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Counselling referral for university students: A phenomenological study from the teachers' perspective

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Counselling referral for university students: a phenomenological study from the teachers' perspective

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ABSTRACT

This small-scale pilot study analysed the input of two university teachers regarding their approaches, attitudes and understanding regarding counselling referrals for students in a university setting in Singapore. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis, four main categories of themes were defined from the findings: referral procedures, challenges/difficulties, support and awareness. The academic teaching staff has an important role in the holistic development of students by helping them obtain counselling referrals. The key issues raised are outlined for consideration by policymakers, academic teaching staff and practitioners both within and outside of Singapore. The findings are discussed, including future research possibilities and recommendations to improve the referral process initiated by university staff in higher education.

The transition to university life can be challenging for students. Fromme, Corbin, and Kruse (2008) in their single-cohort study of incoming university students aged 17–19 years in Southwest United States found an increase in a variety of behavioural risks including alcohol use, substance abuse, and sex with multiple partners. The internet-based surveys provided evidence that students from rural high schools and those who stayed at private dormitories posed highest risk for driving after drinking and heavy drinking. Apart from highlighting several factors affecting changes in behaviour during transition to university, Fromme et al. (2008) also delineated the need for further research in order to enable deeper insights regarding changes and inconsistencies in risks related to behaviour and mental health. Pang et al. (2017) conducted an online survey study on 940 youths in Singapore using the Social Tolerance Scale, Attitudes Towards Serious Mental Illness (adolescent version) Scale, and an open-ended question related to the term "mental illness". They found that negative perceptions and a lack of understanding towards mental illness characterised the youth. Julal (2013) investigated predictors of utilisation of university support services in the first year at university among 131 British undergraduates. He found that students who used a reflective approach when faced with personal problems were more inclined to use student support services. Some of the stressors that the youth faced included financial constraints, academic expectations, employment prospects and relationship issues (Julal, 2013). Undergraduates struggle to cope with changes related to the curriculum, study workload and pace (Lowe & Cook, 2003). Bennett and Bigfoot-Sipes (1991) examined the preferences regarding counsellors among American-Indian and White college students in USA and found that the consequences arising from lack of help can include poor overall psychological well-being, dropping out of university, and failure to advance through university modules and academic years.

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Counselling services are a crucial component of education as they help individuals develop to their full potential and abilities (Sink, 2005). Despite existing research on clients and counsellors, no prior research has been conducted on the perspectives of teaching faculty members regarding counselling referrals in higher education. Coupled with the rapid development of school counselling services in Asia, many countries in the region have been drawn towards investment in areas related to the psychosocial concerns of students at all levels (Chong, Lee, Tan, Wong, & Yeo, 2013). Well-trained counsellors have the knowledge of interventions that can help students improve their academic performance (Brown, 1999). In addition, according to Downey (2008), the formation of a relationship through personal interactions between an educator and his or her students is important and can influence students' learning. However, to reiterate, no previous research could be found on the perspectives of university teachers regarding counselling referrals in higher education. As Singapore is a small island with almost zero natural resources, the development of its human resources and education have always been a key priority for the Singapore government (Gopinathan, 2001). Krech and Crutchfield (1948) defined attitude as a longstanding combination between processes involving aspects of motivation, emotion, perception and cognition and relevant influences from the individual's world. An in-depth understanding of university teachers' attitudes towards referring students to counselling can reveal the rationale behind the choices and decisions the teachers make when faced with difficulties during the process. Nugent (2000) noted that educators had a direct and widespread influence on school counselling services. Educators have various opportunities to observe abnormalities or areas for concern amongst their students during class interactions. In the process of establishing a balanced and cordial relationship, counsellors do encounter challenges with managing educators' expectations and different attitudes towards the counselling process (Low, 2009).

The nature of counselling involves certain confidentiality requirements that can be confusing for someone unfamiliar with the field. A counsellor's withholding of confidential information in adherence to the code of ethics could easily be misinterpreted as being unhelpful. Such action may appear to be in conflict with an educational setting in which everyone ought to share information in working towards the best outcome for their students (Bell, 2002).

The role that educators play in communicating and making necessary counselling referrals for their students is substantial. Tovar (2015) conducted a study to examine how interaction with institutional agents and student support programmes influence academic success in terms of grade point average and intentions towards completion of degree. The findings involving 397 Latino students, 18 years or older, and enrolled in a community college in California, revealed that interactions with institutional agents such as faculty staff or academic counsellors had a significant impact on Latino students' success.

