

The Impact of Supervision Process toward Counselling Competencies among Malaysian Trainee Counsellors

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Abstract

The main objective of this study is to investigate the level of counselling competencies among trainee counsellors in supervision. It also aims to analyze the relationship between frequency of supervisions with counselling competencies. This study was conducted among trainee counsellors (counselling students) from nine public universities all across Malaysia that offer bachelor programmes in counselling. The respondents consisted of n=204 trainee counsellors and n=62 lecturer supervisors who were selected in pairs using stratified random sampling. The Counselling Competencies Scale was used to assess the counselling competencies of trainee counsellors. The results of the study revealed that most of the respondents were at the “meets expectations” level of the counselling competency. The results also showed that there was a significant relationship between the frequency of supervisions with two sub-scales of counselling competency, namely professional behaviour ($d=.180$, $p<.009$) and counselling skills ($d=.169$, $p<.019$). This research finding has implications for the training field of counselling education in Malaysia. Additional research on other areas, such as the other contribution factors toward the trainee counsellor’s competency is needed for future studies.

Keywords: Malaysia, supervision, counselling competencies, trainee counsellors

Our lives today have become more challenging as urbanization and globalization have come into the fore. The idea of urbanization and globalization may be intimidating to many, as it is all about the resistance to change. With globalization, there will be transitions in terms of jobs, cultures as well as the environments and lifestyles, and in effect, people have to deal with these changes. In response to this form of modern lifestyle, nowadays counselling is acknowledged as a professional service equipped with various approaches and techniques that can assist humans when dealing with psychological distress and mental health problems (Arifin et al., 2022).

As a result, there is a demand for counsellors in providing research-based and structured counselling services competently (Farozin, 2019; DepPue & Lambie, 2014; Falender & Shafranske, 2014; Swank et al., 2012; Zakaria, 2013). Therefore, it is worth pointing out that counsellors shoulder various responsibilities for clients with psychological and mental health struggles. Ideally, to become a competent counsellor, all aspects of competence need to be developed from the beginning of counsellor training and education (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019; McLeod, 2013; Setiyowati et al., 2019; Zakaria & Warren, 2016). Unfortunately, a trainee counsellor does not develop in a vacuum and requires the readiness to bear responsibility for personal learning in many areas. As stated by McLeod (2013), educating a counsellor involves many aspects such as the system of education, training, and also support to produce and maintain the quality of counselling services offered (Zakaria et al., 2017).

Therefore, counsellor education programmes are designed to ensure that their trainees are efficient, that they can persevere through difficult periods of counselling, exert themselves to work effectively with a complex range of clients, and demonstrate a high level of competence in dealing with their clients (Zawawi & Al-Ali, 2014). In view of this, counselling internship (Mohd Ali et al., 2020) and supervision process (Alis et al., 2017) are both among the main elements in counselling degree courses in Malaysia that need to be undertaken concurrently as stated in the Counsellor Training Standard and Qualification (Malaysian Board Counsellors, 2015) guidelines.

Counselling internship is a form of post-practicum experience training supervised with the purpose of enabling students to scrutinize, increase and strengthen the counselling knowledge and skills application at the professional training hubs (Malaysian Board Counsellors, 2015). The internship training needs to be executed in any organizations, institutions or clinics that prepare counselling services and it is part of the supervision process.

Although Malaysian Board of Counsellors has presented a clear guideline, counsellor educators and supervisors find it really challenging to develop and empower their trainees' competency, due to the complex nature of the supervision process (Arifin et al., 2022). That is why the extent of the actual competency level achieved by trainee counsellors is still open for debate (Falender, 2014). Additionally, the researchers also found that the studies or writings related to the topic of trainee counsellors' competency are also very limited especially in the context of supervision in Malaysia.

That said, the past literature shows that most of the studies related to supervision practice have been conducted through the lens of Western supervision practices (Falender et al., 2021). In the context of Malaysia, there are supervision studies conducted by Mat Min (2017), Ahmad (2016), Alis and colleagues (2014), Ghazali (2015), Norwati & Wan Mazwati (2013), Mohd Nor (2012), Wan Jaafar (2007), and Abdul Ghani (2007). However, none of the studies have focused on the true competency of the trainee counsellors in supervision. One of the root causes to this issue is the lack of competency instrument.

