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Author(s)	Michael Goh
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## An Exploratory Study of Singaporean Students' Counselling Needs and Attitudes Towards Counselling in Higher Education

Michael Goh  
Division of Psychological Studies  
School of Education  
National Institute of Education  
Nanyang Technological University  
469 Bukit Timah Road  
Singapore 259756  
Phone: (65) 460-5027  
Fax: (65) 469-9007  
E-mail: GOHM@NIEVAX.NIE.AC.SG

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**Abstract:** This study was motivated by a review of the literature on student personnel services for higher education students and an awareness that such services are scarce in Singapore. A small sample of students at a higher education institution in Singapore were surveyed concerning their counselling needs and attitudes toward counselling to explore the utility to extend this study to a larger scale. The findings from the survey are discussed with implications for action.

**Purpose of the Study**

**Background**

Counselling is still a relatively new phenomenon in Singapore. Yet there is a general consensus when one talks to students, teachers, faculty, education administrators or even the lay person of the need for more counselling and for the establishment of more formalized counselling services. In fact, it is not uncommon for the general public to pass unsolicited prognosis that certain persons -be they students, children, relatives, spouses, friends, or even self - need counselling. All this notwithstanding the still relatively taboo status of counselling in Singapore (Macner-Lict, 1992) and the distant, mythical, and suspicious relationship it has with Asian societies in general. It has even been said that Asians continue to view the sharing of personal problems as stigmatizing and shameful (Sue & Sue, 1985).

## Statement of the Problem

It would be interesting and useful to explore the indigenous forms of helping, not necessarily called 'counselling', that evolves and exists in various countries, her cultures, subcultures, families, and family systems. This author believes that such a study would require more than just survey research that samples the population to report 'blanket' results. It may be necessary to execute ethnographic and qualitative analyses to elicit complex dimensions in help-seeking preferences and subsequent behaviour for specific culture groups. Such research requires more time and effort than this study permits. In the meantime, reports in the local media continue to highlight the need for more counselling to address discipline issues as well as the increase in the number of children needing professional psychological services. While little has been written about specific counselling needs at our institutions of higher education, one need only ask academic and non-academic staff at these institutions to know that such a need appears to be growing. The purpose of this study is to clarify this perception.

Therefore, the two main questions that this study will address are:

1. Do students at the National Institute of Education (NIE) see the need for a more formalized counselling service on campus?
2. What are NIE students' reasons for seeing or not seeing a counsellor?

It is hoped that this study will lead to a refining of the survey instrument, suggest better ways to explore questions of students' needs and attitude toward counselling, and if proven necessary, help initiate more educated, established, and effective counselling services at institutions of higher education.

## Limitations of this Study

This study therefore limits itself to addressing the present needs of students at one institution of higher education in order to pilot the utility and feasibility of this study before it is carried out on a larger scale.

This study recognizes the sometimes 'stop-gap' nature of such an exercise in that counselling, to some, assumes a remedial role. There are those who suggest that attention be paid to prevention instead. While it is not within the scope of this study to argue about the mechanics and philosophy of helping services, this author will review articles that hopefully educate on the potentially comprehensive nature of counselling services - that is, preventive, developmental, and remedial. The present call to establish counselling services of any nature arises from this author's informal contacts with faculty members who appear to be seeking more trained personnel on university campuses to address students' needs. Even so, this does not represent any need to be alarmed. As the literature will support, most of these needs are

developmental in nature (i.e., usually not psychological distress requiring long-term counselling) and counselling serves to facilitate students' learning and developmental experience in higher education. All this for the ultimate purpose of fulfilling students' educational objectives during their higher education sojourn.

It should also be noted that this author is not presumptuous of counselling services, as defined in this study, being the modus operandi of help-seeking behaviour in Singapore. Parts of the questionnaire in this study hope to explore students' perceptions of counselling and the reasons they would or would not see a counsellor in this context.