The aim of this research was to enable a deeper insight into the attitudes of university teachers towards referring students for counselling. To identify the teachers' perspectives, the key research questions were as follows:

(1) What are the teachers' perspectives towards referring students for counselling?
(2) What are the challenges and difficulties faced during counselling referral?
(3) What are the areas for improvement in counselling referral?

The answers to these questions could reveal the influential factors from this important group of stakeholders and could serve as a platform from which to explore potential areas of improvement and policymaking related to counselling services in a university setting.

Method

Sampling and participants

The research was conducted in an autonomous and public-funded university in Singapore. Approval from the organisation's institutional review board was sought and obtained to ensure that ethical

guidelines were followed strictly and appropriately. To ensure purposive sampling (Silverman, 2006), the university identified teaching faculty staff who had referred students for counselling. Two email invitations were sent to university teachers who had previously referred students for counselling, and willing respondents were assured of their anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses. Teachers responded within a month, and interview appointments were subsequently scheduled.

Two male professors who were working full-time at the same university participated in the study. T1 had more than 10 years of teaching experience, while T2 had more than 30 years of experience. T1 was a native Singaporean, and T2 was a migrant worker. It should be noted that they were the only respondents who indicated interest in the project after the email invitation was sent. Moreover, after consideration it was decided to proceed with the study with a sample size of two given that this was a small-scale, self-initiated pilot project conducted solely by two full-time university counsellors.

Measurement and data analysis

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to analyse the participants' experiences, stories and perspectives regarding counselling referrals. IPA allows each unique experience to be categorised into themes based on responses to the research questions (Eatough & Smith, 2008). This method was specifically chosen to obtain relevant and new data in untapped areas before analysing probable areas for improvement. IPA facilitates an examination of phenomenology through an interpretive lens, as opposed to a descriptive one (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

In this particular research context, the attempt to understand the perspective of the academic teaching staff from a counselling professional's perspective required a two-stage process: The participants' attempts to make sense of their own perspectives were followed by our attempts as researchers to interpret the participants' worlds as they presented them. IPA is "concerned with the detailed examination of personal lived experience, the meaning of experience to participants, and how participants make sense of that experience" (Smith, 2011, p. 9).

A set of 11 semi-structured interview questions was prepared and used as a guide for the participant interviews. The questions sought to explore the thought processes used to approach situations in which counselling referral might be required for a student, as well as the barriers, areas for improvement and suggestions. As some of the shared experiences could be sensitive, a semi-structured interview allowed a deeper probe for further elaboration when required. The questions were posed to the participants in a flexible sequence with variant allowances for open-ended probes. We used open-ended questions to gather the interviewees' opinions regarding referring students for counselling based on their own unique experiences and knowledge. The following are examples of the questions used: What are your opinions or understanding about counselling referral? What are some of the barriers that stop you from or create difficulty with helping a student? What role do you play in helping a student in distress? The questions' intent ranged from determining the teachers' initial reaction to dealing with a student who might require counselling, to understanding the roles and the barriers teachers encountered in making referrals and potential areas for improvement.

The teachers were given the option of not answering questions if they did not want to or otherwise felt uncomfortable. The interviews were conducted in the privacy of each teacher's office. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and thirty minutes. The teachers provided consent for the interview, which included an audio file. These files were subsequently transcribed to obtain an accurate analysis. To preserve the participants' voice, a minimum editing approach was applied to the extracted phrases (Corden & Sainsbury, 2006) to ensure accuracy and authentic transfer. Every word was recorded and scrutinised for a coherent interpretation of the message projected by the sender. The audio files were then deleted upon transcription. The transcription was read several times by us in order to familiarise ourselves with the content. Significant and interesting insights were highlighted and transformed into themes using selected concise phrases. A range of techniques for sorting and extracting were used to form the thematic categories. These include the manual examination of words and sentences, scanning of paragraphs for meaningful and emerging insights.

These code attributes were subsequently used to form subthemes. These subthemes were then further streamlined to form clusters of the main category. Extracted phrases were placed under the identified theme and interpreted in a narrative manner to derive the meaning of the data.

Results

Through the interviews, the teachers articulated their perspectives towards counselling referral and its related issues. We found differences in the approaches and efforts the university teachers used to reach out to students in distress. The findings from the teachers' interview data revealed four main themes pertaining to counselling referral: (a) Referral Procedures, (b) Challenges and Difficulties, (c) Support, and (d) Awareness (see Table 1). Also as seen in Table 1, subthemes comprise each main theme.

