Practical solutions to barriers to effective pastoral care of Chinese students

Dr John Pickering[1] and **Mr Gareth Morgan**[2]

1 ie Limited, 134A Matsons Ave, Papanui, Christchurch 8005, New Zealand, www.ie-nz.com, john.pickering@ie-nz.com.
2 University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch, New Zealand, www.canterbury.ac.nz, gareth.morgan@canterbury.ac.nz.

Abstract

This research explores the expectations, perceptions, and experiences of international student advisers doing pastoral care and counselling of Chinese students. Researchers used an informal focus group, structured interviews and a feedback survey to gather data along with a literature survey. Particular attention was paid to the help seeking behaviour of Chinese students, what the perceived barriers were and what strategies advisers used to overcome them. Advisers identified 13 barriers and 41 bridges to overcome them. This paper discusses these barrier and bridges in a format that provides practical suggestions for those advising not just Chinese students, but students in general.

Key Words

Chinese students, counselling, pastoral care, privacy, international student advisers

Introduction

The number of international students from the People's Republic of China have grown from practically zero in 1999 to nearly half of the 118,000 international students in New Zealand in 2003 (ENZ 2004). This represents a significant demographic shift away from South East Asia as the dominant source markets. Australia had a similar number of PRC students, although this was under one quarter of the total international student population (AEI 2005). Despite a decrease in student numbers in 2004 PRC China is still New Zealand's top source country. The rapidity of this demographic change created considerable challenges to the host institutions' social support networks. In this paper, we investigate how international student advisers have facilitated the influx of Chinese students.

Until recently, most research on Chinese students has focussed on Chinese ethnicity students from source markets of longer standing, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan. This research has also focused on the academic or psychological adjustment of these students to life in Australia or New Zealand (eg Berno & Ward, 2003). Comparatively little research has focussed on the experiences of PRC Chinese students, particularly those of the single-child policy – post-Tianemen Square – economic liberalisation generation. Duan and Wang (Duan, 2000) have identified that, in China, this new generation is dealing with conflicts between opposing individualistic and collectivist values. These conflicts are a source of stress. They say that "the resolution of these conflicts requires respect for and fulfilment of both individualistic and collectivistic needs, which places unique demands on culturally appropriate counselling in China" (Duan, 2000: p6). This inner conflict is often accentuated when Chinese students come to New Zealand as they find themselves in a "Western" cultural context that stereotypically encourages individualism as a virtue, but at the same time find themselves under increased family pressure to produce results because of the sacrifice the family is making for them to study abroad. The well-being of these students, and to some extent their academic success, depends on how they seek help, who they seek it from, and how those people respond.

There is an expectation under the Code of Practice for Pastoral Care of International Students in New Zealand, and the ESOS Act in Australia, that educational institutions will have professionals that international students can approach in times of academic or personal need. This study concentrates on those professionals who offer Chinese students "pastoral care" in a broad sense. This includes International Student Advisers, Social Workers, Counsellors, and a number of people with dual roles. Many of the findings are suitably generic and may be of interest to a wider group of professionals including academic staff, learning advisers, and marketers.

Methodology

Through action research the quality of the relationship between several student advisers and Chinese students was investigated. The researchers, being advisers themselves, were experienced in the pastoral care of Chinese students, and the respondents were colleagues and counterparts. This was a reflective and reflexive process in which the advisers were interviewed and questioned about why they took certain action and the efficacy of that action. Data was collected over four phases, each with its own methodology. First was an unstructured focus group with advisers at the beginning of the process. This was deliberately open ended and lead to the development of a structure for the second part of the research: the structured interviews with advisers. In the third phase the information from these interviews was collated and written into a draft report with a number of specific recommendations. In the fourth, and final, phase the draft report was circulated to a wider group of advisers for comments and the rating of adviser's recommendations. The fifth element of this research was participant observation. Being immersed in an office with other advisers, has led to a wealth of experience through work discussions, case studies and situational analysis, advising students, and reflection on many observable encounters with Chinese students.