### Definition

The term counselling is used broadly and diversely throughout the literature reviewed. However, the definition of counselling as used in the questionnaire follows that used by the original author of the questionnaire and is stated as such:

"The word COUNSELLING as used in this questionnaire refers to when you are having a concern/problem/difficulty, for which you will go to a counsellor and she/he listens attentively and responds appropriately. The counsellor enables you to define your difficulties and in so doing,

you begin to work out, for yourself, the most satisfactory means of dealing with your concern/problem/difficulty. It is a professional relationship which is strictly confidential." (Leong, 1991)

### Student Personnel Work and Counselling

Student personnel work in Higher Education, referring to a programme of organized services for students, is currently most evolved in the American higher education system and it is from that system that this study explored and considered the place for student personnel work, specifically, counselling, in higher education in Singapore. The extensive review of the literature that was presented in the original version of this paper will not be included here due to its length.

The purpose of the review was to assist readers in critically appreciating the evolution of such services, its motivation, its form, within a certain context. The articles did not form the sole basis for the consideration of such services in Singapore and did not necessarily reflect an endorsement of the social, political, philosophical, or educational views articulated in the original sources.

As was evident, student personnel or student development work reflected in the history of such services, entailed numerous and varied

activities or programmes. The review progressed from the larger framework of student personnel work towards a more in-depth and primary focus on counselling.

For the purposes of this paper, this author highlights Kuh et al., (1994) who, in a more recent document, explored the present condition of higher education in the United States and recent developments in student personnel services. The authors noted that higher education in the USA context was undergoing transformation as a result of economic conditions, eroding public confidence, accountability demands, and demographic shifts resulting in increased numbers of historically underrepresented groups attending universities. However, it was felt that resources supporting higher education were not keeping pace with the demands. In particular, the public at large appears to be demanding a reemphasis on student learning and personal development to be the primary goals in undergraduate education. The authors' underlying thesis is that both students as well as institutional environments contribute to what students gain from their university experience. Therefore, "the key to enhancing learning and personal development is not simply for faculty to teach more, but also to create conditions that motivate and inspire students to devote time and energy to educationally-purposeful activities, both in and outside the classroom" (p. 1).

Similar in spirit and principle to other philosophies on student personnel, student development work, the authors stated the following assumptions about higher education, student affairs, and student development:

1. Hallmarks of a college person include: (a) complex cognitive skills such as reflection and critical thinking; (b) an ability to apply knowledge to practical problems encountered in one's vocation, family or other areas of life; (c) an understanding and appreciation of human differences; practical competence skills (e.g., decision making, conflict resolution); and (e) a coherent integrated sense of identity, self-esteem, confidence, integrity, aesthetic sensibilities, and civic responsibility.

2. The concepts of "learning," "personal development," and "student development," are inextricably intertwined and inseparable. That the historical dichotomy of "academic affairs" and "student affairs" has

little relevance to post-university life, where the quality of one's job performance, family life, and community activities are all dependent on cognitive and affective skills, and hence, necessarily interrelated.

3. Experiences in various in-class and out-of-class settings, both off and on the campus, contribute to learning and personal development.

4. Learning and personal development occur through transactions between students and their environments broadly defined to include other people

(faculty, student affairs staff, peers), physical spaces, and cultural milieus.

5. Knowledge and understanding are critical, not only to student success, but also to institutional improvement.

6. Student affairs professionals are educators who share responsibility with faculty, academic administrators, other staff, and students themselves for creating the conditions under which students are likely to expend time and energy in educationally-purposeful activities. They endorse talent development as the over-arching goal of undergraduate education; that is, the college experience should raise students' aspirations and contribute to the development of skills and competencies that enable them to live productive, affairs programmes and services must be designed and managed with specific student learning and personal development outcomes in mind (pp. 1-2).

In summary, the literature reflected the important role that student development workers in higher education play, be it in the distant origins of student personnel work or the more recent developments in student affairs offices in universities across the United States, in the lives of students of higher education. Even if the mode of delivery has changed and evolved through the years, the philosophy, point of view, of Williamson (1961, 1975) and other colleagues in his era seem remarkably consistent with the imperative outlined by Kuh et al., (1994). That is, that student learning and development in higher education is enhanced when their university experience includes strong and positive relationships with academic and non-academic staff.