The main and subthemes were constructed using the personal experiences shared by the teachers. Both positive and negative themes were identified. Examples of positive themes included referral engagement, supporting role, encouragement, awareness of students' concerns, and support from the counselling centre. Examples of negative themes included the lack of awareness of mental health among staff, students' resistance, and stigma. The boundaries of counselling, such as guidelines and protocols related to confidentiality, information sharing and handling students who are unreceptive towards counselling, were unclear to them. The teachers provided suggestions and ideas for ways to improve these negative factors. They noted the value of support from the university counselling centre, which they considered a specialised and crucial need.

Theme 1: Referral procedures

Four subthemes comprised the main category, *referral procedures*.

Teachers' engagement in the referral process

One of the participant teachers noted that the university produced a generic list of underperforming students each term. Through interactions with these students to address their academic underperformance, certain non-academic issues may be discovered for subsequent counselling referrals. The other participant teacher reflected that through active personal observation, he attempted to find out more about students who appeared to be having difficulties with classes.

T1: We are given a list of students who underperformed in their academic progress every term. Some of these issues concern family- or relationship-oriented issues and are not related to academic issues. We encourage them to talk to our counsellors.

T2: If I notice a student struggling with something in my class, I suggest that they go for counselling. I ask questions like, have you been in touch with anybody from the counselling centre for support?

Table 1. Themes and subthemes.

Themes	Subtheme 1	Subtheme 2	Subtheme 3	Subtheme 4
Referral procedures	Teachers' engagement in the referral process	Teachers' willingness to play a supporting role	Teachers' comfort level with helping	Teacher encourages students to see a counsellor
Challenges and difficulties	Students' resistance	Stigma associated with seeking help for mental health issues	Teachers' dilemmas in offering help	Teachers lack expertise in mental healthcare
Support	Support from the counselling centre	Counselling providing a third party's perspective		
Awareness	Teachers' awareness of students' concerns	Need to build awareness amongst teaching staff		

Teachers' willingness to play a supporting role

One of the teachers in this study noted that as a professor, he was in a good position to provide a different perspective. This is due to the mutual respect and close bonding through frequent interactions within the class setting. The other teacher asserted that his primary role was to provide students with the initial encouragement only and refer them to the available counselling resources when required.

T1: I guess you provide a listening ear if he or she is willing to open up. You provide an alternative perspective because the person may be hearing the perspective of others, such as parents, who may have a very different perspective from a professor.

T2: I try to convey concern and willingness to support. I try to be a support person in that process by being aware of the available resource and directing people to that. Trying to break down part of the barriers they may have put up about getting help. I definitely want to refer them to counselling because I feel like I am only there to do the initial encouraging. I guess that is probably my main role.

Both participants indicated their willingness to support the students. They also recognised their role in directing students to available counselling resources whenever possible.

Teachers' comfort level with helping

One of the participants indicated that most professors exhibit a level of care for students, which was dependent on the professor's personal comfort level with the particular student. The other teacher shared that he had an open approach; he viewed education holistically and felt there was no shame in being mentally unwell.

T1: It depends on how comfortable I am. If it is a student that I already know, I would just sit down with the student and find out more. The initial response is to determine exactly what is the problem and whether the person is already receiving help. Most of the professors genuinely care for the students, not just the academic progress but in the overall development of the student.

T2: I would describe myself as very open to being supportive of the individual. I believe in the holistic approach to education and that I am preparing students for interaction with potential employers and to deal with the workplace in the future.

Teacher encourages students to see a counsellor

The teacher participants identified that encouragement was among their approaches towards students facing distress. However, their use of encouragement with the chosen target audiences differed:

T1: I am aware that you can't force the student to go and see a counsellor. You should only strongly encourage.

T2: I really try to encourage them if I feel like they are really reluctant to open up to anybody about this. Sometimes, I am doing the referral directly. When I am interacting with instructors, I will encourage them to do the same. I try to be a support person in that process, being aware of the resources and directing the students to that resource.

One of the teachers reflected on how he worked directly with students by encouraging them to seek help from the counsellor. Similarly, the other faculty member not only provided encouragement to students but also encouraged his colleagues to do the same.

Theme 2: Challenges and difficulties

Four types of *challenges and difficulties* were identified through the teacher interviews.

Students' resistance

Students' receptiveness towards getting help from the counsellor was an issue for one of the teachers. He felt there was a gap in the options available for helping students who refuse to go for

counselling. The other teacher participant had found that it was common to encounter students who refused to open up about what was happening to them.