The flexibility of this methodology allowed those participating in interviews or focus group to bring to the research the issues that they think are most pertinent. This means that areas that fell outside the researcher's line of questioning were able to be addressed.

Six Advisers from three public tertiary institutions were invited to participate in the interviews. The advisers ranged in age from 27 to 50's, experience from 6 months to over 10 years. Three advisers were of Chinese ethnicity, three were New Zealand Caucasian. All were female. The two interviewers, both male, were also experienced advisers in their mid and late 30s with 3 and 7 years advising experience.

Following the interviews, the six interviewed advisers and 37 other advisers were invited to make comments on the draft report. All advisers were members of ISANA: International Education Association Inc. This report was presented to them as a series of recommendations drawn from the interviews. Each recommendation had a commentary that reflected the thinking behind the recommendation. The advisers were asked to comment on the reasonableness of the recommendations and were asked to grade on a Likert scale its relative importance in their work from 1, not at all important, to 5, hugely important. 19 responses were received, 15 Female and 4 Male, 2 School, 3 Foundation School, 4 Polytechnic, 2 College of Education, 8 University.

Results

The barriers and bridges to effective advising of Chinese students that were identified by the six interviewed advisers and in the focus group are presented in Table 1 below. Beside each one is a rating from between 1 and 5 which represents the mean (with ± 1 standard deviation) rating of the larger group of 19 advisers. None of the barriers or bridges were rated in the 1 to 2 (of no importance to somewhat important) range and only five were rated in the 2 to 3 (somewhat important to important). At the other end, 20 were rated 3-4 (important to very important) and 29 were rated 4-5 (very important to hugely important). This indicates that the barriers and bridges first identified where nearly all considered important ones.

The barriers and bridges in table 1 are presented without the accompanying commentary that was presented to the advisers when they were asked to rate the barriers and bridges and provide additional comments. This commentary can be found in the original research report to the Ministry of Education, (Pickering and Morgan, 2004). Many of the comments of the advisers have been included in the discussion below.

The barriers and bridges in table 1 and in the discussion that follows have been categorised into four areas, Community, Trust, Availability, and Expression. Each area constitutes a major feature of the landscape the student and the advisers occupy and across which barriers exist and bridges may be built (figure 1).

