The conclusion formulates recommendations aimed at strengthening systemic integration, prevention and cooperation with the academic community.

**Key words:** university counselling; students; mental health; academic environment; well-being; COVID-19 pandemic; faculty; specific needs

## **Theoretical Foundations of University Counselling in the Czech Republic**

### **History of University Counselling in the Czech Republic**

The origins of counselling services in the Czech Republic date back to the period between the two world wars, when applied psychology and psychotechnics began to develop. The first counselling centers emerged, primarily focused on the career selection process, educational direction and resolving educational dilemmas. At that time, counselling was not part of the formal school system; the centers operated independently, most often in youth welfare offices, institutions for promoting trade or socio-medical organizations (Kohoutek, 1998). Gradually, a network of career counselling centers was established, not only in Prague but also in regional cities such as Jihlava, Pardubice and Brno, including specialized units like the Student (Academic) Counselling Center at the Central Psychotechnical Institute, founded in 1935 (Brožek & Hoskovec, 1991). Although there were no counselling centers exclusively for university students, these institutions provided services to a broad target group and became an important precursor to later academic counselling centers. They addressed issues such as educational choice, career orientation

and psychodiagnostics, thereby laying the foundations for professional counselling practice and future higher education counselling services.

In the post-war period, counselling activities were suppressed under the influence of communist ideology, and the scope for psychological and career counselling significantly declined. It was not until the late 1960s that the first more systematic efforts to revive counselling activities began, initially concentrated in regional psychological centers for primary and secondary school students. The first specialized counselling center for university students was established in 1968 in Bratislava, followed shortly thereafter by the founding of the first Czech academic counselling center in Prague in 1973.

Until 1989, counselling at universities functioned largely on an informal basis and was often carried out as a secondary activity by individual members of academic staff. These initiatives were typically isolated and short-lived, closely linked to particular professionals rather than to institutions. Counselling practices at the time ranged from career guidance and psychological support to assistance with managing academic demands. No systematic or institutionally established counselling services existed during this period (Kucharská, 2025).

## Development of university counselling after 1990

After 1989, the higher education sector underwent a profound transformation, marked by rapid expansion, increasing diversification of student needs and growing pressure to modernize support services. The democratic context of the 1990s created space for institutional autonomy, new legislative frameworks and the development of academic freedoms, enabling the establishment of university structures that had not been possible under the previous regime (Novotný et al., 2021). Interest in higher education rose sharply during this period: student numbers increased steadily, new universities and faculties were established at a rapid pace and the academic landscape expanded significantly.

Concurrently, international and European initiatives to harmonize tertiary education increasingly influenced the system, leading to the gradual modernization of degree programs and the development of new forms of university support. The massification of higher education brought greater heterogeneity within the student population, more diverse learning needs and increased demands on students' abilities to navigate their studies, thereby creating a need for systematic forms of student support. Although informal assistance had existed at many institutions for a long time, typically provided on an individual basis by academic staff, it was only the societal

and institutional changes of the 1990s that created the conditions for the formal establishment of university counselling centers. Consequently, the first institutionally established counselling units emerged in the early 1990s, such as the Counselling Center of Masaryk University (1994) or the Coordination Center for Services for Students with Disabilities at Charles University. At the same time, distinct forms of counselling began to take shape—including academic, career and psychological counselling, as well as support for students with specific needs—and a broader discussion emerged regarding the professionalization and methodological standards of higher education counselling. This process can be interpreted as being driven not only by political and legislative changes, but also by the rapid increase in student numbers, which in turn created a need for new support mechanisms capable of responding to the growing diversity of students' academic and psychosocial needs.

In the second phase, spanning the second half of the 1990s, student support for individuals with specific needs underwent a significant transformation. Counselling shifted from isolated individual initiatives toward a coordinated system aimed at standardizing practices, providing methodological guidance to faculties, and integrating counselling services with academic processes.

At the turn of the millennium, coun-

selling services continued to professionalize and expand to technical and regional universities as well (e.g., CIPS at the Czech Technical University in 2003, and the Information and Counselling Center at the University of West Bohemia in 2006). This period was characterized by the development of multidisciplinary teams, the centralization of services into a single point of contact, the expansion of career and psychological counselling, networking with other university units, and a growing awareness of the importance of supporting academic success and preventing early dropout.

A major milestone was the establishment of the Association of University Counsellors (AVŠP) in 2008. The Association has contributed to the unification of terminology and methodological approaches and has created a professional platform for the exchange of good practice. As a result, counselling services are increasingly viewed as a strategic component of university quality—not merely as a means of addressing problems but as a form of systemic support for student adaptation and development.