T1:   The issue remains unresolved because sometimes when you advise students to get help from the counsellors, they refuse. I feel there is a gap with what you can do with students that refuse to go to counsellors.

T2:   I would say it is more common to encounter students that are really closed off and just not willing to reveal even the slightest of what's going on for them.

Stigma associated with seeking help for mental health issues

One of the teachers indicated that getting students to disclose their issues can be a challenge at times due to the stigma associated with poor mental health. The other teacher shared that shame was often linked to mental illness or seeking counselling.

T1:   Something that the counselling centre has been trying to do: remove that stigma. Traditionally, if you see a counsellor or psychiatrist, you are seen as having a problem. Unless the professor gains trust or the student is very comfortable sharing, it is hard to find out about the inner feelings of students. That is why a lot of us don't even know the students are having problems.

T2:   As I come from outside of Singapore, sometimes I'm surprised about the need to keep everything hush hush. What I find challenging is that the student is not willing to be open because of the shame. I would say it is more common to encounter those that are really closed off and just not willing to reveal even the slightest of what's going on for them. The other thing is the shame that I find often associated with mental illness. People just feel so ashamed of the fact that they are seeing a counsellor. Why should you be ashamed of that?

Teachers' dilemmas in offering help

One teacher reflected about being judged by other students for giving more attention to another student and being mindful of professional distance. The other teacher participant stressed the importance of not being overly involved in a case and exercising caution towards students of the opposite gender who need help. The teachers' concern regarding the need to maintain professional distance and fear of favouritism placed them in the peculiar position of wanting to help but finding it difficult at times.

T1:   Typically, for a professor, it is very difficult to find out because a lot of students see you as someone with authority. Unless over time, you become a friend to the students, and that's where students are more willing to open up. There is a distance between a professor and the students. I want to be careful in terms of keeping my distance. Other students might perceive that a particular student is getting more attention from you as an instructor who is going to give grades. If the student is taking your course, he or she might also be concerned about how you might see him or her and whether that might affect the grades.

T2:   The most challenging one is someone who seems so all alone and so independent. That's when I realised that something might go wrong if I get too involved in the case compared to if I refer them out. Especially as a male with female students, the first thing I want to do is to make sure that you have a female colleague involved as early as possible.

The need to balance emotional concern for their students and professional distance created a dilemma that could cause uncertainty for the teaching faculty members.

Teachers lack expertise in mental healthcare

One of the teachers described his helplessness as a result of lack of training and clarity in areas related to emotional or mental health issues. Similarly, the other teacher echoed the same sentiments regarding his lack of professional expertise in the area of helping students and his uncertainty about mental illness.

T1:   Personally, I feel and think most colleagues don't really know. We are not trained in this area, so we don't really know the technique or appropriate advice in a particular situation. Most faculty staff are not aware of what to do if someone came up to them and asked for help. What information can we share? What is

considered sensitive to the student? Do I share with the counsellor or dean? Issues related to emotional or mental aspects is an area in which I feel handicapped.

T2:   I don't have the capacity to deal with someone, simply because I don't have the time, first of all, and secondly, I don't have the expertise. I recognise I don't have the professional expertise to deal with it. I am not an expert in the area; sometimes I don't feel like I have the deep understanding of the illness to know best how I could deal with the person.

Theme 3: Support

Two subthemes comprised the category, *support*.

Support from the counselling centre

One of the teacher participants recalled that the availability of counselling services was one of the first things he was informed about as a teaching faculty member. He noted an increasing number of students using the services and also the usefulness of time management talks. The other teacher expressed his sentiments about how appreciative he felt towards the counselling services in the university.

T1:   The counselling services provided by the student wellness centre were one of the first things we were told about as faculty. The centre also holds a successful peer helping programme. I think that should be done; we should continue to advocate for that. Recently, some wellness talks that relieve stress have been helpful.

T2:   In my early days as an adjunct instructor, one of my students purposely sat in a chair in the corner instead of joining the team he was assigned to. After two weeks, I contacted the administration and checked in with the counselling services in the school after knowing about it due to this case. It was clearly a case of an individual having mental health issues and not wanting it to be known. That's how I become aware of it and ever since, I just refer them to the counsellor there. I really value the counselling services.

The teacher participants were appreciative of the counselling centre and valued its support services for students who required help or were in distress.