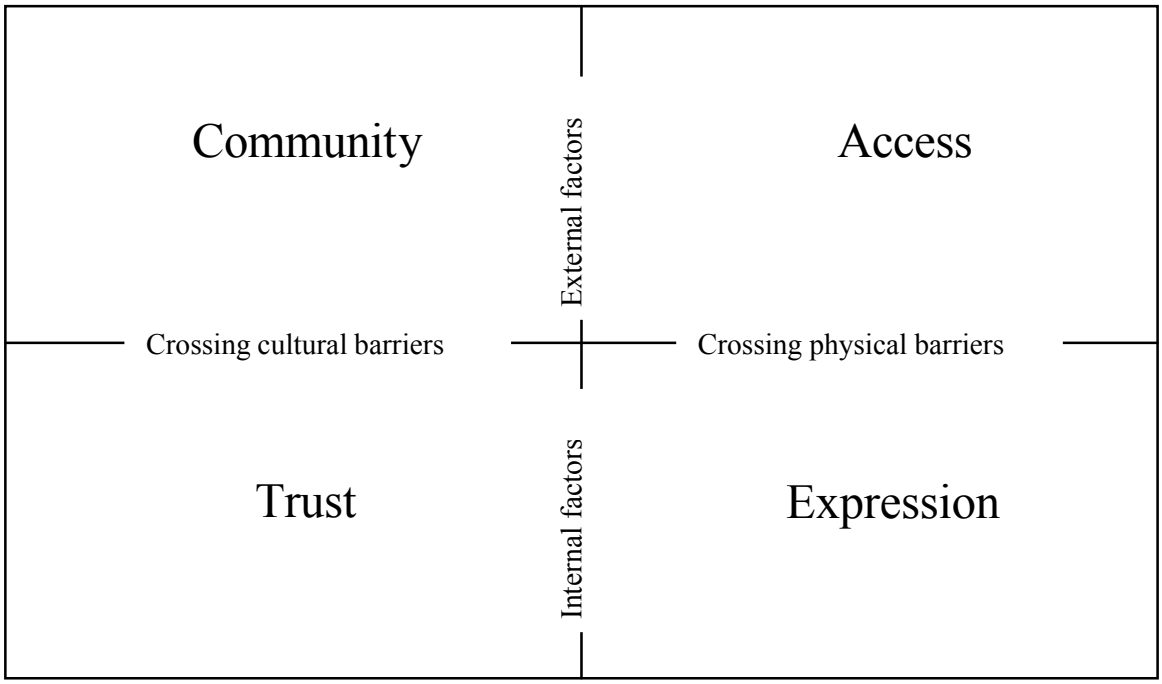

Figure 1. The landscape of the barriers and bridges

Table 1. Barriers and bridges to effective advising of Chinese students

Barrier or Bridge	**Rating (mean ± 1 standard deviation)** (1= not important at all, 5= hugely important)
Community	
Barriers	
Not seeing the student everyday (compared with academic staff members)	2.6 ± 0.8
Bridges	
Develop policies and procedures to work with academic staff	4.5 ± 1.0
Advisers work best as a team	4.3 ± 1.1
Maximise the amount of time spent physically in the presence of the student when they first enter the institution	4.3 ± 1.5
Create opportunities to meet students in a non-advising capacity	4.2 ± 1.2
Trust	
Barriers	
If confidentiality is broken	3.4 ± 0.8
Not being able to speak the student's own language	2.6 ± 0.7
Bridges	
Show a warm heart	4.6 ± 1.0
In a crisis situation always explain verbally to a student that they are having a confidential conversation. Explain who, if anyone, else may learn about that conversation	4.6 ± 1.1
Smile	4.5 ± 1.0
Maximise the use of word of mouth as a way of getting the service known	4.4 ± 0.9
In a crisis situation first attempt to talk the student into letting you	4.4 ± 1.0

speak to their parents, a counsellor or someone else	
Be honest of your own limitations	4.4 ± 1.0
Advisers should be reasonably competent in a broad range of areas including: (i) solving personal problems (ii) career counselling (iii) providing academic support (iv) solving the bureaucratic problems in the institution (ie have a very good knowledge of internal regulations and procedures) immigration rules and regulations	4.3 ± 1.3
Obtain training in privacy laws and regulations	4.2 ± 1.1
In a crisis situation if in doubt – break confidentiality	4.0 ± 1.2
Have a confidentiality policy within your office. This should include: (i) who has access to hard copy and electronic records (ii) with whom an adviser is permitted to discuss a case (iii) what details it is OK to reveal when talking about a case (iv) a procedure for breaking confidentiality in a crisis situation	3.9 ± 1.3
Look the student in the eye	3.7 ± 1.6
Start with small talk	3.7 ± 1.7
Have students sign a privacy waiver when they enrol	3.6 ± 1.5
Appear mature	3.4 ± 1.8
Have privacy waivers in your office	3.2 ± 1.6
Availability	
Barriers	
Advisers having to share an office	3.8 ± 0.4
Not being available	3.3 ± 0.7
At a distance from foot traffic	3.1 ± 0.9
When a student has to "get past" other staff to see and adviser	3.0 ± 1.9
When it is unclear to students "who does what"	2.8 ± 1.7
A desk between the student and the adviser	2.5 ± 0.9
Bridges	
Explain to other staff the role of the adviser	4.5 ± 1.0
Set your room up to encourage openness	4.4 ± 0.9
Have a title that reflects the support role	3.8 ± 1.2
Develop a marketing plan for your service	3.8 ± 1.3
Use your family name and title	2.8 ± 0.9
Expression	
Barriers	
The adviser is perceived to be disinterested	3.5 ± 0.5
Not being able to offer a solution	3.2 ± 0.8
The student is told by an adviser that they can not, or are not allowed to, help them	3.1 ± 0.8
Not being able to speak the student's own language	2.6 ± 0.7
Bridges	
Use trigger questions to help a student open up	4.3 ± 1.2
Look for what motivates the students	4.2 ± 1.1
Seek commitment to a course of action from the student	4.2 ± 1.2
Be prepared to lead a student to another professional	4.2 ± 1.4