### **Current state of university counselling in the Czech Republic**

Contemporary higher education counselling in the Czech Republic is characterized by considerable diversity in both organizational structure and the

scope of services offered. It is a dynamically developing field that responds to the needs of a heterogeneous student population. Universities, owing to their autonomy, are able to design their own models of counselling support—ranging from centralized counselling centers to combinations of central and faculty-based units—with an emphasis on comprehensive and accessible services. Multidisciplinary teams integrate psychology, special education, social work, career counselling and socio-legal support. This model enables the provision of assistance in complex student situations, as many students present with overlapping academic, psychological and social challenges (Association of University Counsellors, n.d.).

The provision of counselling services at Czech universities is primarily established in Act No. 111/1998 Coll., on Higher Education, along with related regulations. Although the Act does not explicitly enumerate specific types of services, it obliges universities to ensure support for their students, including measures to promote equal opportunities. This obligation applies particularly to students with health, social or other disadvantages; however, in practice, counselling services are provided to the entire student population. According to Sec. 6(2) of the Act, each public university is required to define the organization and activities of its components in internal regulations, which must be registered

with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. These documents typically also include provisions on counselling services, thereby strengthening their institutional foundation and ensuring greater stability.

Government Regulation No. 274/2016 Coll., on Standards for Accreditation in Higher Education, further establishes the obligation of universities to ensure equal access to education and to provide supportive measures for students with specific needs. Institutions are required to ensure the availability of services and scholarships, to maintain a respectful and well-informed approach by staff toward these students, and at the same time to guarantee that the accommodations provided do not reduce academic requirements.

Professionalization of the field is also crucial. The Association of University Counsellors develops methodological materials, supports the training of counsellors and strengthens the role of counselling within the quality management of universities (Association of University Counsellors, n. d.). Current challenges include the high demand for psychological services, variations in the quality and scope of services across universities, the need to raise awareness among academic staff and the promotion of systemic well-being initiatives. Counselling addresses both individual care and broader systemic change. University counselling has evolved into a multidis-

ciplinary field that connects legislative obligations, professional expertise and the concrete needs of the student population. Contemporary models emphasize an approach based on respect, equality and individualized support, becoming an integral part of the institutional culture of higher education.

The current state of university counselling is assessed by Bláha in *University Counselling in the Czech Republic: Between Strategy and Reality* (Bláha, 2022). The work systematically presents university counselling as a subject of both academic study and public policy. The author analyzes the institutional framework of counselling services, their availability and scope, and highlights significant differences across universities. The study summarizes the types of counselling currently offered (psychological, career, academic, support for students with specific needs, etc.) and points to uneven capacities, funding and methodological guidance. Bláha also notes that the strategic objectives declared by universities often do not align with what counselling services can actually provide. The publication thus provides an important overview of the current situation, key challenges and the need for conceptual support and funding. At the same time, it confirms that university counselling is not only a practical service but is also becoming a research and strategic topic that merits ongoing attention and development.

## **Who is a university counsellor?**

A university counsellor is a professional who provides students (and sometimes faculty) with support in areas such as academic matters, career development, mental health, socio-legal issues or specific educational needs. According to the Standards of University Counselling published by the Association of University Counsellors (n.d.), counsellors are expected to act in accordance with their professional qualifications, ethical principles as well as confidentiality and data protection requirements. The counsellor's role is multidisciplinary, encompassing individual consultations, assessment, methodological guidance, service coordination and the promotion of an inclusive learning environment.

The Code of Ethics of the Association of University Counsellors (2025) emphasizes the principles of respect, confidentiality, equal opportunity, voluntary participation and the professional boundaries of the counselling relationship. This also includes continuous professional development and supervision—counsellors are required to engage in regular training, stay up to date with developments in the field and maintain their professional competencies. Furthermore, they are obliged to protect clients' privacy, secure data and keep records in a manner that ensures confidentiality and adherence to ethical standards. In practice, university

counsellors are professionals with specialized training in psychology, special education, social work or related fields, who provide consultative support, collaborate with faculties and contribute to the well-being of both students and the academic community.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Objectives of the study and research questions**

The aim of the study was to gain insight into the functioning of counselling services at universities from the perspective of the counsellors themselves. The goal was not to provide a representative description of counselling across all Czech universities, but rather to offer an exploratory, qualitative perspective on the experiences of counsellors working in various types of university counselling centers.

To achieve the objectives of the study and gain an understanding of the current state of university counselling services, the research focused on key areas of counselling practice: the nature of the services provided, the most common student requests and how these have changed since the pandemic, opportunities for supporting faculty as well as the strengths and limitations of counselling practice. These areas served as the basis for formulating the research questions.

1. Which types of counselling services are available at universities and what are the most frequent student concerns?
2. According to counsellors, how have students' needs and difficulties evolved as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What forms of support do counselling services provide to faculty, and what needs or challenges do faculty most commonly bring to the counselling centers?
4. How do counsellors evaluate the strengths and limitations of contemporary university counselling practice?
5. Which factors affect the possibilities for the future development of counselling services?

