

BRIDGING ACCESS AND EMOTION: THE COUNSELLOR ATTACK INTEGRATED EMOTION OUTREACH MODEL TO ENHANCE HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIOUR AT LAHAD DATU VOCATIONAL COLLEGE, SABAH, MALAYSIA

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Abstract: *This study explores the effectiveness of the Counsellor Attack programme in improving students help-seeking behaviour at Lahad Datu Vocational College, Sabah, Malaysia. The programme was introduced to address the low number of students visiting the Psychology and Career Unit. Instead of waiting for students to come to the counselling room, counsellors actively visited classrooms and workshops to engage students directly in their own learning environment. To further strengthen the programme, emotional literacy elements were integrated through SoulTalk activities, which help students identify and express their emotions in a simple and supportive way. This approach aimed to reduce stigma toward counselling services and make students feel more comfortable seeking help. The study used an action research design involving 45 selected students. Data were collected through visitation records and pre- and post- intervention questionnaires. The findings show a 52.9% increase in student visits after the programme was implemented. Students also reported feeling more aware of their emotions, more comfortable speaking with counsellors, and more willing to seek support when needed. Overall, the Counsellor Attack Integrated Outreach Model demonstrates that combining proactive engagement with emotional support can effectively encourage help-seeking behaviour among vocational students. The model may serve as a practical approach for reducing counselling stigma and promoting emotional well-being in educational institutions.*

Keywords: *Counsellor Attack, Outreach Counselling, Emotional Literacy, Help-Seeking Behaviour, Vocational Education*

Introduction

Help-seeking behaviour among students has become a growing concern within educational institutions worldwide. Although counselling services are widely available in schools and higher education settings, utilisation rates remain consistently low (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2010). Students often delay or avoid seeking professional support due to stigma, lack of awareness, negative perceptions of counselling, and limited emotional

understanding of their own experiences. In vocational education settings, these challenges may be further intensified. Students enrolled in vocational programmes frequently prioritise technical competencies and practical skills, sometimes placing less emphasis on emotional well-being and psychological development. As a result, counselling services may be perceived as irrelevant unless associated with serious disciplinary or mental health issues.

At Lahad Datu Vocational College, Malaysia, the Psychology and Career Unit observed a pattern in which most students visited the counselling unit only upon referral by disciplinary officers, lecturers, or administrators. Voluntary visits were relatively low, indicating limited self-initiated help-seeking behaviour. This trend suggested that the traditional reactive counselling model where counsellors wait for students to approach the unit was insufficient in fostering engagement. To address this issue, the *Counsellor Attack* programme was introduced as a proactive outreach initiative. Counsellors engaged students directly within classrooms and workshops, thereby reducing physical and structural barriers to access. However, although visitation rates improved, emotional resistance and counselling-related stigma persisted.

To enhance the intervention further, emotional literacy elements were integrated through structured SoulTalk activities. These activities aimed to help students identify, understand, and express emotions in a safe and supportive environment. This study examines how integrating accessibility and emotional engagement influences help-seeking behaviour among vocational students.

Literature Review

Help-Seeking Behaviour Among Students

Help-seeking behaviour refers to the process of actively seeking assistance from formal or informal sources to address personal, emotional, or psychological concerns (Rickwood, Deane, Wilson, & Ciarrochi, 2005). Research consistently demonstrates that despite experiencing emotional distress, many young people do not seek professional help.

A systematic review by Gulliver et al. (2010) found that young people commonly avoid professional services due to stigma, embarrassment, lack of perceived need, and preference for self-reliance. Similarly, Eisenberg, Downs, Golberstein, and Zivin (2009) reported that college students with mental health concerns often do not utilise counselling services even when available.

Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour suggests that help-seeking behaviour is influenced by attitudes toward the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. If students perceive counselling negatively or believe that seeking help will result in social judgment, they are less likely to initiate contact.

Stigma as a Barrier to Counselling

Stigma remains one of the most significant barriers to seeking professional help. Corrigan (2004) explains that public stigma leads individuals to internalise negative stereotypes, resulting in self-stigma. Self-stigma reduces self-esteem and discourages individuals from pursuing counselling services.