There are several instruments labelled as the counselling competency measuring tools such as Helping Skills System (Hill & O'Brien, 1999), Skilled Counselling Scale (Urbani et al., 2002), and Counselling Skills Scale (Eriksen & McAuliffe, 2003). However, all the instruments are limited to only one component namely counselling skills (Lambie et al., 2018; Swank et al., 2012). Until today, there is only one instrument which is Counselling Competencies Scale (CCS) that can measure counselling competency in a comprehensive supervision (Lambie et al., 2018) as utilized in this study. Given that no research has been done in Malaysia to investigate the actual mastery level of trainee counsellors on the counselling competency in the supervision, this study has been conducted to reduce the paucity existing in the previous study through the following two objectives:

1. To investigate the level of counselling competency of trainee counsellors in the supervision process; and
2. To analyse the relationship between the frequency of supervisions with counselling competencies.

Literature Review

Among the earliest literature found to have discussed counsellor competency was Gross and Robinson (1987). These writers discussed five main components that have to be possessed by a competent counsellor including (1) have to display accurate professional qualification; (2) professional growth through involvement in professional activities; (3) services can only be offered by those having acknowledged qualification; (4) always maintaining knowledge and qualification at the best level; and (5) able to help the client resolve the issue more effectively.

In other words, the use of supervision process is a crucial element in counsellor development during training and throughout the working life of the counsellor (American Counselling Association, 2014; Bernard & Goodyear, 2019; Malaysian Board Counsellors, 2015; McLeod, 2013). In the supervision process, there are support and education activities from the supervisor to channel the counselling profession's knowledge, skills, and attitude (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019); professional value and identity (Barton, 2016; Zakaria et al., 2017); as well as instruction, modeling, and mutual problem-solving to trainee counsellors (Falender & Shafranske, 2004).

Other than that, supervision is also a form of evaluation to the development that has been achieved by the trainee counsellor throughout their internship training (Bernard & Goodyear,

2019; Kabir, 2017). Meanwhile, Watkins (2020), found that previous studies had proven that the supervision process really helps trainee counsellors to go through with the session, increase their self-awareness and self-efficacy; have a positive correlation with work satisfaction and able to deal with obstacles and workload effectively.

It can be concluded that one of the main aims in the supervision process is to empower the competency of trainee counsellors (Arifin et al., 2022; Falender & Shafranske, 2014; Swank et al., 2012; Vassara & Papavassilio-Alexiou, 2021; Bernard & Goodyear, 2019).

For the competency definition that was first identified in counselling, it was found under the psychology branch introduced by Epstein and Hundert (2002) which is: “the habitual and judicious use of communication, knowledge, technical skills, clinical reasoning, emotions, values, and reflection in daily practice for the benefit of the individual and community with curiosity, self-awareness, and presence” (p. 227).

Nonetheless, this definition received criticism from Ridley and colleagues, (2011), who questioned how “the habitual and judicious use” can be illustrated. Even so, terms like “clinical reasoning, with curiosity, and presence” were also criticized as they had broad meanings, were ambiguous and vague. Based on the literature survey, early on, counselling scholars only discussed and put forth the idea that the competency of a counsellor only depends on their mastery towards counselling skills for instance in Egan (1990), Hill (1990), and Ivey and Authier (1978).

However, ideas like this contradict the view of McLeod (1992) who opined that the competency of a counsellor depends on any quality, capability or factor that can influence his or her effectiveness in doing tasks or playing their role. According to McLeod (2013), the author identified that there were seven broad areas of counsellor competence namely interpersonal skills; personal beliefs and attitudes; conceptual ability; personal ‘soundness’; mastery of technique; ability to understand and work within social systems; and openness to learning and inquiry.

On the other hand, Ridley and colleagues, (2011), viewed that counselling competency is defined as a set of micro skills encompassing the cognitive, affective and behavioural components and involving therapeutic change outcome. Meanwhile, past studies like Balich and colleagues (2015), Carnes-Holt and fellows (2016), Foo and colleagues (2017), Lambie and fellows (2018), Subarimaniam and colleagues (2020), Swank (2014), Swank and fellows (2012), Warren and colleagues (2012), Warren and fellows (2013), Zakaria and colleagues (2020), and Zakaria and fellows (2022) established that counselling competency means knowledge, counselling skills, professional disposition, professional behaviour. as well as ethical sound practice and application.