### **Research design and data collection**

The research took the form of an online questionnaire survey conducted between June and August 2025. The questionnaire included closed-ended, multiple-choice and open-ended questions, allowing for a combined exploratory quantitative and qualitative analysis. It was distributed to 65 counselling staff at universities, with 25 respondents completing it (a response rate of 38.5%). Participants were contacted through the conference University Counselling 2025 – Current Trends and Challenges (Faculty of Education, Charles University, 2025).

Thus, the sample is not representative of all counselling staff in the Czech Republic but rather consists of professionals who actively engage in professional development and monitor emerging trends in higher education and counselling. This selection approach allowed for the collection of expert insights and informed experiences from counsellors who contribute to the development of the field and have a clear view of current shifts and challenges in the university environment. In this sense, the study is exploratory, providing valuable input for further research and helping to identify topics that merit systematic investigation.

### **Analytical Methods**

Closed-ended items were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while multiple-choice questions were assessed by calculating frequencies and percentage distributions of the response options. Open-ended questions were analyzed using content analysis. This process involved open coding of responses, followed by grouping semantically related answers into subcategories, and finally condensing them into higher-level thematic categories. This approach allowed for capturing both the specific experiences of counsellors and the broader trends across universities.

## Sample

The study involved counsellors from university counselling offices and centers. They were employed at four universities (Charles University, University of Chemistry and Technology Prague, Czech Technical University and Czech University of Life Sciences), allowing for a capture of the diversity of counselling practice across different institutional contexts. Of the 25 respondents, 23 were women. Responses from three participants were excluded from the analysis due to incompleteness, leaving a total of 22 completed responses. The average age of respondents was 41.38 years ( $SD = 10.10$ ), and their counselling experience averaged 5.31 years ( $SD = 3.45$ ).

Half of the counsellors (11 individuals; 50%) also hold an academic position at their university, which may influence their perception of students' counselling needs as well as their collaboration with faculty. Regarding employment type, most counsellors were employed under a standard work contract (16 individuals), two worked under a service agreement and four provided services on a freelance basis (invoicing). These differences highlight the varied institutional arrangements for counselling across the universities included in the study.

## Results of the Survey among Counselling Staff

### Typology of counselling services provided to students

Counsellors worked with approximately 10-11 students per month, typically meeting each student three times; the average duration of engagement with a student was 6-7 months. The findings showed considerable variability, which was related to both the counsellors' workloads and their specific involvement in the provision of counselling services.

As can be seen below in the overview of categories, the first three categories dominate, ranging from half to two-thirds of the sample—namely, psychological counselling, academic counselling and crisis intervention. The first three categories dominate, ranging from half to two-thirds of the sample—namely, psychological counselling, academic counselling and crisis intervention. About one-third of respondents reported additional areas, including special education counselling (such as support for students with specific needs), relationship and partner counselling as well as counselling for international students. The final three categories were mentioned less frequently: career and professional counselling, socio-legal counselling and support for students with specific needs. Since the question allowed for additional

comments, it is possible to examine each category in more detail.

**Psychological counselling (N=73%).**

Psychological counselling is the most frequently reported service. Counsellors address issues such as anxiety, stress, panic attacks, uncertainty, low self-esteem and student overload. A significant portion of cases relates to adaptation to university life, managing academic demands and overall student well-being. The psychological component is a key part of counselling services at most universities.

**Academic counselling (N=13, 59%).**

Counsellors reported general issues such as “problems with studying” but also provided more specific examples, including insufficient motivation, procrastination, exam failures, communication with instructors, concerns about final exams and study support strategies. Academic counselling is therefore an important component of overall student support.

**Crisis intervention (N=10, 46%).**

Counsellors reported that crisis intervention involves working with students in acute or rapidly escalating situations, typically in cases of psychological crises, self-harm or suicidal thoughts. It also addresses urgent issues related to studies, family, peers or professors. The focus is primarily on the initial identification of acute psychological or academic risk, assessment of the situation, provision of short-term support and referral to specialized care—often outside

the university counselling setting—with recommendations for clinical psychologist or psychiatric services.

**Special education counselling**

**(N=6, 27%).** Services for students with specific needs represent one of the most specialized areas of counselling. Counsellors focus on functional assessment (a requirement for registering students as having specific needs), adjustments to study conditions, communication with instructors, preparation of recommendations and explanation of the relevant legal framework. This area is particularly challenging due to varying levels of instructor readiness and differing interpretations of what study accommodations entail.

**Counselling for international students (N=6, 27%).**

Counselling for international students focuses on adaptation to academic requirements, language-related support, social integration and the resolution of legal and practical issues associated with studying in the Czech Republic. It may also include psychological support related to culture shock, loneliness or social isolation.