In educational settings, students often associate counselling with serious psychological disorders or disciplinary issues. This perception creates fear of labeling and social exclusion (Gulliver et al., 2010). Reducing stigma requires normalising emotional discussion and reframing counselling as a developmental support service rather than a remedial intervention.

Proactive Counselling and Outreach Models

Traditional counselling models rely heavily on student-initiated visits. However, outreach approaches have gained increasing recognition for improving accessibility and engagement. Proactive outreach reduces structural barriers by bringing counselling services directly to students' environments (Lee et al., 2023).

Outreach strategies foster relational trust and reduce intimidation associated with formal counselling spaces. When counsellors are physically present in students' daily environments, perceptions shift from authority-based intervention to supportive engagement.

This aligns with person-centred theory (Rogers, 1957), which emphasises empathy, unconditional positive regard, and relational closeness as foundational to effective counselling relationships.

Emotional Literacy and Emotional Awareness

Emotional literacy refers to the ability to recognise, understand, manage, and express emotions effectively (Goleman, 1995). Emotional intelligence theory suggests that awareness of one's emotions improves self-regulation and interpersonal communication.

Young people with low emotional awareness may struggle to articulate distress, leading to avoidance of counselling sessions. Salovey and Mayer (1990) highlight that emotional identification is a core component of emotional intelligence and an important predictor of adaptive behaviour.

Structured emotional identification tools such as emotion cards or guided reflection prompts can support individuals in recognising internal states that are otherwise difficult to verbalise. By increasing emotional clarity, individuals become more open to seeking assistance (Rickwood et al., 2005).

Integrating Accessibility and Emotional Engagement

While outreach improves physical access, emotional literacy enhances internal readiness. Combining both approaches may create a comprehensive framework for transforming help-seeking behaviour.

The Counsellor Attack Integrated Outreach Model is built upon this integration:

- Accessibility reduces external barriers.
- Emotional identification reduces internal resistance.
- Relational engagement builds trust.
- Trust encourages voluntary help-seeking.

This theoretical integration forms the foundation of the present study.

Method

Research Design

This study employed an Action Research design based on the Kemmis and McTaggart model (Plan–Act–Observe–Reflect). A quantitative approach was utilised to measure the effectiveness of the programme through pre- and post-intervention data comparison.

The action research framework was selected because it allows practitioners to implement structured interventions while systematically observing, evaluating, and refining the programme. This cyclical process ensured that improvements to the Counsellor Attack Integrated Outreach Model were continuously informed by empirical findings.

Population and Sample

The study involved two groups:

- i. Population data: Official visitation records of all students who attended the Psychology and Career Unit (January–October 2024 and January–October 2025).
- ii. Selected sample: A purposive sample of 45 students selected based on specific criteria, including participation in outreach sessions and availability for pre- and post-questionnaire evaluation. This dual-data structure allowed both institutional-level impact analysis and focused behavioural assessment.

Research Instruments

Two primary instruments were used:

- i. Document Analysis
Official visitation records from 2024 and 2025 were analysed to identify trends and measure increases in student attendance.
- ii. Questionnaire (Pre- and Post-Intervention)
A structured questionnaire was administered to measure changes in:
 - Knowledge of counselling services
 - Perception toward counselling
 - Readiness and willingness to seek professional help

The Likert-scale format allowed quantitative comparison between pre- and post-intervention responses.

Research Procedure

The study was conducted in three main phases:

- i. Pre-Intervention Phase (November 2024 – January 2025)
During this phase:
 - Baseline visitation data (2024) were analysed.
 - Initial data collection through pre-questionnaires was conducted.
 - Research instruments were developed and refined.
 - A detailed implementation plan for the Counsellor Attack programme was prepared, including schedule, locations, and session content.
- ii. Intervention Phase (February – October 2025)

The intervention involved nine structured sessions conducted in student environments such as workshops, laboratories, and programme units. The Counsellor Attack outreach sessions were conducted twice monthly, lasting between 20–60 minutes. Activities included:

- Soultalk
- Self-personality assessment
- Informal engagement with counsellors
- Casual sharing about counselling services
- Early mental health screening
- Mind games
- Success story sharing

Throughout this period, visitation data were continuously recorded. Emotional engagement components (including structured emotional identification activities) were incorporated to enhance internal readiness for help-seeking.

iii. Post-Intervention Phase (October – November 2025)

In this phase:

- Final visitation data were collected and analysed.
- Post-questionnaires were administered.
- Comparative analysis between 2024 and 2025 data was conducted.
- Programme effectiveness was evaluated.