The articles reviewed thus provided the larger framework in which the topic of focus in this study, counselling in higher education, originates. It is important for the reader to have taken this journey through student personnel and student affairs work in order to see the critical role that counselling plays in the overall fabric of student learning and development in higher education.

#### Help-Seeking in Higher Education in Singapore

The study by Leong (1991), from which the questionnaire for this study is derived, focuses on the relationship of self-esteem and academic achievement and students' attitudes toward counselling. The subjects were 328 students from a polytechnic in Singapore. The results from this study suggested that students were likely to look to close friends/boy or girl-friends, relatives, and parents for help. Most poignant, however, is the students' indication that they would most prefer to "solve the problem myself". This appears to agree with research by Tinsley and Benton(1978) that professional services are sought only after the individual's primary support system has been exhausted. Forty-four percent of the students, however, did indicate that they would or would consider seeing a counsellor if they are faced with a concern/problem/difficulty.

Conditions of resistant help-seeking behaviour, however, are not unique to this context alone, as reflected in the U.S. research reviewed earlier. Leong (1991) aptly notes that such attitudes should not

necessarily lead student personnel workers to simply try to "sell" counselling services more aggressively but rather to take students' help-seeking preferences into consideration in the designing and delivery of comparable services. Student personnel workers may instead wish to enhance students' development toward more independent problem-solving behaviour ("rather solve the problem myself") by playing a supportive versus intervention role, as well as to educate students on what to do when they run dry of options.

### Motivation for this Study

Having been introduced to the broader field of student personnel services and the role that counselling plays within that context, the literature also highlighted the fact that counselling is conceptualized differently in different cultures and contexts, and that students' expectations, preferences, and characteristics, and counsellor characteristics and style, are key factors in determining the nature of counselling. Implications of the research reviewed also suggested that higher education institutions play a vital role in the initiation and provision of counselling services that meet students' learning and development needs. It is from this standpoint that this pilot study was motivated.

Strikingly similar in principle to the 'mission' apparent in the philosophies of student personnel work reviewed earlier but adapted in form to suit Singapore's social, political, and economic contexts, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew stated as the 'simple objective' of education in Singapore to be: "to educate a child to bring out his greatest potential so that he will grow into a good man and a useful citizen....the litmus test of a good education is whether it nurtures citizens who can live, work, contend and cooperate in a civilized way. Is he loyal and patriotic? Is he, when the need arises, a good soldier ready to defend his country?...Is he filial, respectful to elders, law-abiding and responsible?...Is he tolerant of Singaporeans of different races and religions?" (Lee, 1979). In 1986, the Minister for Education again stated this aim no less explicitly: "What will not change will be our commitment to develop each child to the limits of his abilities and talents so that he will grow up to be a responsible adult, loyal to his country, concerned for his family and able to earn his own living" (Tan, 1986).

Based on diagrams depicting Singapore's Education System that ranges from Kindergarten through tertiary education toward employment, this author believes that the above aims extend necessarily into the higher education experience and requires us to take a serious look at how

student learning and development continues to be facilitated during this stage of the 'citizen's' education. This study therefore aims to inform the subject of student personnel work, specifically counselling, in higher education.

## Methodology

### Subjects and Procedures

Subjects for this study were 170 undergraduates at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University (NTU). It was decided that to pilot this study, a convenient sample of all Year 1 students in the BA/BSc with Diploma in Education (Primary) programme would be administered the questionnaire during their tutorials. This would eradicate the possibility of level or course of study being extraneous variables in the early stage of this exploratory study.

### Sample Characteristics

Table 2 presents the following demographic characteristics of subjects: sex, race, age, and course of study.

### Instrument

This study adapted an Attitude Toward Counselling Survey designed by Leong (1991). No validity or reliability data is currently available on the questionnaire. The survey was designed based on the author's twelve years experience as a student counsellor to elicit information on how students feel about counselling.