Based on the discussion above, there are various definitions of counselling competency established from one scholar to another. There is nothing more critical on counselling competency other than defining the term (Pelling, 2009; Ridley et al, 2011). Up until today,

the researchers have not found, or been informed of, any consensus in regard of what an achievable counselling competency entails (Barnett et al., 2007; Xia et al., 2021).

The difficulty in determining the definition of counselling competency truly shows that the process of acknowledging trainee counsellors as competent counsellors is something that is very much prioritized in this profession. One of the main reasons is because competency is a determinant to the effectiveness of counselling process and a therapeutic outcome to the client (Ridley et al., 2011; Setiyowati et al., 2019). A counsellor without competency, who provides the counselling services may harm the clients' psychology as a whole, can ruin the profession reputation, and will affect all the counsellors in service (American Counselling Association, 2014; Arifin et al., 2022; Bernard & Goodyear, 2019; Falender, 2014; Malaysian Board Counsellors, 2015; Zakaria, 2013).

To prevent this from happening, a counsellor competency act has been made effective in Malaysia in Counsellor Ethics Code (Malaysian Board Counsellors, 2019) under Professional Competency Section (C.2) Professional Competency, sub-section (C.2.a) Competency Border, which is: "Counsellor must be carrying out their professional work in the scope of competency based on education, training, supervision experience, professional accreditation also appropriate professional experiences. Counsellors should obtain knowledge, personal awareness, sensitivity and skills, all of which are related to their services through various clients" (p. 28). Hence, promoting counselling competency among trainee counsellors in clinical supervision is very crucial in counsellor training and education programmes.

Methodology

This is a cross-sectional study which employs a quantitative method by distributing the instruments in the data collection phase. The respondents in this study are 204 trainee counsellors in their final year of internship and 62 counselling lecturers appointed as supervisors to the trainee counsellors. All respondents are from counselling undergraduate programmes from nine Malaysian public universities namely Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI), Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT), Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM), and Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia (UIAM). All these universities have been accredited by the Malaysian Qualification Accreditation and the Malaysian Board of Counsellors. A stratified random sampling procedure was used for the study.

Table 1
Demographic Information of the Respondents

Demographic information	Trainee counsellor		Lecturer Supervisor	
	N (204)	Percentage	N (62)	Percentage
Gender				
Male	36	17.6	20	32.3
Female	168	82.4	42	67.7
University				
UPSI	12	6.5		
UMT	12	9.7	10	16.1
UPM	30	14.7	4	6.5
UM	44	21.6	6	9.7
UUM	24	12.9	8	12.9
UMS	11	6.5	5	8.1
USIM	23	11.3	6	9.7
UNIMAS	30	14.7	8	12.9
IIUM	18	8.8	4	6.5
Race				
Malay	169	82.8	57	91.9
Chinese	9	4.4	2	3.2
India	8	3.9	1	1.6
Other	18	8.8	2	3.2
Settings				
Non-governmental organizations	13	6.4		
Government organizations	39	19.1		
Counselling Centre for higher studies institute	80	39.2		
School	72	35.3		
Demographic information	Trainee counsellor		Lecturer Supervisor	
	N (204)	Percentage	N (204)	Percentage
Supervision frequency				
Once	24	11.8		
Twice	91	44.6		
Three times	76	37.3		
Four times	8	11.8		
Five times	5	2.5		

Approval and ethics clearance were obtained before prior data collection progression from the Ethics Committee of Universiti Putra Malaysia, Reference no: UPM/TNCPI/RMC/JKEUPM/1.4.18.2 (JKEUPM). Having received the endorsement, researchers had asked for permission to conduct the study from the Academic Deputy Chancellor from every university involved. After it was approved, researchers contacted every respondent involved and asked for their permission before the instrument was distributed. The instrument set consisting of two sections was used in this study. Section A includes the demographic information of the trainee counsellors, consisting of university, gender, race,

internship setting and frequency of supervisions. Section B, on the other hand, includes the Counselling Competencies Scale (CCS) (Swank et al., 2012) were distributed to their lecturers.