Data Analysis

were analysed quantitatively using:

- i. Frequency and percentage analysis for visitation data.
- ii. Descriptive statistics for pre- and post-questionnaires.
- iii. Mean score comparison to measure changes in knowledge, perception, and readiness.

Implementation of the Study

The study followed the four phases of the Kemmis and McTaggart Action Research Model.

i. Planning Phase (November 2024 – January 2025)

The planning phase involved analysing 2024 student visitation data as a baseline indicator. Forty-five students were selected based on predefined criteria.

Research instruments, including the pre-questionnaire and document analysis forms, were developed. A detailed implementation schedule for the Counsellor Attack programme was structured, specifying session dates, locations, and activity content.

ii. Action Phase (February – October 2025)

The programme was implemented through nine outreach sessions across various programme units.

Each session included:

- Introduction of counsellors
- Explanation of the functions of the Psychology and Career Unit
- Interactive booth activities

- Informal engagement and discussion

The outreach format created a relaxed and approachable atmosphere. Continuous data collection on visitation frequency was maintained during this phase.

iii. Observation Phase (Throughout Intervention Period)

The observation phase involved ongoing monitoring of programme implementation and systematic data collection. Quantitative data were gathered through:

- Official visitation records
- Pre- and post-questionnaire responses

Observational insights from counsellors were also documented to identify behavioural shifts and engagement patterns.

iv. Reflection Phase (October – November 2025)

The reflection phase involved comprehensive analysis of all collected data.

Comparisons were made between:

- 2024 and 2025 visitation trends
- Pre- and post-questionnaire results

Critical reflection was conducted to identify strengths, weaknesses, and areas for future improvement.

Results And Discussion

Increase in Student Visitation Frequency

Based on secondary data analysis, the total number of student visits increased from 834 in 2024 to 1,275 in 2025. This represents an increase of 441 visits, equivalent to a 52.9% growth rate.

This substantial increase indicates that the Counsellor Attack outreach intervention significantly improved student engagement with the Psychology and Career Unit. The upward trend became particularly noticeable after the second month of implementation and remained consistently stable throughout the intervention period.

The increase in visitation suggests that proactive outreach successfully reduced structural and psychological barriers that previously limited student access to counselling services.

Pre-Post Comparative Analysis of the Counsellor Attack Programme

Analysis of pre- and post-questionnaires administered to 45 respondents revealed significant transformation across three major domains:

i. Transformation in Knowledge and Awareness

Pre-intervention data revealed a concerning baseline condition. Only 11.1% (5 out of 45 respondents) reported being highly aware of the existence and function of the Psychology and Career Unit. This indicated a serious gap in student awareness regarding available support services.

Post-intervention findings showed a dramatic increase, with 88.9% (40 out of 45 respondents) reporting strong awareness of the unit and its services. Furthermore, during the pre-intervention phase, 42.2% (19 out of 45 respondents) demonstrated negative attitudes toward counselling (Likert score 1–2). Post-intervention results

showed a complete reduction of negative attitudes to 0%. This finding reflects the programme’s effectiveness in building a stronger foundation of trust and knowledge regarding counselling services.

ii. Evolution of Perception and Attitude

Significant changes were also observed in students’ comfort levels when meeting counsellors. During the pre-intervention phase, 33.3% (15 out of 45 respondents) expressed discomfort (score 1–2) in approaching counsellors. After the intervention, no respondents reported discomfort.

However, societal stigma remained a persistent challenge. In the pre- intervention phase, 62.2% (28 out of 45 respondents) strongly agreed that stigma prevented them from seeking counselling services. Although this figure decreased to 51.1% (23 respondents) post-intervention, stigma remained a significant barrier.

This suggests that while individual perceptions improved, broader social influences continue to shape help-seeking attitudes.

iii. Modification of Help-Seeking Behaviour

The most encouraging finding was the transformation in visitation behaviour. Post-intervention results showed that 100% of respondents had visited the Psychology and Career Unit at least once. Among them, 55.6% (25 respondents) visited more than five times. 40% (18 respondents) visited three to five times.

