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**Assessing the Need for Counselling Services among Nursing Students
in Northern Malaysia: A critical insight into a neglected area of nursing
education**

Darul Farah Yaacob¹, Rusnani Ab Latif^{1*}, Yoyok Bakti Prasetyo², Ns.Henny Dwi Susanti²

**Corresponding Author*

¹ Faculty of Health Sciences, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Pulau Pinang Kampus Bertam, 13200 Kepala Batas, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia.

² University of Muhammadiyah Malang, Indonesia.

darulfarah@uitm.edu.my, rusnani@uitm.edu.my, yokyo@umm.ac.id, hennydwi@umm.ac.id
Tel: +60139104522

Abstract

Nursing students in northern Malaysia experience considerable academic demands, emotional strain, and clinical duties, all of which impact their mental well-being and academic performance. This study explores their counseling needs, with an emphasis on self-leadership, communication skills, learning techniques, and coping strategies. By surveys and focus group discussions, major themes such as heavy workloads, clinical-related stress, and feelings of isolation emerged. Findings highlight shortcomings in existing counseling services, especially in stress management and resilience-building. The study proposes the implementation of a structured, accessible, and student-focused counseling framework designed to support nursing students in becoming resilient and well-prepared healthcare professionals.

Keywords: Nursing Students; Guidance and Counseling; Psychosocial well-being; Stress Management.

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1.0 Introduction

Nursing education is widely recognised as both intellectually demanding and emotionally taxing. As nursing students navigate through rigorous academic requirements, clinical placements, and personal responsibilities, they are often exposed to significant psychological stress. These challenges can lead to anxiety, burnout, and even depression if not addressed appropriately. In many cases, the emotional well-being of nursing students is overlooked, despite its direct impact on academic performance, clinical competence, and future professional resilience. In Northern Malaysia, where healthcare demands are increasing, nursing students are expected to adapt quickly to the complexities of modern nursing practice. However, the availability and accessibility of counselling services tailored to their unique experiences remain limited or underutilised. This gap underscores the urgent need to evaluate the demand and importance of

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psychological support services within nursing institutions. This study aims to assess the need for counselling services among nursing students in Northern Malaysia, highlighting the challenges they face, their awareness and attitudes toward mental health support, and the extent to which these services are currently available.

Nursing training is challenging, and students must navigate through educational, clinical, and interpersonal hurdles. If it occurs in Northern Malaysia, the same constraints are enhanced with a lack of institutional support, cultural stigma on mental health, and socio-economic disparities existing and leading to enhanced stress (Choi, Park, & Noh, 2024; Lacson et al., 2024). Students of nursing effectively encounter stress, depression, burnout, and emotional exhaustion as consequences of prolonged academic and clinical pressure (Wei, Roberts, & Strickler, 2021; Morales-Rodríguez et al., 2021). Furthermore, students struggle with self-leadership, communication, and stress management, which are essential elements of nursing practice that are not adequately addressed or frequently covered in the curriculum. Workload-based counselling programs may be beneficial (Mbakaya et al., 2020; Xiong, 2024). The framework builds upon Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, where the fulfillment of basic needs is seen as essential to personal growth (Ryff, 2014; Batool et al., 2023) and integrates elements of Self-Determination Theory and the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping where motivation, autonomy and coping strategies are given importance (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Moreover, sociodemographic aspects such as gender, ethnicity, and rural origin influence the need for counseling, with women experiencing gender-related health problems and students from minority ethnic groups experiencing socio-cultural and economic problems (Ahmad et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2024).

2.0 Literature Review

Nursing students face significant stress due to their academic workloads, clinical placements, and patient care responsibilities, making guidance and counselling services crucial. Nursing education is demanding, combining rigorous academic learning with hands-on clinical training. Students are often burdened with heavy academic workloads that include lectures, assignments, exams, and research projects. Concurrently, they participate in clinical placements where they must apply theoretical knowledge to real-world healthcare settings, often dealing with complex medical cases, emotional stress, and life-or-death situations. This dual pressure from academic and clinical environments can result in high levels of stress, anxiety, and emotional fatigue. Without adequate support, these stressors can harm students' learning, performance, and mental health. Consequently, structured guidance and counselling services are crucial in helping students manage stress, develop effective coping strategies, and maintain emotional well-being throughout their educational journey.