**Career counselling (N=5, 23%):**

Counsellors reported that students also seek support due to uncertainty about their choice of field or future career direction. Career counselling includes assistance with labour-market orientation, CV preparation, decisions about further studies and long-term career planning. This is a rapidly developing

area that complements psychological and academic support.

**Social and legal counselling (N=4, 18%).** Counsellors also addressed financial and social issues, which have increased markedly in recent years. These include support with accessing scholarships and benefits, managing financial hardship, balancing paid work with studies and navigating legal matters in specific situations. Such requests are often linked to the growing pressure on students who combine their studies with employment.

**Support for specific student groups (N=3, 14%).** In the counsellors' accounts, this type of support most often appeared in relation to student parents, students from low-income backgrounds, first-generation students and those combining study with paid work. Counsellors noted that these groups tend to face distinct challenges in terms of study organization, financial pressures and increased psychosocial strain, and therefore may require more targeted support or a more individualized approach.

### **Perceived problems faced by today's university students**

We then focused on counsellors' perceptions of the problems faced by today's university students. The qualitative analysis drew on dozens of individual statements and identified six main thematic areas:

**Psychological stress and mental health challenges (N=11, 50%).** Counsellors reported that contemporary university students who seek support are often experiencing significant psychological strain. Anxiety, fear and panic attacks are predominant, frequently accompanied by depressive symptoms, emotional instability and feelings of overall exhaustion. Students describe overload and signs of impending burnout, as well as long-standing low self-esteem, self-doubt and difficulties with self-evaluation. Perfectionism, fear of failure and concern about making mistakes or disappointing others play a significant role. Many students struggle with intense uncertainty, self-criticism and feelings of being "unable to cope." Emotional overload, psychosomatic symptoms and sleep disturbances are also common.

**Academic insecurity and disorganization (N=8, 36%).** Common challenges faced by university students include uncertainty about their studies—concerns about exams, final state examinations or completing their degree, fear of academic failure and doubts about the purpose of their studies. Students often struggle to navigate the academic environment, administrative procedures and study requirements, which further increases stress. Poor planning, procrastination, workload pressure and insufficient study strategies or time management are also significant factors. Additionally, personal and emotional issues—such as rela-

tionship difficulties, emotional strain or anxiety—can negatively affect academic performance, reduce motivation, increase the risk of delaying tasks and in some cases, lead to interruption or termination of studies.

**Weaker social skills and difficulties in relationships (N=8, 36%).** A significant area of difficulties for which students seek university counselling services involves relationship and social problems. Most commonly, these include conflicts with partners or family members, complications in relationships with classmates, feelings of loneliness and difficulties in forming new connections. Counsellors also often report uncertainty in communication with instructors or supervisors, problems in relationships within departments and challenges in integrating into social groups. These situations can lead to feelings of inadequacy and isolation, which in turn increase stress levels and reduce motivation to continue studying.

**Career uncertainty and professional direction (N=4, 18%).** A significant area of counselling services concerns students' uncertainty about their professional direction. Students often doubt their choice of study program, fear making the wrong decision and question their future career prospects. Indecision between multiple options, fear of making a mistake and the feeling of “not knowing what I want” are common. Counsellors also report pressure from family or society to

choose the “right” field or career, which further increases anxiety and can lead to postponing decisions or feeling paralyzed when choosing the next step.

**Social and economic burden (N=3, 4%).** Students also report practical pressures, such as the need to work while studying, financial insecurity and difficult life situations that interfere with their study routines. Common issues include balancing work, studies and personal life, chronic time shortages and a lack of rest. Some students face the challenges of being studying parents, caring for children or dealing with unstable housing conditions, all of which can lead to increased stress and threaten academic success.

A significant group of difficulties involves **personality and value-related issues**, which reflect a deeper sense of identity uncertainty among students. Counsellors report that students often reflect on the meaning of life and their future paths, question the correctness of their chosen direction and seek to understand “who am I and where am I going.” Feelings of being unfulfilled by their studies, conflicts between personal values and external expectations as well as uncertainty about long-term direction are also evident. These issues indicate that counselling services are used not only in response to acute problems but also to seek personal grounding and life purpose during periods of major academic and life decision-making.

## **Changes following the COVID-19 pandemic**

Respondents agreed that the pandemic fundamentally changed both the psychological well-being and academic functioning of university students. It represented a significant burden, the effects of which counsellors continue to observe several years later. The results of the qualitative analysis can be divided into multiple categories, as counsellors provided multiple responses.

**Decline in mental health (N=16, 73%).** Counsellors often reported higher levels of anxiety, uncertainty and social fear among students, particularly when returning to group interactions and communication. According to counsellors, students have more difficulty managing routine academic situations, show reduced stress tolerance and are more prone to feelings of discomfort. For many, returning to in-person learning was associated with significant stress and uncertainty.