Advisers should develop counselling skills	4.2 ± 1.5
Advisers to have an "international" background with some similar experience to the student through either having lived overseas or having immigrated to New Zealand	4.1 ± 1.4
Advisers should not have multiple roles	4.1 ± 1.7
Show an openness to learning the Chinese way	4.0 ± 1.0
Visit China	4.0 ± 1.0
Be straightforward and honest with them if you think they are not	4.0 ± 1.3
Let them know that you have invested of yourself personally in a situation	4.0 ± 1.4
Observe a student's body language	4.0 ± 1.5
Be prepared to be authoritative	4.0 ± 1.5
Share your own experiences to encourage a student to open up	4.0 ± 1.6
Ask the student about where they come from	3.9 ± 1.6
Always look upon the student within their family context	3.6 ± 1.5
Learn and make use of some Mandarin	3.3 ± 1.0

Discussion

Community

Social Support

The first choice for Chinese students who need help would invariably be to turn to family (Iowa State 2004, Vong 2002, Tao et al. 2000, Ruan et al. 1997, Mau 1990). As the PRC students in New Zealand are predominantly born following the "one child policy" (established in 1978), this means that family support is very much cross generational and centred on the parents. Usually an "approach" style (focussed on problem-solving) would be encouraged by Chinese families (Tao et al. 2000). According to Au (2002) parental dependence *fosters* mental health, while young people who have premature independence are more likely to develop mental health problems .

International students in New Zealand have had to become independent or semi-dependent from their parents (while remaining financially dependant). The physical distance is paralleled by an "experiential" difference. Very few of the Chinese parents have travelled to a western country, let alone lived in one, nor do they speak English, and only a tiny minority have had university level education (perhaps as few as 0.47% of the population - see Tao et al., 2000). In other words, not only are the parents physically separated from their children, their experiences are literally world's apart. Where, then, do students turn for support? The literature and advisers' experience suggests "friends" are the next port of call (Iowa State 2004, Vong 2002, Tao et al. 2000, Mau 1990).

The support of a student with a problem is seen as "societal and communal responsibility in China" (Iowa State 2004) as compared with the de facto institutional responsibility in New Zealand laid down by the Code of Practice. Tao et al's (2002) study of "freshers" at Chinese universities who live a long way from home revealed that when students first arrived their primary sources of support were perceived to be parents and teachers, but within four months it was their parents and peers who were perceived to be primary sources of support. No similar study has not been done in New Zealand, but it is the experience of the authors and other advisers, that friends (who may be little more than acquaintances) are often the first one's new students turned to for help. Advice being sought from other than professional advisers can be a barrier to students receiving appropriate help. Nevertheless, where friends give appropriate advice they relieve advisers of a significant workload.

Tao et al's (2000) study of Chinese students living away from home in a Chinese university was based on *perceived* levels of social support. It did not attempt to measure actual levels of support. One important result was that the higher the perceived level of social support the more likely a student was to adopt approach (problem focussed) coping strategies and less likely to use avoidance (emotion focussed) coping strategies. Another important measure was that the higher the perceived level of support the less susceptible the students were to depression and anxiety and the greater was their academic adjustment, social

adjustment, attachment to the institution, personal/emotional adjustment, and self-esteem. Cheng (1998) also showed, in a study measuring perceived support and levels of depression amongst Chinese adolescents, that higher levels of perceived support resulted in lower measures of depression. It is important, therefore, that students perceive that they have a high level of social support.