While previous research by Choi, Park, and Noh (2024) and Wei et al. (2021) identifies academic stress, burnout, and emotional strain as significant concerns for nursing students, these studies have primarily focused on urban settings or broader, generalised populations. This study fills the gap in the literature by focusing on nursing students in Northern Malaysia, a region often overlooked in research, where socio-cultural factors such as regional isolation and mental health stigma play a more pronounced role in students' willingness to seek help. In contrast, studies in other regions, such as Zhong et al. (2021), have shown that cultural and social factors like stigma and poor mental health literacy impact help-seeking behaviours. This research extends their findings by specifically examining how these factors manifest among nursing students in Northern Malaysia and how they hinder the effective use of counseling services.

The need for counselling support is further emphasised by studies like Dos Santos (2022), which argues that counselling helps students reduce stress, build resilience, and improve academic performance. Similarly, Samson (2020) highlights the importance of counseling in addressing emotional issues like anxiety and burnout, which are prevalent among nursing students. In the context of Northern Malaysia, gendered roles and expectations related to caregiving, combined with cultural taboos surrounding mental health, make the provision of culturally competent counseling essential. Studies by Whitford et al. (2020) and Zhong et al. (2021) suggest that culturally sensitive therapy approaches are crucial for overcoming these barriers and ensuring that students receive the support they need.

Moreover, the current study highlights the importance of theory-driven counselling interventions that integrate frameworks such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Self-Determination Theory in supporting nursing students in rural areas. By offering a tailored approach that addresses mental health, resilience, communication skills, and self-leadership, this study provides actionable insights into the unique counseling needs of nursing students in Northern Malaysia, contributing to the existing literature on student well-being and counseling interventions in underserved regions (Lacson et al., 2024; Mbakaya et al., 2020).

3.0 Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to comprehensively assess the counseling needs of nursing students in Northern Malaysia. The first phase of the study involves administering a structured survey to 300 nursing students from both public and private institutions using stratified random sampling to ensure the sample reflects diverse sociodemographic characteristics, such as gender, ethnicity, year of study, and institution type. The survey uses a 5-point Likert scale to assess needs across four key domains: self-leadership, communication skills, learning strategies, and psychological coping. The reliability of the questionnaire was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha, with strong internal consistency values ranging from 0.940 to 0.962 across the domains.

The second phase of the study involves semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 20 participants purposively selected from the initial survey sample. These qualitative interviews aim to explore students' personal experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms, providing in-depth insights into their counselling needs and requirements. Data from the quantitative phase will be

analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics via SPSS, while qualitative data will be analysed through thematic analysis using ATLAS. ti software. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committees, and informed consent was acquired from all participants, ensuring confidentiality and voluntary participation. The study integrates the findings from both phases, with the quantitative data guiding the selection of topics for the qualitative phase. This methodological approach ensures a robust understanding of nursing students' counselling needs and provides recommendations for improving counselling services within nursing education in the Northern region.

4.0 Results

This study combined qualitative analysis and a questionnaire survey to investigate students' guidance and counselling needs, providing practical insights that can inform counselling practices. Results are summarised in tables to highlight the primary outcomes and to identify areas where there is a greater need.