The cover page solicits background information about respondents as recorded in the previous section. The second page provides further directions for the questionnaire as well as the definition of counselling to be used in completing the questionnaire.

The rest of the questionnaire comprises two parts. Part I assesses how students feel about counselling at the time of this study. Part I is the section of the questionnaire that was slightly amended from the original version to suit NIE's context and the intent of this study. Since NIE had no formal counselling service or centre (compared to the original author's polytechnic), the questions pertaining to students' awareness of such services had to be reworded as reflected in questions 1 and 2. As it is also the intent of this study to assess students' interest in the establishment of formalized counselling services at NIE, questions 3 and 4 were included. Part II explores the reasons why students may or may not seek counselling.

### Table 2

## Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

### Characteristicsn%

#### Sex

Male 2414.12

Female14685.88

#### Race

Chinese 13881.18

Malay 14 8.24

Indian 13 7.65

Others 5 2.94

#### Age

18+ - 19 0 0.00

19+ - 20 89 52.35

20+ - 21 4425.88

21+ - 22 24 14.12

22+ - 23 8 4.71

23+ - 24 1 0.59

24+ - 25 4 2.35

#### Course

BA/DipEd 12975.88

BSc/DipEd 4124.12

Leong (1991) notes that the following assumptions are made when using this questionnaire:

1.It is assumed that participants would share accurately and honestly their own true perceptions of how they feel and think about themselves and their attitudes toward counselling.

2.It is assumed that participants would understand the term "counselling" as defined in this questionnaire. That they would therefore be able to respond accurately and honestly to the questions raised on attitudes toward counselling.

3. It is assumed that the questionnaire was constructed as a valid measure to ascertain the attitudes of respondents to counselling.

(pp. 38-39)

## Results

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, the results presented in this chapter will focus mainly on a cross-tabulation of the data resulting in frequency and percentage analyses. The small convenience

sample does not warrant analyses of demographic and other variables at this point in time until a broader representative sample of data is collected in future studies.

Table 3 represents the frequency distribution and percentages for Part I of the questionnaire soliciting students' views of counselling. The results indicate that while a large number of the students sampled in this study appear to be unaware of the available of counselling services, and especially how to request it, majority of the students (n = 147, 86.47%) are in favour of establishing more formalized counselling services such as a Student Counselling Centre at NIE. Sixty-five percent ( n = 111) of the students also indicated that they would potentially utilize such a service.

In response to question 5 which asked if students would seek any type of counselling service in Singapore (not necessarily from NIE), if faced with a concern/problem/difficulty, students responses are reflected in Table 4. Thirty-three students (19.41%) and fifty-one students (30%) indicated that they will see or will seriously consider seeing counsellor respectively. In contrast, eighty-six students(50.59%), about half the sample, indicated that they will definitely not see a counsellor.

Table 3  
Students' Views of Counselling at NIE

Questionnaire Item	Yes		No	
	n	%	n	%
Q1 Aware of Student Counselling Services at NIE	64	43.53	105	69.41
Q2 Know how to request service	6	3.92	53	34.74
Q3 Is there a need for a more formalized counselling service at NIE?	147	96.47	23	15.03
Q4 Would you utilize such a service?	111	72.79	33	21.41
Q6 Ever been for any type of counselling?	18	11.54	129	84.46

a = 2 non responses  
b = 1 non response

Table 4

Students' Likelihood of Seeking Counselling Services  
n%

Yes, I will see a counsellor	3319.41
I will seriously consider seeing a counsellor	5130.00
No, I will definitely not see a counsellor	8650.59

Students who have ever seen a counsellor then indicated where they went for counselling and the reasons that led them to do so. The results are reflected in Tables 5 and 6. The percentages reported are a percentage of the entire sample population to try to reflect the overall extent of the counselling services used and the reasons for seeking help rather than a somewhat meaningless percentage of this small help-seeking group. It should be noted, however, that the portrayal of students not seeking counselling does not reflect the absence or the presence of problems.