This reflects a clear shift from avoidance behaviour to proactive engagement. Students no longer perceived counselling as a last-resort service but as an accessible and supportive resource.

Interpretation of Programme Effectiveness

The 52.9% increase in student visits should not be interpreted merely as a statistical improvement. Rather, it represents a paradigm shift in vocational students’ perception of counselling services.

These findings are consistent with Ajzen’s (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour, which posits that behavioural change is influenced by changes in knowledge, attitudes, and perceived norms. As awareness increased and negative perceptions decreased, students’ intention to seek help strengthened, resulting in observable behavioural change.

Key Success Factors of the Programme

Three primary factors contributed to the programme’s effectiveness:

i. Accessibility Factor

The “counsellor-to-student” approach successfully reduced physical and psychological barriers. By entering students’ learning environments, counsellors normalised help-seeking behaviour and minimised the intimidation associated with formal counselling spaces.

ii. Relational Factor

Informal and interactive engagement fostered empathetic relationships between counsellors and students. Trust-building played a crucial role in encouraging voluntary

visits.

iii. Contextual Factor

The programme was adapted to suit the vocational learning environment. Activities were practical, interactive, and aligned with students' daily experiences, making the intervention relevant and meaningful.

Analysis of Persistent Challenges

Despite significant success, stigma remained a critical issue, with 51.1% of respondents still acknowledging its influence. This finding aligns with Corrigan's (2004) argument that stigma is deeply embedded and resistant to short-term interventions. Therefore, future initiatives should involve broader institutional and community-level engagement, rather than focusing solely on students.

Implications for Counselling Theory and Practice

The success of the Counsellor Attack programme supports a shift from traditional reactive counselling models to proactive outreach-based frameworks.

The findings challenge the conventional "wait-for-students" model and highlight the need for:

- i. Relational engagement
- ii. Contextual adaptation
- iii. Institutional visibility of counselling services

In vocational education settings, counselling must be embedded within students' lived experiences rather than confined to office spaces.

Limitations and Implementation Challenges

Several limitations were identified:

- i. The intervention duration may not have been sufficient to fully transform deeply rooted societal stigma.
- ii. The absence of a control group limits causal attribution.
- iii. Voluntary participation may have attracted students with pre-existing positive attitudes toward counselling.

Future studies should consider longitudinal designs and experimental comparisons to strengthen evidence.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the evolving discourse on counselling accessibility by demonstrating that sustainable help-seeking behaviour requires more than structural availability of services. It requires a deliberate integration of accessibility and emotional engagement.

The Counsellor Attack Integrated Outreach Model illustrates a conceptual progression from *access* to *emotion*, and from *emotion* to *behavioural transformation*. While outreach strategies successfully reduce physical and institutional barriers, emotional identification and relational trust act as catalytic mechanisms that convert exposure into voluntary engagement.

The 52.9% increase in visitation should therefore be interpreted not merely as statistical growth, but as evidence of a paradigm shift in students' help-seeking orientation. The findings suggest that when counselling services move beyond static service delivery and actively embed themselves within students' lived environments, psychological resistance decreases and help-seeking becomes normalised.

This study advances the proposition that accessibility without emotional integration yields limited behavioural change, whereas accessibility combined with emotional literacy produces measurable and sustainable engagement outcomes. Thus, the Counsellor Attack Integrated Outreach Model offers a dual-layered framework which is Structural Layer: Proactive outreach to reduce external barriers and Psychological Layer: Emotional engagement to reduce internal resistance. The interaction between these layers generates behavioural activation in help-seeking.

Practical and Policy Implications

For vocational education institutions, the study suggests that counselling reform should prioritise:

1. Institutionalisation of structured outreach mechanisms.
2. Integration of emotional literacy tools within engagement sessions.
3. System-wide stigma reduction strategies beyond individual-level intervention.

Embedding counselling within students' daily academic contexts transforms support services from peripheral units into integral components of institutional well-being infrastructure.

Future Research Directions

Future investigations should explore:

- Longitudinal sustainability of integrated outreach-emotion models.
- Mediating effects of emotional literacy on behavioural change.
- Cross-institutional replication across different cultural and educational contexts.

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