Table 1: *Descriptive Statistics for Guidance and Counseling Needs by Domain*

| Descriptive Statistics | | | | | |
|---|-----|---------|---------|------|----------------|
| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
| Self-Leadership Skills | | | | | |
| I need the skills to manage my time for academic matters | 300 | 1 | 5 | 3.64 | .924 |
| I need the skills to manage my time for co-curriculum | 300 | 1 | 5 | 3.39 | .931 |
| I need the skills to manage my time for self-care | 300 | 1 | 5 | 3.36 | 1.167 |
| I need the skills to manage my time for my family | 300 | 1 | 5 | 3.27 | 1.189 |
| I need the skills to manage my time for my social life | 300 | 1 | 5 | 3.27 | 1.058 |
| I need the skills for leading group work | 300 | 1 | 5 | 3.54 | .908 |
| I need the skills to be a good group follower | 300 | 1 | 5 | 3.43 | .939 |
| Communication Skills | | | | | |
| Verbal communication skills: I need a guide to understand my lecturer's language | 300 | 1 | 5 | 3.37 | .995 |
| Verbal communication skills: I need a guide for understanding my colleague's language | 300 | 1 | 5 | 3.25 | .978 |
| Non-verbal communication skills: I need a guide to understand my lecturer's language | 300 | 1 | 5 | 3.34 | .990 |
| Non-verbal communication skills: I need a guide for understanding my colleague's language | 300 | 1 | 5 | 3.22 | .977 |
| Non-verbal communication skills: I need a guide for understanding my patient's language | 300 | 1 | 5 | 3.48 | .955 |
| Learning Skill | | | | | |
| I need a guide for understanding and remembering lecture notes | 300 | 1 | 5 | 3.59 | .985 |
| I need the following skills: Time management in examination | 300 | 1 | 5 | 3.60 | .971 |
| I need the following skills: Understanding the topics, learning outcomes | 300 | 1 | 5 | 3.60 | .929 |
| I need the following skills: Tackling of questions | 300 | 1 | 5 | 3.77 | .891 |
| I need the following skills: Techniques for scoring good marks | 300 | 1 | 6 | 3.85 | .931 |
| Psychological Coping Skills | | | | | |
| I need the following skills: Coping mechanism of stress | 300 | 1 | 5 | 3.41 | 1.107 |
| I need the following skills: Coping mechanism of anxiety | 300 | 1 | 5 | 3.32 | 1.121 |
| I need the following skills: Coping mechanisms for depression | 300 | 1 | 5 | 3.29 | 1.101 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 300 | | | | |

4.1 Findings

The findings indicate that Learning skills are the most pressing counselling need among nursing students, particularly in academic performance strategies such as time management for exams (mean = 3.60 to 3.85). Psychological Coping Skills also showed a moderate to high need, especially for stress and anxiety management (mean = 3.29 to 3.41). Self-leadership skills, particularly in time management for academic and personal responsibilities, were moderately important (mean = 3.64). Communication Skills were ranked lowest in terms of overall need, with a focus on communication with patients and lecturers (mean = 3.48 and 3.37, respectively). These results underscore the importance of targeted interventions in academic learning and psychological coping to support nursing students' success and overall well-being.

4.2 Relationship Between Sociodemographic Characteristics and Guidance Needs

This section examines the relationship between sociodemographic characteristics (gender, ethnicity, entry qualification, origin, and year of study) and the perceived need for guidance and counseling services across four domains: self-leadership, Communication skills, Learning skills, and psychological coping skills. The analysis was conducted using Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA), which enables the simultaneous testing of the collective impact of multiple independent variables on several dependent variables. The findings from the Tests of Between-Subjects Effects provide insights into which sociodemographic factors significantly affect students' guidance needs.

Table 2: Test of Between-Subjects Effects

| Tests of Between-Subjects Effects | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|----|-------------|---------|------|
| Source | Dependent Variable | Type III Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
| Corrected Model | Self Leadership | 75.666 ^a | 24 | 3.153 | 5.599 | .000 |
| | Communication | 51.617 ^b | 24 | 2.151 | 3.164 | .000 |
| | Learning | 67.459 ^c | 24 | 2.811 | 4.682 | .000 |
| | Psychological | 80.705 ^d | 24 | 3.363 | 3.517 | .000 |
| Intercept | Self Leadership | 278.294 | 1 | 278.294 | 494.193 | .000 |
| | Communication | 208.302 | 1 | 208.302 | 306.443 | .000 |
| | Learning | 284.084 | 1 | 284.084 | 473.180 | .000 |
| | Psychological | 282.592 | 1 | 282.592 | 295.549 | .000 |
| Gender | Self_Leadership | 4.219 | 1 | 4.219 | 7.493 | .007 |
| | Communication | 3.978 | 1 | 3.978 | 5.853 | .016 |
| | Learning | .728 | 1 | .728 | 1.212 | .272 |
| | Psychological | .272 | 1 | .272 | .285 | .594 |
| Ethnic | Self_Leadership | 1.070 | 2 | .535 | .950 | .388 |
| | Communication | 1.775 | 2 | .888 | 1.306 | .273 |
| | Learning | .655 | 2 | .328 | .546 | .580 |
| | Psychological | 1.317 | 2 | .658 | .689 | .503 |
| Qualification | Self_Leadership | .810 | 3 | .270 | .479 | .697 |
| | Communication | .191 | 3 | .064 | .093 | .964 |
| | Learning | .367 | 3 | .122 | .204 | .894 |
| | Psychological | 1.178 | 3 | .393 | .411 | .745 |
| Origin | Self-Leadership | 1.224 | 1 | 1.224 | 2.174 | .141 |
| | Communication | .202 | 1 | .202 | .298 | .586 |
| | Learning | 2.202 | 1 | 2.202 | 3.667 | .057 |
| | Psychological | 2.239 | 1 | 2.239 | 2.342 | .127 |
| Year Of Study | Self-Leadership | 2.382 | 2 | 1.191 | 2.115 | .123 |
| | Communication | 2.687 | 2 | 1.344 | 1.977 | .141 |
| | Learning | 1.505 | 2 | .752 | 1.253 | .287 |
| | Psychological | 2.138 | 2 | 1.069 | 1.118 | .328 |