The results seem to indicate that most students who have sought counselling did so through their affiliations with the mosque, church, temple and other religious organizations (n = 23, 13.53%). This was followed by the 'other' category (n = 12, 7.06%) where students indicated other sources such as counselling in the junior college and other specific sources of help, like seeing a psychiatrist. Other counselling services used by these students, in descending order are: Secondary Schools (n = 6, 3.53%); Government Counselling Service (n = 4, 2.35%); Community Chest Counselling Agencies (n = 3, 1.76%); Private Counselling Service (n = 1, 0.59%); and NIE (n = 0, 0.00%).

Again, it should be noted that students are merely reporting where they sought help according to a certain time in their lives and in different situational contexts. It would be premature to conclude these results as a clear indication of students' preferences.

Table 5  
Where Students Went For Counselling

Source of Counselling	n%
Mosque, church, temple, or religious organizations	23 13.53
Others	12 7.06

Secondary Schools	6	3.53
Government Counselling Service	4	2.35
Community Chest Counselling Agencies	3	1.76
Private Counselling Service	1	0.59
NIE	0	0.00

Reasons the above students sought counselling indicated in Table 6 show that most students sought counselling "to help [them] grow as persons" (n = 23, 13.53%) followed closely by "problems/tension with home/family" (n = 19, 11.18%), feelings of unhappiness and unworthiness (n = 16, 9.41%) and difficulties with studies (n = 15; 8.82). Other reasons, in descending order of importance are: Other problems (n = 13, 7.65%), most students choosing this indicated help for specific problems such as major depression; Difficulties with boyfriend/girlfriend relationships (n = 6, 3.53%); Financial problems (n = 3, 1.76%); Accommodation (n = 1, 0.59%); and Adjusting to being a student at NIE (n = 1, 0.59%).

Table 6  
Reasons Why Students Sought Counselling

Reasons	n	%
To help me grow as a person	23	13.53
Problems/tension with home/family	19	11.18
Felt unhappy/unworthy	16	9.41
Difficulties with my studies	15	8.82
Other problems	13	7.65
Difficulties with boyfriend/girl relatns	6	3.53
Financial problems	3	1.76
Accommodation	1	0.59
Adjusting to being a student at NIE	1	0.59

The data for questions 9 and 10 appeared confusing during data entry and it was hypothesized that students may not have correctly understood who was to respond to which question. It was therefore decided that the data would not be included for analysis in this study but consideration will be given to rewording or restructuring the procedure in future administration of the questionnaire.

The results for Part II of the questionnaire are indicated in Tables 7 and 8. Table 7 shows the reasons students stated for seeing a counsellor and Table 8 reflects the reasons students decide not to see a counsellor. These two sets of results differ from Table 6 in that the former solicited reasons only from students who have sought counselling services prior to completing this questionnaire. The following tables reflect the reasons of all students in this sample,

irrespective of previous counselling experience, obtaining a broader and more general response for a larger sample group.

It should be noted, however, that students responding to these two questions in Part II do not inform us as to whether they would or would not go see a counsellor but supposes that if they do or do not, such would be the reasons as indicated in Tables 7 and 8.

Table 7  
Reasons For Seeing A Counsellor

Reasons	n	%	Rank
Get Advice	144	84.71	1
Talk to someone who understands	105	61.76	2
Get encouragement and assurance	102	60.00	3
Talk to someone who will help me experience hope	86	50.59	4
Talk to someone interested in my probm	82	48.24	5
Gain a better understanding of myself	68	40.00	6
Reduce anxiety/press over acadc probs	66	38.82	7
Get an outlet for strg and dp feelings	65	38.24	8
Talk to someone abt career issues/conc	63	37.06	9
Talk to someone who will help me believe in myself	55	32.35	10
Get help in building my self-confidence	51	30.00	11
Find someone to help me deal with my feelings of insecurity	48	28.24	12
Learn that I am not the only person with problems	39	22.94	13
Talk to someone who will help me to find ways to accept myself	25	14.71	14
Other Factors	11	6.47	15