Counselling providing a third party's perspective

Both teachers acknowledged that having a professional counsellor to address some of the issues students face was a valued asset. An alternative view from the counsellor can be helpful for the student.

T1:   Perhaps the faculty may not be the best person to talk to as the student may not want to reveal weakness in front of a professor. Someone else, like a counsellor, someone more independent from the system and is not in a position to grade the student's performance or assignments. I think that is probably more effective.

T2:   Having a conversation with a professional, helps them to be more at ease with everybody else. So that is why I really value the professional counselling services. Because I think it's almost like you are getting a third party's input into your life, a third party's perspective.

Theme 4: Awareness

Two subthemes make the main category, *awareness*.

Teachers' awareness of students' concerns

One of the teachers observed that being in a classroom increased his awareness of students' emotions through observation. If he noticed an affected student, he would have a conversation with the student to learn more. The other teacher revealed that he sought the assistance of a colleague when an unfamiliar student approached him for help.

T1:   If a student comes in and I am totally not aware who the student is or not comfortable with, I may invite one of my colleagues to join in the meeting.

T2:

> As an instructor, sometimes you are aware of things in the classroom. If I'm noticing someone appears to be stressed or anxious, I would ask the person for a conversation.

Need to build awareness amongst teaching staff

The need for additional education and involvement with staff to help them support students could be explored, as one teacher pointed out. Similarly, the other teacher participant stressed the need to inform current and new staff regarding counselling and its importance.

> T1: More needs to be done to educate, probably at the highest level. Helpers could be professors, administrative staff or a role model, like a student leader. If you have more on the ground, the risk signs could be identified, and help could be directed way earlier. The support network on the ground could be there with a collaborative and inclusive approach.
>
> T2: The academic staff are a bit backward in their understanding of counselling and its importance. Sometimes, it is the people like the new hire starting their academic career who make mistakes that affect our reputation. Again, those that are new, that really shouldn't be an issue. I can imagine those that have been with us for a long time, that their views are already fixed.

Such policy overhaul and changes often require strong support from top management and leadership.

Discussion

The attitudes of both participant teachers indicate the willingness of university teachers to support and refer students despite differing levels of comfort and openness. Their understanding of counselling referrals reflected their belief in playing a supporting role and providing encouragement by referring these students to the university counselling centre despite various challenges. Uffelman and Hardin (2002) reported that students dealing with difficult issues, such as suicidal thoughts, depressive moods and abusive relationships, have an increased likelihood of using the counselling services available at school. Educators could also encourage students in distress to seek counselling by having a keen sense of awareness within the class, as also described by the two teachers in this study. Kounin (1970) described the importance of *withitness* which focuses on awareness, knowledge and communication of students' emotions.

Importantly, the findings revealed some of the dilemmas, difficulties and struggles the educators faced, including stigma related to seeking help from counsellors. The fear of being judged by others when seeking help and the perception that others might view them as incompetent in managing their issues has caused individuals to avoid counselling (Vogel, Wester, & Larson, 2007). Social stigma, defined as the fear of being negatively judged by others for seeking help with an issue (Deane & Chamberlain, 1994), represents a huge barrier. The shame arising from social stigma creates a barrier against seeking help and care (Corrigan, 2004). This has remained a considerable challenge in seeking counselling and referral. Along with the inaccessibility of counselling services, the stigma associated with seeing a school counsellor is a huge barrier (Magen & Chen, 1988). More than 100 research articles have reinforced how stigma serves as a barrier (Clement et al., 2015). There is evidence that stigma associated with seeking help or poor mental health could prevent people from obtaining the resources they require. Hence, students' hesitation in seeking help can be a self-deterrent from solving their issues. Although the university teachers in this study identified stigma as a challenge, their own encouraging role in referring students to counsellors may help mitigate such stigma.

Planning and support from top management leaders have considerable impact in shaping an organisation's vision and enhancing the understanding of its goals and purpose (Hallinger & Heck, 2002). It is imperative for all departments within the university to work cohesively towards addressing the needs of students who require counselling referrals and support services. Hallinan (2008) noted that the learning process entails both cognitive and social-psychological dimensions. Student

wellness and school support is pertinent to academic performance. Students might exhibit pessimism towards the course if they perceive their supervisor as unsupportive (Cole, Bruch, & Vogel, 2006). This is something that faculty staff can be mindful of. Mental wellness and resilience are important areas for educators to consider when taking an overall holistic view of their students' development. Due to their frequent interactions with students, faculty staff are in a good position to refer them for counselling. At the same time, the responsibilities and duties of teaching faculty staff members are often hefty. Hence, it is of utmost importance for the university to provide them with the infrastructure, support and resources to meet needs in areas that are not directly concerned with academic teaching. Counselling referral and emphasis on student mental wellness can be reinforced with support from the school leadership team.