For the trainee counsellor respondents, 204 sets of demography instruments were distributed using the Google Form, whereas for the supervising lecturer respondents, 204 sets of CCS instruments were sent using express post. The CCS instrument set posted to the supervising lecturer is based on the frequency of trainee counsellors selected under their supervision. As an example, three trainee counsellors under the supervision were selected. Thus, three sets of the CCS instrument will be posted to a supervising lecturer. Also, attached is a prepaid express post envelope under the name of the principal researcher to make it easier for the lecturer to return the instrument set. The CCS is an instrument used specifically to assess the counselling competencies of trainee counsellors in supervision.

The CCS consists of 32 items divided into 4 sub-scales, namely, (1) Counselling Competency; (2) Professional Disposition; (3) Professional Behaviour; and (4) Overall Competencies. The CCS instrument uses a five-point Likert scale: 8=exceeds expectations; 6=meets expectations; 4=near expectations; 2=below expectations; 0=harmful. A summary of the sub-scales, items, and CCS scoring methods can be found in Table 2, while the interpretation of the CCS scores is presented in Table 3.

Table 2
Sub-scales of CCS

Sub-scale	Items	Minimum score	Maximum score
Counselling skills	1 to 12	0	96
Professional disposition	13 to 22	0	80
Professional behaviour	23 to 32	0	80
Overall competencies	1 to 32	0	256

Table 3.
Interpretation of CCS score

Competency level	Counselling Skills	professional disposition	professional behaviour	Overall competencies
Harmful	0	0	0	0
Below expectations	2 to 24	2 to 20	2 to 20	2 to 64
Near expectations	26 to 48	22 to 40	22 to 40	66 to 128
Meets expectations	50 to 72	42 to 60	42 to 60	130 to 192
Exceeds expectations	74 to 96	62 to 80	62 to 80	194 to 256

Data Analysis

Prior to the use of the CCS, the instrument was tested twice in pilot and actual studies with Cronbach's Alpha (α) statistical tool to determine the reliability of the instrument. Reliability means that the results obtained with an instrument are consistent and stable (Pallant, 2013). For

both tests administered, the α -value obtained for CCS instruments was .96. Based on Cohen and colleagues (2007), interpretation α -value of >0.90 indicates very high reliability. This proves that the CCS is an excellent measurement tool and can be used for the purpose of this study. Data were analyzed using statistical tests such as frequencies, means, and standard deviations, meanwhile Chi-square (Somers's d) was used to test the relationship between the frequency of supervisions and counselling competency.

Results

Table 4 shows the analysis findings for the professional behaviour sub-scale with the mean 54.07 (SD=11.58). For this sub-scale, the majority have fulfilled the expectation level which is 129 (63.2%) respondents, followed by 46 (22.5%) respondents exceeding the expectation level, and 27 (13.2%) respondents almost meeting the expectation. Meanwhile, 2 respondents stay below the competency level, and no respondent obtains a harmful level of professional behaviour.

Table 4
Professional Behaviour Sub-Scale

Levels of professional behaviour	Score	Frequency	%
Harmful	0	0	0
Below expectations	2 to 20	2	1.0
Near expectations	22 to 40	27	13.2
Meets expectations	42 to 60	129	63.2
Exceeds expectations	62 to 80	46	22.5
Total		204	100%
Mean=54.07		Standard Deviation=11.58	

Table 5 illustrates the analysis outcome for the counselling skills sub-scale. Based on the table below, the mean score for counselling skills is 65.73 (SD=12.70). The majority of the respondents for the counselling skills have met the expectation which is 140 respondents (68.6%), 44 (21.5%) respondents exceed the expected competency level, and 20 (9.8%) respondents reach close to the competency level. Meanwhile, no respondent has obtained counselling skills score under the competency level and at a harmful level.