Gender

- *Self-leadership*: The analysis revealed a significant effect of gender on self-leadership needs ($F(1, 298) = 7.493, p = 0.007$), with female students perceiving a higher need for self-leadership skills compared to their male counterparts. This suggests that gender may influence how nursing students perceive the importance of developing skills such as time management and group leadership."

- *Communication*: Female students perceive a greater need for guidance in communication compared to male students ($F(1, 298) = 5.853, p = 0.016$). This emphasises the importance of effective communication in nursing, particularly in maintaining relationships with patients, peers, and faculty."

- *Learning and Psychological*: No difference was observed in gender regarding the Learning ($F(1, 298) = 1.212, p = 0.272$) and psychological coping ($F(1, 298) = 0.285, p = 0.594$) domains. This indicates that both male and female students perceive similar needs for academic and emotional support.

Ethnicity

- *Self-leadership, Communication, Learning, and Psychological Coping*: Ethnicity did not influence any of the guidance needs domains. For instance, the effects of ethnicity on self-leadership ($F(2, 297) = 0.950, p = 0.388$) and communication ($F(2, 297) = 1.306, p = 0.273$) were minimal. These findings suggest that, regardless of ethnic background, all students report similar levels of perceived need for self-leadership and guidance in communication.

Qualification

- *Self-leadership, Communication, Learning, and Psychological Coping: Origin (Urban vs. Rural)* - Entry qualification did not influence the perceived need for guidance in any of the domains. For example, self-leadership ($F(3, 296) = 0.479, p = 0.697$) and communication ($F(3, 296) = 0.093, p = 0.964$) showed similar results across entry pathways. This suggests that the students' entry qualifications (whether STPM, Matriculation, or other) do not have a major impact on their perceived need for support in these areas.
- *Self-leadership*: Self-leadership needs did not differ based on origin (urban vs. rural) ($F(1, 298) = 2.174, p = 0.141$), suggesting that both urban and rural students perceive similar needs for leadership skills
- *Learning*: A trend was observed for learning needs ($F(1, 298) = 3.667, p = 0.057$), suggesting that rural students may feel a slightly higher need for academic support compared to their urban counterparts. While this trend is close to significance, it warrants further exploration in future research.
- *Communication and Psychological Coping*: Communication ($F(1, 298) = 0.298, p = 0.586$) and psychological coping ($F(1, 298) = 2.342, p = 0.127$) showed similar results, indicating comparable needs among students from both urban and rural areas

Year of Study

- *Self-leadership, Communication, Learning, and Psychological Coping*: The year of study did not influence the perceived need for guidance in any of the domains. For example, self-leadership ($F(2, 297) = 2.115, p = 0.123$) and communication ($F(2, 297) = 1.977, p = 0.141$) yielded similar results across 2nd-year, 3rd-year, and 4th-year students. This suggests that the need for self-leadership and communication skills remains consistent across different academic years.

Gender, origin, and year of study emerged as key factors explaining a substantial portion of the variance in perceived guidance needs, particularly in relation to self-leadership and communication. Gender was the most influential factor, with females expressing a greater need for assistance in these domains, which is important when considering counselling offerings. Ethnicity, entry qualifications, and year of study had minimal impact on perceived needs. There was a trend for rural students to express more support needs than other groups, although this did not reach statistical significance, suggesting a potential area for further research.