**Decline in study habits (N=15, 68%).** A large portion of the responses describe that during prolonged periods of remote learning, students lost routine and systematic study habits. Returning to in-person learning therefore required a more challenging process of rebuilding discipline, planning and study organization. Counsellors also mentioned students' weaker orientation within the university environment and a greater tendency to postpone fulfilling academic obligations.

**Social isolation and impaired interpersonal skills (N=12, 55%).** Recurring themes included social isolation, uncertainty in communication and difficulties in establishing connections. According to counsellors, students communicate less in seminars, are hesitant to speak in front of peers or instructors and find it more difficult to integrate into groups. Counsellors noted that the pandemic disrupted regular social learning, which is reflected in weaker relational competencies.

**Rising demand for support services (N=9, 41%).** All counselling centers reported a significant increase in requests for psychological support. Counsellors emphasized that students are seeking help more frequently and earlier than before the pandemic, and that counselling services have become a much more visible part of the university environment. The pandemic experience has thus heightened the need for supportive mechanisms and underscored the importance of counselling in managing challenging situations.

**Positive aspects (N=6, 27%).** Although the counsellors' qualitative data predominantly reflect the negative impacts of the pandemic, positive changes were also observed, albeit less frequently (usually expressed as "exceptions," "for some students" or "within part of the group"). Counsellors noted that some students became more independent and were better able to manage the-

ir time and studies because they had to take on greater personal responsibility. Some learned to work more effectively with digital tools and to make regular use of online consultations or hybrid forms of learning, which provided them with greater flexibility. It was also noted that the pandemic contributed to the destigmatization of psychological support—students became less hesitant to seek professional help and were more willing to talk about mental health. In rare cases, counsellors reported that some students experienced less social stress or performance pressure in the online environment and were better able to maintain their personal routines. Overall, it can be said that the pandemic supported adaptability and openness to mental health care in a subset of students, even though this was more of a minority trend.

### **Faculty counselling services**

Most counsellors have experience providing advisory support to members of university faculty (N=18), although they note that it is less frequent than work with students and, in some cases, rather rare. Recurring thematic areas of support for faculty can be identified in their responses.

**Academic adjustments and faculty assistance in support of students (N=14, 64%).** The most common request involves consultations on how to adapt teaching and assessment for students

who have specific difficulties—or whom counsellors perceive as needing support. This concerns not only formally registered students with specific needs, but also those going through stressful periods, experiencing academic difficulties or facing temporary limitations. Counsellors assist faculty in identifying realistic and pedagogically feasible adjustments to teaching or assessment while also establishing fair conditions.

**Responding to student mental health crises (N=8, 36%).** In some cases, faculty turn to the counselling center when a student shows signs of a psychological crisis. Consultations primarily focus on understanding how to respond, how to offer support to the student and when it is appropriate to refer the student to the counselling center or other professional services.

**Challenging communication and conflict situations (N=6, 27%).** The data also include mentions of more challenging communication between students and faculty or occasionally among colleagues in the workplace. Although not a frequent occurrence, counsellors sometimes help clarify communication procedures, responsibilities and the boundaries of the faculty role, or assist in resolving conflicts within the department.

**Personal and mental health strain among faculty (N=4, 18%).** Counseling services are also provided for faculty experiencing personal difficulties,

although to a much lesser extent. This includes, for example, finding ways to manage workload, stress or even burnout, as well as addressing problems in the family context. Counselling staff assist in finding a balance between work and personal life and support faculty in self-reflection and personal development.

### **Achievements of counselling services**

One question in our survey focused on what counsellors consider to be the main achievements of university counselling services. Counsellors perceive a number of positive changes that have occurred in university counselling in recent years. These achievements relate both to the organization of the services themselves as well as to their impact on students and the broader academic community. Based on content analysis, the following thematic areas were identified.

**Institutionalization of counselling as a core component of the university (N=10, 45%).** Counsellors repeatedly emphasize that, at most universities, counselling has become a respected, stable and structurally embedded part of university services. In the past, counselling was often a supplementary or peripheral activity carried out by a few individuals; today, it is seen as a standardized component of academic support. This shift also includes greater visibility

of counselling services, their incorporation into internal regulations, and improved awareness among both students and faculty. The establishment of counselling as an integral part of the university is regarded as a key milestone, enabling the stable functioning of services and the development of additional activities.

**Providing a safe space for students (N=10, 45%).** Counselling is described as a space where students can openly share their difficulties and receive respectful, accepting and confidential support. Counsellors report that many students come to them for the first time with issues they have not previously had the opportunity to discuss with anyone, such as anxiety, failure, relationship problems, uncertainty or academic crises. Creating a safe environment is seen as a key achievement, enabling students to seek help in a timely manner and prevent more serious problems. Counselling often fulfills the role of psychosocial support that is otherwise lacking within the university environment.