Table 5
Counselling Skills Sub-Scale

Levels of counselling skills	Score	Frequency	%
Harmful	0	0	0
Below expectations	2 to 24	0	0
Near expectations	26 to 48	20	9.8
Meets expectations	50 to 72	140	68.6
Exceeds expectations	74 to 96	44	21.5
Total		204	100%
Mean=65.73		Standard Deviation =12.70	

Looking at Table 6 representing the distribution of the professional disposition sub-scale for the respondents (trainee counsellors), all in all, the mean of the professional disposition sub-scale is 58.66 (SD =10.76). The majority of the respondents have met the expected competency level with 109 (53.4%) respondents, followed by 78 (38.2%) respondents exceeding the expected competency level. Next, 17 (8.3%) respondents reach close to the competency level, and no respondent is found below the competency level and harmful level for this sub-scale.

Table 6*Professional disposition sub-scale*

Levels of professional disposition	Score	Frequency	%
Harmful	0	0	0
Below expectations	2 to 20	0	0
Near expectations	22 to 40	17	8.3
Meets expectations	42 to 60	109	53.4
Exceeds expectations	62 to 80	78	38.2
Total		204	100%
Mean=58.66			Standard Deviation=10.76

Table 7 shows the distribution for the overall competencies level of the trainee counsellors in supervision. The mean score for overall counselling competencies is 178.46 (SD= 32.03). The majority of the respondents meet the expected competency level which is 140 (68.6%) respondents, while 53 (26.0%) respondents exceed the expectations, and 11 (5.4%) respondents have nearly met the expectation as their counselling competency level. No respondent has obtained the score under the counselling competency level and harmful level.

Table 7*Distribution of overall competencies*

Levels of counselling competency	Score	Frequency	%
Harmful	0	0	0
Below expectations	2 to 64	0	0
Near expectations	66 to 128	11	5.4
Meets expectations	130 to 192	140	68.6
Exceeds expectations	194 to 256	53	26.0
Total		204	100%
Mean=178.4			Standard Deviation =32.03

Next, in Table 8 below, we have the findings for Somers' d tests analysis. Based on the findings, there is a relationship between total supervision received with two counselling competencies level sub scales among trainee counsellors namely professional behaviour and counselling skills. The results indicate that the higher frequency of supervision (more than one time) received by counsellor-in-training is found to be statistically significant and this means that they are more competent in professional behaviour ($d = .162, p < .009$), and counselling skills ($d = .143, p < .019$) compared to their peers who received supervision only once.

Table 8*The Relationship between the Frequency of Supervision and Counselling Competencies*

Frequency of supervision	Professional Behaviour				<i>d/sig</i>
	Exceeds expectations	Meets expectations	Near expectations	Below expectations	
Once	4	17	3	0	
Twice	12	65	14	0	
Three times	28	38	9	1	
Four times	2	5	1	0	
Five times	0	4	0	1	
Total (204)	46	129	27	2	.162 / .009*
	Counselling Skills				
Once	3	20	1		
Twice	16	67	8		
Three times	23	43	10		
Four times	1	6	1		
Five times	1	4	0		
Total (204)	44	140	20		.143/.019*

Discussion

This study is conducted to identify the level of counselling competencies among Malaysian counsellors-in-training, also to determine its association with the frequency of supervisions received. For the first objective, the result in this study indicates that the majority of the respondents have met the expected competency level in the overall CCS sub-scales with the mean 67.73 (counselling skills); 58.66 (professional dispositions); and 54.07 (professional behaviour) respectively. This result is relatively similar to that of DePue and Lambie (2014) that examined the impact of a training experience including supervision process toward trainee counsellors' levels of empathy and their counselling competencies. This study used the same instrument which is CCS and the measurement was made twice during the training in the midterm and final supervision period. The respondents involved 87 University-Based Community Counselling and Research Center trainee counsellor-respondents.

The results indicate that the trainee counsellors' overall counselling competency sub-scales in midterm supervision are mostly at the "meets expectations" level with the mean very similar to this study for counselling skills=64.05; professional disposition=59.66; and professional behaviours=58.48 respectively. Meanwhile, the study finding is also in line with another study conducted by Yaumas and colleagues (2018). This study involved 145 final year trainee counsellors that were randomly selected in Faculty of Tarbiyah and Education in Islamic University of Raden Intan Lampung. Generally, the result of the study reveals that most of the trainee counsellors possessed an average or simple level basic counselling competence with the mean ranged from 61 to 80. In addition, none of the respondents acquired the highest competencies with the mean ranged from 81 to 100 which indicates that the majority of the

respondents did not master the competencies completely. However, this study did not report the number of the students for each counselling competency score obtained.