Table 8  
Reasons For Deciding Not To See A Counsellor

Reasons	n	%	Rank
Rather talk to my close frs/girl or boy frds	121	71.18	1
Rather solve problem myself	105	61.76	2
Counsellor is a stranger	85	50.00	3
Rather go to my church/mosque/temple/ any religious organisations for help	61	35.88	4
Rather talk to my brothers/sisters/relatives	50	29.41	5
Fear of lack of confidentiality	50	29.41	6
Rather talk to my parents	49	28.82	7
No confidence in the counselling services	42	24.71	8
Afraid of people knowing that I have a problem	34	20.00	9

No confidence in the counsellor 33 19.41 10  
 Cannot see how counselling is helpful/effect 32 18.82 11  
 Rather see my lecturer/tutor/instructor 29 17.06 12  
 Unable to admit that I might need prof help 29 17.06 12  
 Cannot help my academic problems 28 16.47 14  
 Afraid of being labelled as needy or weak 22 12.94 15  
 Cannot help my self-esteem problem 15 8.82 16  
 Other reasons 11 6.47 17

## Conclusion

The two main questions to be addressed in this study are:

1. Do students at NIE see the need for a more formalized counselling service on campus?
2. What are NIE students' reasons for seeing or not seeing a counsellor?

### Do Students At NIE See The Need For A More Formalized Counselling Service on Campus?

Based on a sample of 170 BA/BSc with DipEd first year students at NIE, a large percentage (n = 147, 86.47%) of students would like to see a more formalized counselling service, such as a Student Counselling Centre providing help for personal, academic, and career concerns, on campus. About sixty-five percent of the students further indicated that they would likely utilize such a service.

Students had earlier indicated in the questionnaire that more than half of the students sampled (n = 101, 59.41%) were unaware that NIE offered Student Counselling Services upon request. A striking number of students (n = 164, 96.47%) did not know how to request such a service. Currently, the only publicity regarding student counselling

services at NIE is in the form of a paragraph that appears in the General Information booklet of the Institute. An approximated reproduction of the announcement looks as such:

### Student Counselling Service

A student counselling service is available upon request from students. It is provided by qualified counsellors from the Division of Psychological Studies, School of Education. Students may approach Head, Division of Psychological Studies at Room 214, Oei Tiong Ham Building, to make a request for a counsellor to be assigned to them. Alternatively, they could obtain help through referral by their own course lecturers or tutors.

## What Are NIE Students' Reasons For Seeing Or Not Seeing A Counsellor?

From the results, it appears that most of the students prioritized their reasons for seeing a counsellor to be for more practical and direct help that involve getting advice, encouragement, hope, academic concerns, etc. These students appear to be less likely to seek help for self-exploration issues pertaining to esteem, confidence, security, acceptance, or identity. These results seem to support earlier articles reviewed that address differences in how the self is conceptualized and emphasized in different cultures and how these perceptions of the self influence the purpose and end of counselling. What may appear surprising is students' willingness to "talk to" or "get an outlet for my strong and deep feelings", which, as some authors have suggested, runs against the grain of Asian reservedness.

In expressing their reasons for deciding not to see a counsellor, students in this sample indicated a preference for a more "familiar" source of help comprising friends, social/religious groups, or relatives (parents being the least preferred amongst kin). These results appear to concur with a recent study by Goh (1995) that showed that Chinese students from the Peoples' Republic of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, preferred more informal sources of help such as friends and family.

Students also expressed a strong desire to "solve the problem [themselves]" whilst indicating a general difficulty trusting unfamiliar persons, the product, the process, and confidentiality. This appears to render support to "student-directed" models of counselling (Kratochvil, Jones, & Ganschow, 1970) that aim to assist students in directing changes in their own lives. Leong (1991) states that this approach may serve counsellors well in university settings that have time and activity constraints.