The literature and the research we have conducted indicates that a communal approach to support, rather than an "isolated" institutional approach, would help to engender that perception of support. In turn, a feeling of being well supported reduces some of the mental health risks and can reduce the workloads of advisers. The Iowa State University counsellors suggest that "[in a crisis] an effort should be made to access as many of the institutional services (i.e. governmental) as well as the social networks ie the combination of advisers, peers, and relatives", (Iowa State 2004). This is based on the observation that in China support is a societal and communal responsibility. Whilst this may create some privacy problems, a communal approach to problems is an important bridge.

There are many simple things that advisers can do to develop a communal approach or to appear to be more communally focussed. A communal or community approach is very difficult to define: What is community? Whose community? Which community do we target? It seems that many advisers and writers have a differing concepts of what community or communal involvement entails and where to start. To define communal/community involvement could turn out to be very restrictive and contrary to the purposes of this paper. We choose therefore not to define it but instead to list a number of practical solutions and comments made by advisers. What is important is that the reader identifies and if necessary defines the community or communal approach that would assist in their particular circumstances.

Start in your own back yard

Because academic staff see students regularly they were sometimes identified as more likely people for the student to approach. Some advisers commented that the personalities of some academic staff encouraged students to be open with them and some students have a higher respect for academic staff than support staff. On the other hand, some suggest that Chinese students see academics as unapproachable. Clearly, a lot depends on the personalities of the staff and the student involved in any instance. Not seeing the student as often as academic staff, not being a familiar face, was considered to be a disincentive for the student to approach advisers. At the same time, many academic staff would resent being put in the position where they are obliged to fulfil the support needs of their students. It is advisable, therefore, that advisers are well integrated into the university community, and that staff know where and when to refer students for their support. It will be useful to have the academic staff "buy in" of international policies and procedures. For example, they have the potential to pick up on struggling students and act as an early warning system based around a policy to monitor absenteeism, or the failure to participate in assessment. Advisers commented on the importance of building and maintaining relationships with the other staff for the good of the students, and the need for clear guidelines especially due to the many different things that the advisers do.

The communal approach can be extended to the office of the advisers too. Advisers work best as a team. An adviser can't be available to students on a 24/7 basis. They also don't possess all the skills necessary for all students. A team also means that someone is always available. This may not be practical in a small institution. However, an adviser may need a "deputy" who has other roles, yet who will be available when they are absent and who is sufficiently well trained, briefed, and familiar to the students to "hold the fort." Two advisers, who worked in separate institutions, endorsed teamwork because of the ability to utilise different team member's strengths, the flexibility possible, the bouncing ideas of each other, and the pushing of each other to provide the best support. There was a significant difference between Chinese and non-Chinese ethnicity. The Chinese advisers whilst still thinking it important, were not quite as emphatic about its importance as the non-Chinese advisers.

How and where you spend your time

Advisers agreed that time spent physically with students when they first enter the institution is very important. Students remember a face and voice – especially when they have observed, from a safe distance, that the person behind the face and voice has a "warm heart". Advisers who are not present at orientations due to other commitments, or who spend too much time on the nuts and bolts of orientations rather than meeting and welcoming the students will be at a distinct disadvantage compared with those who can spend the time chatting, giving out inconsequential advice (eg where the best pizza's can be bought), and

developing rapport with them. While the majority of advisers considered it hugely important to get the message of availability across on the first day of orientation, one of the Chinese advisers did not grade it as important on the basis that Chinese are very practical and "chatting" was done between good friends. *"[Chatting] will make them stand out if they keep chatting to the advisers who they meet for the first time but ignore other Chinese schoolmates."* The point, we believe, is that it is important for advisers to start making a connection with new students or we risk perpetuating the problem of students turning to friends for advice who are sometimes not qualified or informed to give it. This can only be done by spending time with the students and developing mutual trust. Trust is built up through students seeing advisers as genuine people with a genuine interest in them. Meeting students in a non-advising capacity like social events, lunch time drop in sessions, and hanging around outside the classroom having an occasional chat about nothing in particular are important ways of building that trust. One suggestion was a weekly activity session. Another adviser suggested that it is helpful for students to know that you "have a life" outside the school and to share family events etc.