Recommendations

The two teacher participants highlighted several areas that could be explored for deeper study and improvement purposes. One was faculty members' uncertainty regarding the counselling process. The lack of professional knowledge regarding the counselling process and mental health information hampered referrals to counselling. One proposed suggestion was to ensure that new hire/faculty staff be exposed to the counselling centre as part of an orientation-induction process. There is a need to ensure that existing staff are kept aware of new counselling-related policies and initiatives. This will ensure a cohesive understanding of the different sectors of the organisation.

Future policy planning could include these initiatives through various pre- or in-service training, workshops, briefings, updates and structured informal conversations. Clarity of the recommended guidelines and protocols will help the staff develop competence in their ability to connect with the students on a deeper level and provide the necessary resources for referral when the situation arises. Wellness-related workshops focusing on stress and time management, mindfulness and relaxation are additional support and awareness activities that can be put in place for students.

Limitations

As the research was conducted by two full-time counsellors, there were various limitations in the scope, breadth and depth of the investigation. Also, these findings are only based on a small sample of two teachers from one university, and it should also be noted that various organisations have different practices, standards and protocols in place.

Seeking faculty staff for involvement in a research project that might not be directly relevant to their job duties can be challenging. This project was meant as an investigative analysis tool to help the counselling centre gain awareness and improvement their practices, knowledge and services through input from relevant stakeholders. As this was not a university-wide sanctioned research and taking into consideration the priorities of faculty staff, it was challenging to ensure mandatory participation specifically from faculty staff who have made counselling referral for their students. Reid, Flowers, and Larkin (2005) noted that a smaller sampler size allows examination at a greater depth of analysis in IPA. As a self-initiated pilot project conducted solely by two full-time university counsellors, we decided to select both participants using IPA. Smith et al. (2009) have highlighted that sample size is based on context and consideration should be accorded on a case-by-case study. In this study, one advantage was that one of the teacher participants was a migrant worker and therefore we captured two different perspectives. Of course, there is potential to develop this research further on a larger scale with varied types of participants, involving both teaching faculty and students. Schoenberg (1978) noted that the best indicator of a university's genuine concern for its students and their welfare is the budget allocated for counselling. A university-sanctioned survey would ensure a higher rate of participation, which would produce more quantitative data for analysis and comparison.

Conclusion

The challenges and issues presented by the university teachers reinforced the importance of regular communication, allocated time slots and active engagement by the university counselling centre. Through outreach activities such as workshops and briefings, the entire university community can have access to knowledge and information regarding the available counselling services and the referral process. A better understanding of the counselling services and mental health is not only important for the confidence of university teachers in managing related issues but may also have a number of clinical advantages in terms of therapeutic alliance and counselling referral efficacy. This would require distributive and coordinated efforts to be in place between the teaching faculty and counsellors. There is still a pertinent need to educate in order to reduce or eliminate the stigma associated with mental illness and instead endorse the importance of seeking counselling when necessary. It is imperative that collaborative efforts between the university administration, teachers and the counselling centre are strengthened to ensure that any student in distress will be able to receive counselling support in a timely and effective manner. It is clear that the findings of this study, on the challenges and role of educators in referring students to counselling, need to be further explored and extended in future research.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

Ng Poh Yaip Steven is a senior counsellor in Singapore Management University, Singapore. He is currently a doctoral student in the policy and leadership studies' academic group at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University (NIE/NTU), Singapore. He has a Master's Degree in Counselling from Monash University, Australia, and received his teacher training from NIE/NTU, Singapore. A registered counsellor with Singapore Association of Counselling (SAC), he has 14 years of teaching and counselling experience in various educational settings.

Chung Yee Lin Ada has been working in the area of child, youth and family service for over 20 years. She is now working as the Head of the Student Wellness Centre at Singapore Management University, Singapore, guiding the team to provide counselling service to students. She received her Bachelor's degree in Social Work and a Master's degree in Counselling from the University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong. She then obtained her Doctorate in Education from the University of Technology Sydney, Australia. She is also a certified solution-focused therapist (CSFT), a registered counsellor with the Singapore Association of Counselling (SAC), a social worker and a clinical supervisor.

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