Another study conducted by Alis and colleagues (2017) examined the associations between self-reflection with counselling competencies consisting of (1) performing helping skills; (2) managing the counselling process, and (3) handling challenging counselling situations. There were 100 trainee counsellors from four public universities in Malaysia namely UMT, UPSI, UPM and UM involved in this study selected through the stratified sampling technique. Interestingly, their study findings were slightly different compared to this study with the majority of the respondents which is 65% had high competency level and 35% had moderate competency level, with the mean 263.23. Meanwhile Wan Jaafar (2011) investigated the trainee counsellor competencies through their counselling performance. The respondents consisted of 100 trainee counsellors who underwent counselling internship for 12 weeks. They were chosen through the stratified sampling from three universities in Malaysia namely UPM, UM and UMS. The result is also quite similar to this study with the majority of the trainee counsellor competencies at a moderate level with counselling skills=50.61; counselling knowledge=47.25; interpersonal=49.22; and general performance =49.22 respectively.

According to these findings, it seems that there was a variation in the levels of competencies possessed by trainee counsellors during the supervision. This is related to the fact that most of the researchers have administered different psychometric properties and employed varying competencies cut-off points. For example, other than this study, DePue and Lambie (2014) had also used Counselling Competencies Scale (CCS), whereas Wan Jaafar (2011) adopted the Counsellor Performance Inventory (CPI) where the measurement was implemented through the supervisor's lens of evaluation. Meanwhile, Yaumas and colleagues (2018) used unnamed psychometric properties, and Alis et al., (2017) administered Counsellor Activity Self-Efficacy Scale (CASES) respectively. The measurement tools that were used in both of these studies are based on the counsellor-in-training self-rated evaluation. Despite the different cut-points, there is still a similarity with the past studies in terms of the competency of the trainee counsellors who have gone through the internship and obtained supervision. The majority were at the good and moderate levels and none had been at the lowest or harmful level. Only few trainee counsellors were found to obtain the highest competency level.

In a similar vein, for the second objectives, this study finding indicates that the frequency of supervisions received had a significant association with the two counselling competencies subscales namely counselling skills and professional behaviour. This study's findings were parallel with DePue & Lambie (2014) to see the impact of practicum experience for the counselling students towards the empathy level and counselling competency. The outcome from the work by DePue and Lambie (2014) shows that there is an increase in the empathy level and counselling competency among the trainees at the end of the semester, compared to the middle of the semester after they have been supervised throughout the practicum. Other than that, the study finding is also consistent with the study by Swank (2014) that attempts to compare the level of counselling competency evaluation between the supervisor and the counselling practicum students. There are two evaluations which is in the middle of the semester and the

end of the semester, using Counselling Competencies Scale (CCS). The finding from Swank (2014) shows that there is an addition to the competency score at the end of the semester compared to the mid-semester, based on the evaluations given by the supervisor and the counselling students. Next, the finding also supports the finding from Alis et al., (2017) where there is a connection between self-reflection and competency among the trainee counsellors who are being supervised. The finding from Alis and colleagues (2017) shows that the competency level self-reflection ability of the trainee counsellors has increased after they have gained the experience being in the counselling session a few times in the supervision.