It is interesting that the results of this study regarding reasons for deciding to see or not see a counsellor are quite similar to the polytechnic results in Leong (1991). A comparison of the ranking of reasons by both institutions appear in Tables 9 and 10.

While the top three reasons given in both tables appear identical, some differences appear in that NIE students were more likely to seek help from a religious source than Polytechnic students. Since religion was not a demographic variable explored in either study, it is not possible to study if there were religious affiliations versus an absence of between the two populations.

A difference in ranking is also noticeable in that NIE students appear less likely to seek counselling for the reason of building

self-confidence than Polytechnic students. In contrast, NIE students appear more likely to believe that counselling can help academic problems more than Polytechnic students. While the results are interesting to consider, no statistical analysis for significance was conducted, thus disallowing any conclusive statements from being made.

The inclusion of two new items: (1) "Talk to someone about career issues/concerns" in the Reasons For Seeing A Counsellor section; and (2) "Rather see my lecturer/tutor/instructor" in the Reasons For Not Seeing A Counsellor section, appear to be meaningful. Their being somewhat in the middle of the rankings suggest that students do consider these items to be viable reasons. Considerations should be made to include these and other appropriate questions in future research.

Table 9  
Comparison of Ranking of Reasons For Seeing a Counsellor by NIE and Polytechnic Students

Reasons	NIE	Poly
Get Advice	11	
Talk to someone who understands	22	
Get encouragement and assurance	33	
Talk to someone who will help me experience hope	45	
Talk to someone interested in my problems	54	
Gain a better understanding of myself	67	
Reduce anxiety/pressure over academic problems	78	
Get an outlet for my strong and deep feelings	810	
Talk to someone about career issues/concerns	9a	
Talk to someone who will help me believe in myself	1012	
Get help in building my self-confidence	116	
Find someone to help me deal with my feelings of insecurity	1211	
Learn that I am not the only person with problems	139	
Talk to someone who will help me to find ways to accept myself	1413	
Other Factors	1514	

a = This item was not on the original questionnaire

Table 10

Comparison of Ranking of Reasons For Deciding Not To See A Counsellor  
By NIE and Polytechnic Students

Reasons	NIE	Poly
Rather talk to my close frds/girl or boy frds	12	12
Rather solve problem myself	21	
Counsellor is a stranger	33	
Rather go to my church/mosque/temple/ any religious organisations for help	41	0
Rather talk to my brothers/sisters/relatives	54	
Fear of lack of confidentiality	68	
Rather talk to my parents	75	
No confidence in the counselling services	81	1
Afraid of people knowing that I have a problem	99	
No confidence in the counsellor	10	12
Cannot see how counselling is helpful/effective	116	
Rather see my lecturer/tutor/instructor	12a	
Unable to admit that I might need prof help	12	14
Cannot help my academic problems	147	
Afraid of being labelled as needy or weak	15	16
Cannot help my self-esteem problem	16	13
Other reasons	17	17

a = this item was not on the original questionnaire

### Discussion and Implications

On the surface, it may appear as if results from parts I and II of the questionnaire contradict each other. The former indicating strong support for a more formalized counselling service on campus and the latter filled with a pervasive sense of doubt about counselling and an indicated preference for more informal sources of help.

To this author, it simply reflects what the literature has already informed us. That students in higher education, by and large, are undecided about counselling and counselling services. The literature has also suggested many intervening variables such as student characteristics, counsellor characteristics and style, and the complex, multidimensional mosaic of culture, worldviews, personal and social habits, and many other aspects of human psychology that can come into play when counsellors and students interact.

Therefore, it is not uncommon, to see such results as a reflection of

the conflict many students face - a recognition that they need help but a counteracting anxiety that stems from an unfamiliarity towards counselling services. Again, this author is not proclaiming such services to be the "cure-all" for all students' needs but proposing that counselling services be considered in such ways that attempt to meet students' needs based on their present ambivalence towards such services.