**Destigmatization of mental health support (N=8, 36%).** Counsellors consider it a significant achievement that students are now less hesitant to seek psychological support. While visiting a psychologist was previously associated with fears of labeling or stigmatization, in recent years it has become much more common to view psychological consultation as part of personal growth or prevention. The COVID-19 pandemic has

further reinforced this trend: students more frequently recognize mental health care as an important aspect of academic functioning. Counsellors also note that destigmatization is evident among faculty, who are now much more likely to encourage students to seek counselling.

**Support for academic success and reduction of study-related stress (N=7, 32%).** According to respondents, counselling plays a significant role in helping students better manage academic demands and complete their studies. Counsellors assist with study strategies and time management, enhance students' ability to regulate stress and support motivation to complete courses or entire programs. Many counsellors cite specific cases of students who successfully navigated critical periods thanks to counselling. Support for academic success has thus become one of the most tangible effects of university counselling.

**Social support and managing life challenges (N=4, 18%).** A large portion of counselling successes is associated with the ability to assist students in challenging or non-standard life situations, such as financial hardship, loss of family support, health complications or social-legal issues. Counselling centers provide guidance on scholarships, crisis programs, adjustments to study conditions and legal assistance. Social support is often crucial for retaining students in the academic system, particularly those who are the first in their family to attend

university or are otherwise disadvantaged. Counsellors report that without institutional support, these students would often have had to discontinue their studies.

**Professionalization of counselling and methodological guidance (N=3, 14%).** According to counsellors, university counselling services have undergone significant professionalization in recent years. Methodological guidance has improved, standards are being developed, counsellors have more opportunities for continuing education and there is increased collaboration across universities. In some cases, universities invest in supervision or team meetings, which enhances the quality of services. Professionalization is seen as a prerequisite for further development of counselling, greater expertise and stronger systemic integration within higher education institutions.

### **Issues and challenges in university counselling**

Although counsellors identify a number of positive changes, the field of university counselling still faces numerous structural, organizational and cultural barriers. Based on respondents' statements, six main areas of concern emerge. These challenges indicate where there is room for further development, methodological refinement and systemic strengthening of counselling services.

**Awareness of counselling services (N=7, 32%).** Many counsellors reported that both students and staff have insufficient information about the services offered by the counselling center, how to schedule appointments or the possibilities for longer-term support. Although awareness is gradually improving, there is still a group of students who learn about the counselling center by chance or only when a situation escalates into a crisis. Another issue is that students sometimes perceive the counselling center solely as a psychological service, overlooking the broader range of support available (career, academic, social-legal). Low awareness thus limits the usefulness of the service and delays timely access to help.

**Limited collaboration with faculty (N=6, 27%).** Counsellors point out that collaboration with teaching staff is not always systematic and is often based on personal contacts. Faculty members sometimes do not know when it is appropriate to refer a student to the counselling center or fear that they may “intrude on the student’s privacy.” Some faculty members state that working with students facing difficulties exceeds their competencies, yet they are not accustomed to proactively contacting the counselling center.

**Challenges in supporting students with special educational needs (N=6, 27%).** Although support for students with specific needs is relatively well developed

at many universities, counsellors point out several challenges. These include, for example, varying interpretations of recommendations across faculties, faculty concerns that academic adjustments may lower standards, lack of time for individual collaboration, difficulties in communication between the counselling center, the faculty and the student, as well as limited systemic support for more complex cases.

**Lack of coordination in counselling systems across universities (N=5, 23%).** One of the most common problems is the pronounced lack of uniformity in counselling systems across individual faculties and universities. Some institutions offer a wide range of services (psychological, career, social, and academic), while in others, counselling is minimal or inconsistently staffed. Counsellors note that the absence of a unified framework makes it difficult to share best practices. Students often change not only their study programs within a university but also transfer to another institution, where counselling services may operate very differently, leading to confusion and reduced access to support. Fragmentation also extends to the differing working conditions of counsellors, which may limit the quality and scope of services provided.

**Unrealistic expectations of counselling (N=4, 18%).** Some students and faculty approach counselling with expectations that exceed its capacities—

for example, requesting immediate solutions to long-term problems, therapeutic interventions beyond the time and professional scope of university counselling services, mediation of family conflicts or interventions in academic regulations. Counsellors report that they often need to clarify the boundaries of their role and explain that counselling is not a “universal solution” for all situations. A key challenge for the coming years is therefore to manage the expectations and improve communication with service users.

**Systemic constraints and institutional rigidity (N=4, 18%).** Counsellors note that the university environment is often rigidly structured, with numerous administrative barriers. Changes are implemented slowly, even in situations where it is clear that students require more flexible support. Common problems include insufficient capacity, lack of stable funding and a heavy administrative burden.