Based on the second objective findings, it proves that there has been an increase in the competency of the trainee counsellors in line with the increased frequency of supervisions undertaken. This is due to the fact that the data in this study and in previous studies such as Yaumas and colleagues (2018), DePue and Lambie (2014), Swank (2014), and Alis and fellows, (2017) were gathered at the end of the internship after the trainee counsellors had dealt with a lot of issues in the supervision and having undergone the supervision process with their respective supervisor. Normally, early on in the training, whether in the internship or practicum, trainee counsellors will have to confront a lot of challenges like anxiety and fear (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019; Kurtylmaz, 2015; Tsai, 2015), certain difficulties such as being unclear about their role (Babcock, 2014; Olk & Friedlander, 1992) and various issues in supervision relationships (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019; Falender, 2014; Ladany & Malouf, 2010; Mohd Ali et al., 2020). However, multiple studies have also proven that the supervision process can also increase the level of competence of trainee counsellors in terms of the increased skills in carrying out the session, increasing the level of awareness and self-efficacy and it is related positively with the satisfaction of the trainee counsellors (Subarimaniam et al. (2020); Watkins, 2020); higher empathy level (DePue & Lambie, 2014); and better self-reflection (Alis et al., 2017; Arokianathan et al., 2020; Zakaria, 2013).

This is due to the fact that in the internship training, every trainee counsellor will be provided with a counselling lecturer from their university, as their main supervisor (Mohd Ali et al., 2020) and a site supervisor as the second supervisor throughout the internship training period. During the supervision, the supervisor is responsible in assisting the development of the trainee counsellors such as making observation, evaluation also giving feedback towards the skills, theory, intervention and many other competency components that need to be mastered by trainee counsellors when undergoing the counselling session (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019; Kabir, 2017; Falender, 2014; Malouf & Ladany, 2010). Other than that, the supervisor will transfer the competency needed by the trainee counsellors to ensure that they are able to execute the counselling session effectively.

At the same time, trainee counsellors have the opportunity to discuss any issues that clients are not able to handle, or any shortcomings or difficulties with the supervisor during the supervision. Indirectly, all the activities that happen in the supervision process are those that will, in the end, contribute to the increased level of competency for the trainee counsellors. Therefore, the supervision process is pivotal and significant in developing the competency of trainee counsellors during internship/practicum (Arifin et al., 2022; Bernard & Goodyear,

2019; DePue & Lambie, 2014; Swank et al., 2012). In addition, their competencies during an internship will bring positive results to counselling services specifically toward clients (Spielberger, 2020), whereas the lack of supervision will expose adverse effects and be harmful to them (Wheeler & Richards, 2007). As supported by Bernard & Goodyear (2019) supervision is the “gatekeeper” in the counselling profession that preserves the welfare of the clients.

Limitation and Recommendation

In this study, mere attention has been given to the level of competency of the trainee counsellors in Malaysian public universities. To enhance counselling training in Malaysia, this study recommends that it is carried out as well at private universities with full accreditation from Board of Counsellors Malaysia. Other than that, future researchers are also recommended to look into other factors that may influence competency such as personality, experience as a client self-exposure, transference, satisfaction and expectation towards the supervision process and others contributing to the trainee counsellors’ competency in the supervision process.

Next, in this study, data were only gathered once, which is at the end of the semester. Thus, in our next study, it is proposed that the data are to be gathered twice and conducted as a longitudinal study, which is the middle of the internship semester and at the end of the internship semester. By conducting this type of study, the trainee counsellors’ mastery level can be more precisely determined.

Conclusion

There is a consistent, albeit subtle, reminder throughout this current study that the supervision process is the mainstay that aids the development of the professional identity of every trainee counsellor through their increased competency. Being a competent counsellor does not only mean mastering the skills *per se*, but also encompassing the supposed components of competency. The results of this study have provided a general overview of the counselling skills of counsellor-in-training in Malaysia. The result shows that most of the respondents meet the expectations of counselling skills, professional behaviour, professional disposition, and overall competencies at the fourth level. It is also revealed that trainee counsellors in Malaysia have the prerequisites to become a competent counsellor. Additionally, there is a significant mention of the implications for trainee counsellor education, and supervision practice. This is because the frequency of supervisions appears to be one of the important factors in the development of trainees’ counsellor competencies. With these given circumstances, the supervisors need to carry out sufficient frequency of supervisions as dictated in the Board of Counsellors Malaysia’s guideline. It is fundamental for the trainee counsellors to master the theory, concepts, and application of counselling to provide the best counselling sessions. Thus, as building trainee counsellor competence is a challenge for the supervisor, concerted efforts towards the evaluation, enrichment and consolidation towards a standard counselling competency that need to be achieved are vital to be executed continuously in the counsellor education and training programmes.

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