Belonging to community groups, voluntary organisations, and sports and social clubs where advisers will meet students is also helpful. Good work done by advisers in the community does not go unrecognised in a wider community of close-knit friendships. It helps to develop (or destroy) the reputation of advisers, which travels by word of mouth, that someone is available, trustable, reliable and Chinese student friendly. Issues of trust, reputation, availability and reliability are all issues that will be focussed on in more detail in the rest of this paper. Needless to say there is a close connection between a communal or community approach and engendering the trust in advisers needed to get students to come in and seek advice. Community involvement or a communal approach closes the gap between the conventional support seeking behaviour of Chinese students and the institutional forms of support that exist in New Zealand.

Trust

A major theme that emerged, even before questions about trust were raised, was the theme that trust must be built and maintained between the student and the adviser. Even if a student understands the requirement of a counsellor to keep what is said to them in confidence there is still the problem that they may not trust the counsellor. According to Iowa State "No matter how professionally trained an individual may be, counsellors probably will not be sought out in person in crisis because trust has not been established on an informal level" (Iowa State 2004). This comment is revealing in that it is not simply a matter of trust in the position (eg Counsellors and Advisers are trustworthy because it is part of their job and culture), but in the person and that this requires informal contact (which will take time). A lack of trust is a serious barrier to effective advising. The following summarises the mechanisms advisers have used to build trust with Chinese students. The issue of trust is closely related to the reputation of the advising unit or individual advisers (trust engenders reputation; reputation engenders trust), and the potential shame that a Chinese student feels when seeking advice on a sensitive issue (shame requires a high level of trust).

Building trust

The mechanisms suggested for building trust are simple actions that require only sincerity and the awareness that the person the adviser is talking to is a sensitive person, who will respond (almost instinctively) to the adviser's demeanour. While all advisers talked about showing empathy, it was particularly evident with the Chinese advisers that a warm or genuine heart was very important. This is something that students can see very easily, even without words being spoken. The explanation is that in Chinese culture there is not, as in Western culture, a dichotomy between heart and mind. The heart is not merely the centre of feelings, it is the centre of the spirit – personal character – morals. Chinese are enculturated into reading people (the Chinese saying being "Observing the face and checking the colour."). This ability at non-verbal communication means that an adviser's facial expression and body language become crucial to the development of trust in their relationship. A "warm heart" is about motivation and attitude of the advisers – it is not necessary something "learnt" on the job – but something brought to the job through the character of the adviser. Therefore, it is crucial that when advisers are hired, that this characteristic is looked for. One way to do this is to use Chinese students as part of the interview process.

Besides character there are some practical steps that advisers can take to revealing their "warm heart". For example, smiling when meeting students plays an important role in relaxing students. When first meeting a student it was suggested to engage in small talk, getting to know the student and letting them get to know the adviser in return. Eye-contact was suggested but Chinese advisers indicated that Chinese students, especially

female, may feel uncomfortable with this. One added that to *"Move your eyes away from their faces will give some space or privacy to Chinese students who in general are shy or embarrassing or upset about what they want to talk about. Too much staring into their eyes or face may be more regarded more aggressive than keen to help."* Some suggested that learning to greet students in their own language can help, but others commented that in the wrong context this could be patronising. Whatever tools an adviser uses should depend on the situation. These are a means of helping the student to decide if they can trust the adviser. There is no recipe to build trust. It takes time. The most important point here is "being genuine", as opposed to appearing insincere which makes trust impossible.