## Discussion

The findings provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of university counselling in the Czech Republic and highlight several key trends that should be interpreted in the context of existing literature and broader societal changes. This discussion focuses on three main areas: (1) the nature and evolution of clients’ needs, (2) the role and instituti-

onal positioning of counselling services within universities and (3) structural challenges and recommendations for the future.

### The nature and evolution of the needs of students and faculty

The results of the study indicate a substantial shift in the needs of university students. Psychological strain, anxiety, fear of failure, emotional instability and exhaustion are among the dominant issues for which students seek counselling services. This trend is consistent with broader research highlighting an increase in mental health difficulties among the university population (e.g., Švamberg Šauerová, 2021; Brzáková Beksová & Nadvorníková, 2024). At the same time, our data confirm Bláha’s findings (2022) that the contemporary university environment generates an increasingly complex set of psychological, relational and academic challenges, and that psychological support has become an ever more significant component of counselling services.

At the same time, weakened study habits are evident, including difficulties with time management, procrastination, uncertainty about the meaning of one’s studies and fear of academic failure. Counsellors often link these difficulties to the period of remote learning, which is consistent with literature emphasizing

the sensitivity of academic functioning to changes in the learning environment (Berezka & Šimonová (2024). Bláha (2022) similarly notes that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the growth in demand for counselling services—and our findings fully confirm this trend.

The results of this study are also consistent with other empirical data from the Czech context. Using the example of the Academic Counselling Center at the Faculty of Education, Charles University, Kucharská (2025) demonstrates that students seek support for a wide range of difficulties: from psychological and emotional problems to academic uncertainty and specific educational needs. This confirms the trend of destigmatizing counselling services and the growing legitimization of psychological support in higher education, which is fully in line with our findings.

A significant finding is the expansion of counselling services toward faculty members. Instructors seek support in working with students with specific needs, in crisis situations and regarding the definition of professional boundaries and their own role. This aspect is not emphasized to the same extent in Bláha's study (2022), and our data therefore broaden the perspective on counselling as a tool for supporting the entire academic community, rather than students exclusively.

Counselling services are therefore increasingly perceived not only as

a means of supporting students, but also as a space for supporting academic staff who face growing professional and emotional demands. This perspective is explicitly reflected in several contributions included in the volume *Higher Education Counselling* (Presslerová et al., 2024). For instance, Švamberg Šauerová (2024) emphasises the role of university counselling centres in promoting the occupational wellbeing of academic staff, highlighting the importance of systematic support aimed at stress management, burnout prevention, and sustainable professional functioning. Similarly, Kryštof (2024) discusses the possibilities and limits of coaching academic staff, pointing out both the potential benefits of targeted support for teaching personnel and the structural constraints that may hinder its broader implementation. These contributions complement our results by situating the wellbeing of academic staff as an integral component of contemporary higher education counselling, thereby reinforcing our finding that effective counselling services need to extend beyond a student-centred focus and address the broader academic community.

### **The role and integration of counselling services at universities**

Counselling services are perceived as a stable and legitimate component of the

university environment, reflecting the long-term trend of professionalization in higher education counselling (Čalkovská & Houžvičková Šolcová, 2021; Hájková Peláková, 2023). Similarly, Bláha (2022) demonstrates that counselling centers are now more firmly institutionally anchored, and although their structure and scope vary, they have become a standard part of university policy. Our data confirm this trend—counselling services are not viewed by counsellors as peripheral or supplementary activities, but as a significant component of supporting students' academic success and well-being.

At the same time, it is apparent that the role of university counselling centers is not always clearly defined. Students and faculty sometimes expect the center to perform functions that exceed its capacities (e.g., therapy, mediation or decisions regarding academic measures). The tension between expectations and the actual capabilities of services is also highlighted by Bláha (2022), particularly in relation to limited capacity and the varying conditions across institutions. This underscores the need for clear communication of competencies, institutional support and deeper integration of counselling services into university life. The ambivalent perception of the role of counselling services described by respondents in our study is also reflected in contributions included in the volume *Higher Education Counselling* (Pressle-

rová et al., 2024). For example, Berezka & Šimonová (2024) points to the tension between the increasing demands placed on counselling services and their limited staffing and financial resources. Further development of higher education counselling should therefore aim not only at expanding the range of services provided, but also at strengthening their institutional anchoring.

Empirical data from the Academic Counselling Center at the Faculty of Education, Charles University (Kucharská, 2025) further indicate that counselling services can make a significant contribution to students' academic stability and their orientation within the university environment. Our study expands on these findings from a single institution by incorporating the perspective of a broader group of counsellors working across multiple universities.