Consequently, deliberations for a more structured and formalized counselling service should consider the following:

1. Continuation of this research on a broader scale so as to obtain a representative sample of the NIE student population. With NIE's projected move to the Yunnan Garden Campus, it may also be beneficial to extend this to the larger NTU campus population to explore if a larger NTU Counselling Service is to be considered. Beyond this, it may even be useful to survey other higher education institutions over time to gain a more complete picture of higher education students' needs.
2. Size, however, does not make the service better. Considerations should be given to the perception that such services tend to be "strange" and somewhat intimidating. This may mean a more decentralized structure, more accessibility, in addition to warm, friendly, and inviting rooms that don't look like cold and clinical offices.
3. It is important to also consider how students can be better informed of such services. One method is to involve them as much in such studies and planning so that the evolving counselling service is not merely a product of abstract imagination without practical functions.
4. If students naturally gravitate toward their peers, consideration should also be given to training peer counsellors. This not only helps to ease staffing considerations but also promotes an atmosphere of cooperation and support among students. "The House" at the University of California, Davis is one of many successful examples of peer counselling programmes.
5. Efforts should be made to "demystify" counselling as a process only for the "sick" or the "mentally ill". Workshops, talks, "coffee-hours" may be held to inform and educate students on the importance of personal, academic, and emotional support that can facilitate student learning and development during their higher education experience.
6. In the above respect, counselling services should also involve more than a one-to-one relationship between counsellor and student but also to encompass workshops to improve academic and study skills, learning habits, to explore career interests and direction, and other general wellness programmes. Groups may also be offered to address particular concerns such as family tensions, relationships, or more specific concerns such as eating disorders, procrastination, etc..
7. It is for all these particular reasons that many university counselling centres are recognising the importance of consulting with

the campus at large and the increasing need to "go to them" rather than wait for students to come. It is therefore just as important to offer workshops to student groups, classes, and even faculty.

8. Relationships with faculty are therefore critical because they form the "front-line", so to speak, and can potentially serve the role of academic advisers as evident in many major overseas universities. Consequently, they may function as referral resources in directing students who may need more specialized help. Frequent liaisons with faculty should therefore be maintained in order to ensure that the larger student population is reached.

9. Above all, it is critical that ethical guidelines for the practice of counselling be formulated. This author recognizes that such an effort may take time as deliberations need to be convened at a national level. This allows a counselling service to strive toward a service that meets international standards (Kiracofe et al., 1994) in serving higher education students' personal, academic, and career needs. Included in such standards, and perhaps central, would be a counselling system where students' are ensured full confidentiality within agreed limits that are commensurate with professional psychological association's ethical principles for practitioners. The university setting creates the possibility of undesirable dual-role relationships, with lecturers also being counsellors, and therefore staffing of such a counselling service needs to be carefully considered.

## Conclusion

This exploratory study has found firstly that a sample of students at NIE are in favour of a more formalized counselling service established on campus. Secondly, the study has also noted students' expressions of concern about counselling services in general and also their feelings about counselling as a source of help in view of other available formal and informal means. This author has suggested that the latter inform the former in that the counselling service that evolves takes into consideration students' perceptions of counselling and counselling services. An effective counselling service would therefore be one that facilitates students' personal, academic, and career needs towards the achievement of students' higher education objectives.

Bishop (1990), in articulating the agenda for university counselling centres in the 1990s, noted that university counselling centres play a unique role in higher education institutions that are constantly facing changes introduced at the societal level resulting in student populations with extremely diverse needs. The socio-economic and political demands increasingly placed on higher education in Singapore (Gopinathan, 1992) make universities and other tertiary institutions in Singapore, and their students, no different.

This study presents as a beginning for more exploration into the needs, counselling and otherwise, of students in higher education. Obviously,

cross-national results of similar studies would be subsequently useful in furthering our understanding of help-seeking behaviours and attitudes across cultures. It is hoped that these efforts will raise our consciousness regarding the psychology of the higher education student and ultimately contribute toward student learning, development, and the fulfillment of higher education objectives.

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(\*Includes references used in a more comprehensive version of this paper)

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