Building a Reputation

At a superficial level adviser's reputation can be enhanced through things that are important in Chinese society, like high academic qualifications and being introduced by someone of high standing. Some very good advisers are not fortunate enough to be able to rely on these overt factors and have had to rely on more subtle superficial means. These include maintaining a public image of "maturity" and "respectability" by dressing professionally or simply stop dying their hair. Most advisers thought experience was more important than age. This is probably an issue that students should comment on.

At a more substantial level an adviser's reputation is closely linked to competence. But what is competence? And what should an adviser be competent in? Competence, judged from a students perspective, would be a successful outcome. News of a competent adviser will spread by word of mouth. One adviser described herself as *"Mum"* because she deals with *"anything and everything."* Another commented that *"It requires many extra skills, time, information, network, knowledge, experience etc to be a good adviser.* Advisers should be reasonably competent in a broad range of areas including:

(i) solving personal problems
(ii) career counselling
(iii) providing academic support
(iv) solving the bureaucratic problems in the institution (ie have a very good knowledge of internal regulations and procedures)
(v) immigration rules and regulations

The most common issues brought to advisers covered these areas. Advisers also commented on the expectation of the student that the adviser provide a solution rather than pass them on to others. However, the advisers cautioned that it is important to be honest with one's own limitations. Where something is beyond the professional competence or authority of the adviser they need to explain this to the student and to put the student into the hands of someone who can deal with the issue. With a few good results word of mouth will function to make the service known.

Confidentiality

It is difficult for Chinese students to trust a "stranger" with their problems, particularly where there is a social stigma attached to a problem. Social stigma in Chinese culture is not the same as in New Zealand culture. The obvious example is with mental health problems which are considered to be a shameful family matter (Au, 2002), and a "family disgrace should not be revealed to outsiders" (Vong 2002). The family would loose face further if the student did not achieve good results in their overseas education, which burdens the students with an incredible sense of responsibility, especially if their mental health issues are affecting their grades. Their own failure will bring shame upon their entire family.

To complicate the matter, "there is no custom of keeping things quiet among Chinese people" (Vong 2002) and that the "acquiring and transmitting information via word-of-mouth and the grapevine is acceptable" (Iowa State 2004). There is an assumption that any personal thoughts expressed to a counsellor will be passed on to family, friends, teachers, etc (Vong 2002). Parents, in particular, expect to know all about their children and the children would expect someone in an institution to relay information to their parents. One comment from a Chinese adviser was that the Chinese students do not *"worry much about confidentiality in most cases."* However, others noted that students are concerned particularly about an issue that may affect their academic results should an academic staff member hear about it. Advisers, on the other hand, are legally and culturally bound to maintain a student's confidentiality and when this is explained to and understood by a student it can bring great relief to the student and openness to the conversation. Nonetheless, and adviser breaking confidence will soon be known by the student population through word of mouth which

will discourage others to seek out an adviser. As Au (2002) points out the reputation of an adviser and counsellor is a key element of trust.

Culture, Privacy Laws and confidentiality

During the initial focus group it became apparent that there was a tension between Chinese cultural expectations and the New Zealand society and law over matters of privacy and confidentiality. The tension was especially apparent to the Chinese advisers, as one put it "*the Chinese side of me will deal with relationships first, followed by reasons and law.*" The New Zealand law expects advisers to treat students over 18 years as individuals with a right to privacy regardless of the cultural expectations and family context of the student. This means that advisers were bound to only inform parents when given permission by the student or a life was in danger. Families were not kept informed about their children. As a result, the onus rested on the students to keep parents informed. This created a novel cultural situation with boundless freedom and a responsibility to decide, often without guidance, what behaviour was appropriate. This freedom / responsibility would not have been available to young people in China. A minority of students have taken advantage of the situation. Without knowing their motives it is hard to comment on whether they are motivated by self-interest, saving face for their family, or some other reasons when they lied about or did not report on their academic progress, or social and financial circumstances.