4.3 Psychosocial Well-being and Guidance Needs

Table 3. *Thematic Categories and Sub-categories*

| Theme | Category | Sub-Category |
|----------------------------|---------------------|---|
| 1. Psychosocial Well-being | 1a. Challenges | Workload Clinical Stress Loneliness Homesickness |
| | 1b. Implications | Depression Burnout Lack of Motivation Poor Academic Performance |
| 2. Guidance and Counseling | 2a. Awareness | Knowledge of Counseling Services |
| | 2b. Barriers | Stigma Time Constraints Lack of Trust Inaccessible Services |
| | 2c. Recommendations | Awareness Campaigns Increased Accessibility Better Counsellor Training Student-friendly Approaches |

Theme 1: Psychosocial Well-being

- *Challenges*: Students reported that workload, clinical preceptorship stress, loneliness, and homesickness were major stressors that impacted their well-being. From a workload perspective, the combined demands of academics and patients were challenging. The clinical setting was a source of emotional stress, as they felt they would make mistakes in patient care.
- *Implications*: These stressors resulted in mental disorders like depression, burnout, and demotivation. Many participants mentioned that academic performance was affected by emotional burnout.

Theme 2: Guidance and Counselling

- *Awareness*: There is also no doubt that some students were denied counselling due to a lack of availability and inadequate knowledge. This ignorance served as a significant barrier to help-seeking.
- *Barriers*: The stigma of mental health was reported to be a significant barrier. Students feared being judged if they sought counselling. Moreover, time limitations due to a demanding nursing program discouraged seeking help.
- *Recommendations*: Students suggested increased advertising, flexible counseling hours, and online counseling services. They also emphasised the need for better-trained counsellors who can relate to the specific difficulties faced by nursing students.

5.0 Discussion

The results of this study provide valuable insights into the counseling needs of nursing students in Northern Malaysia. A key finding is the high demand for psychological coping skills, particularly in managing stress and anxiety. This aligns with previous studies by Choi, Park, and Noh (2024), who identified similar challenges among nursing students, highlighting stress and burnout as significant concerns. In contrast, the findings from Wei, Roberts, and Strickler (2021) emphasise a need for more targeted interventions in self-leadership and communication skills, which were also significant in our study. This suggests that while stress management is a common need, different regions may have varying priorities for counselling.

The Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) supports these findings, as it emphasises the importance of intrinsic motivation and autonomy in addressing psychological well-being. Nursing students who perceive a lack of autonomy and control over their academic and clinical responsibilities are more likely to experience stress and burnout. The practical implications of this study suggest that nursing schools should integrate targeted counselling services into their curricula to address the specific needs identified in this study. For example, providing workshops focused on time management, stress reduction techniques, and enhancing communication skills would be beneficial. Furthermore, creating a supportive environment where students feel comfortable discussing their mental health without stigma is crucial. Schools should consider expanding counselling services to include both individual and group counselling sessions, as well as ensuring access to peer support networks, which were identified as essential by students in the qualitative phase.

However, this study has several limitations. The focus on nursing students in Northern Malaysia may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions or countries with different socio-cultural contexts. Future research should investigate counselling needs in other areas, particularly in urban settings or regions with greater access to counselling services.

6.0 Conclusion& Recommendations

This study highlights the significance of guidance and counselling services for nursing students in northern Malaysia. The findings reveal significant needs in areas like psychological coping, self-leadership, communication skills, and learning strategies. Tailored counseling programs are crucial in supporting students' mental health and academic success. Institutions should integrate these services into nursing curricula to prepare students for the demands of the profession. Future research should explore the long-term effectiveness of counseling interventions and expand the study to other regions to enhance the generalizability of the findings. The research contributes to global discussions on nursing education, advocating comprehensive counseling services to support students' academic success and emotional well-being.

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Paper Contribution to the Related Field of Study

This study advances nursing education by examining the guidance and counseling needs of students in northern Malaysia, an under-researched area. It explores key domains of psychological coping, self-leadership, communication skills, and learning strategies, highlighting how these affect academic performance, mental health, and professional development. The study also considers sociodemographic factors, emphasising the need for culturally responsive and equitable counseling programs. Grounded in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Self-Determination Theory, the findings provide a theoretical framework for developing effective interventions.

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