### **Structural challenges and recommendations for the future**

Alongside positive trends, structural barriers persist. Awareness of counselling services remains insufficient, and collaboration between counselling centers and faculty is often episodic and dependent on individual contacts. A significant issue is the fragmentation of the system—Bláha (2022) highlights the uneven coverage of counselling centers across universities. Our data refine this

picture by showing that inequalities also exist within a single institution, across faculties and departments (in terms of the scope of services, capacity and stability of counselling staff).

Structural limitations to the further development of higher education counselling are also highlighted by Čalkovská and Houžvičková Šolcová (2021), who argue that this field has long lacked clearer legislative support and a stable funding framework. The authors point out that university budgets do not include a dedicated financial component for counselling services, which results in reliance on project-based funding. Such funding is associated with uncertainty and constrains the long-term sustainability and systematic development of counselling services. These observations are consistent with the findings of our study, in which respondents likewise draw attention to difficulties related to the institutional and staffing arrangements of counselling services.

The COVID-19 pandemic further accentuated these disparities while simultaneously increasing the demand for psychological and academic support. In the context of Bláha's study (2022), our findings can be understood as a complement to the macro-level analysis, providing insights into the micro-level of counsellors' everyday practice—their caseloads, working conditions and the real impacts of limited capacities. Together, both studies highlight the need for

systemic strengthening of counselling services, including institutional stability, methodological support for faculty and the development of preventive tools.

Overall, it is evident that university counselling is not merely a support service but a significant component of ensuring the quality of education and the well-being of the entire academic community. Moving forward, it will be crucial to monitor how counselling services continue to professionalize, how their role in relation to faculty evolves and how structural inequalities in their availability and capacity can be reduced.

### Study limitations

The present study has several limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the results. First, it is important to note that the research relies on a relatively small and intentionally selected sample of counselling professionals, who were primarily recruited through a professional event and networks. As a result, the survey response may reflect the perspectives of active and professionally engaged counsellors who have long-term interest in the development of university counselling. Therefore, the findings cannot be considered representative of all counsellors working at Czech higher education institutions.

Another limitation is that the data are based on **counsellors' self-reported statements** rather than the perspectives

of students or faculty. The study therefore primarily captures the professional viewpoint on client needs and the functioning of the system, which may introduce certain biases—for example, emphasizing particular types of cases or institutional barriers. It is also important to consider that counsellors operate under different organizational and staffing conditions, which may influence their assessments and experiences. Additionally, a large proportion of respondents also serve as university professors, which may provide an additional perspective that cannot be clearly distinguished from that of counsellors working exclusively in this role.

Another limitation is the **predominantly qualitative nature of the analysis**, which allows for a deeper understanding of meanings and trends but provides less opportunity for statistical comparison or modeling of relationships between variables. The study should therefore be understood as exploratory—its aim is not to draw universally generalizable conclusions but rather to open the topic, identify the main areas of need and highlight the structural challenges facing university counselling.

Finally, it is important to note that some of the counsellors' statements reflected the post-COVID-19 situation. Certain changes in students' needs may therefore be temporary, while others may only stabilize over time. These dynamics should be examined further from a longitudinal perspective.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insight into the practice of university counselling in the Czech Republic and allows for the formulation of recommendations for further research and the development of counselling services at both institutional and systemic levels.

## Conclusion

The survey results confirm that university counselling in the Czech Republic has become a stable component of the higher education environment. Counsellors describe a shift from a peripheral, supplementary service to a professionally anchored practice that significantly contributes to supporting academic success, student well-being and the functioning of the academic community. Particularly notable is the increase in psychological and emotional difficulties for which students seek counselling. These findings correspond with existing literature as well as Bláha's insights on the recent developments in university counselling.

The study also shows that the COVID-19 pandemic played a significant role as an accelerator of change. According to counsellors, levels of anxiety, uncertainty and social isolation increased, study habits weakened and the demand for psychological support grew. At the same time, however, the pandemic contributed to the destigmatization of mental health

care and to the greater legitimization of counselling services. This experience underscores the importance of counselling as a preventive and stabilizing element of university life.

An important finding is the expansion of counselling services toward faculty members. Support primarily concerns working with students with specific needs, responding to crisis situations and defining the pedagogical role. This dimension broadens the traditional concept of university counselling and confirms its strategic significance for fostering an inclusive and safe academic environment.

Alongside positive trends, structural barriers persist—insufficient awareness,

limited capacities, fragmented services and sometimes unrealistic expectations regarding the role of counselling. These challenges highlight the need for systematic development, clear institutional integration, greater emphasis on preventive support and closer collaboration with the academic community.

Overall, university counselling represents a significant tool for supporting both the quality of education and campus life. Moving forward, it will be essential to strengthen counselling's capacities, enhance its professionalization and better integrate it into the strategic management of universities, enabling it to respond effectively to the complex and evolving needs of students and faculty.

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