Advisers were often put in a difficult situation when contacted by parents or when they were aware that students had not been keeping parents informed of their activities and whereabouts. Another problem that arises is because advisers are not family they are not contacted, and can only receive restricted information about students in cases of arrest, psychological emergency, or serious accidents and illness.

Advisers made a number of suggestions on how to deal with these privacy issues. These suggestions are not a panacea, and some of them raise issues of confidentiality and trust. The writers suggest advisers use their discretion and deal with each situation on a case by case and institution by institution basis:

- It was recommended that all advisers obtain training in privacy laws and regulations. This was an area where none of the advisers had obtained formal training, although all appeared to be operating within the law. The difficulty was the grey areas.
- As a first course of action, advisers preferred to try to talk the student into speaking to their parents, a counsellor or someone else, or alternatively to let the adviser speak to their parents. At times students don't want families to know that *"suggestions of contacting families at the wrong time will scare students away from further counselling."*
- If in doubt – break confidentiality. The privacy laws make it a judgment call as to whether a student or someone else is in some kind of imminent danger of harm or causing harm. The suggestion here is that it is better to break confidentiality to maximise the possibility of preventing harm than to keep a confidence "hoping" that harm won't occur. *"We need to be quite clear in our own minds that we are doing things for the right reasons."*
- Have a confidentiality policy within the office. The policy should include:
    - Who has access to hard copy and electronic records (on a needs only basis)
    - With whom an adviser is permitted to discuss a case
    - What details it is OK to reveal when talking about a case to another staff member (eg not name, not ethnicity, not course etc unless absolutely necessary)
    - A procedure for breaking confidentiality in a crisis situation including:
        - Putting in writing why confidentiality is to be broken
        - Possibly gaining permission to break confidentiality
        - Possibly telling a superior that confidentiality has been broken, but not necessarily divulging why if it is not necessary to.
- Have students sign a privacy waiver when they enrol. The extent and breadth of this waiver will depend on the institution. It may or may not include parents. It should include hospitals, doctors, and NZIS. This will not necessarily "change the feeling of betrayal" nor reduce the problems because parents are informed, but it does make the legal aspect easier to deal with if someone needs to be informed. It does create a problem of equity with kiwi and permanent resident students.
- A privacy waiver form in your office may be used for students aged over 18 as a means to ensure they understand they are giving permission for personal information to be shared. Some advisers

commented that at this stage it possibly "too late" and could also possibly a barrier to students sharing with the adviser.

Access

Selling a foreign concept

The New Zealand/Western notion of adviser or counsellor is a very foreign one to most Chinese students (Vong 2002). There seem to be three reasons for this: (1) the help-seeking behaviour described previously, (2) a lack of understanding of what counsellor's do and how they can help (Clark, 2002), or (3) because the job title of the "adviser" does not reflect the scope of their advising role. While the first is a cultural trope that we cannot control the latter two reasons are issues of a lack of relevant information at the right time. Most advisers take part in orientations to advertise themselves, but is this enough? Issues of when, how, and to whom advisers introduce themselves are core to the issue of whether someone is available to help Chinese students. To be physically available is one thing, but if students are not aware of the service or what it entails, it is as good as not having a service at all. Furthermore, other staff need to understand the role of the adviser so that they know when to refer students on

Advisers need to market themselves to colleagues both up the hierarchy and across it. Often their roles are relatively new or ill defined and they are not necessarily recognised for their skills. They can become isolated, especially if they are supporting a student who has a grievance of some-kind within an institution. To quote one of the advisers: *"Nobody really knows how important and demanding the adviser's job is. How difficult to deal with people from different culture background. It requires a lot of skills, updated information, knowledge, extra time, and extra work besides the emotional involvement. Advisers can not do a good job without the acknowledgement and support from other staff and management. The success of the students will build up a better reputation for the institution. To achieve this, advisers play a very important role on this journey."* Although it falls outside the job descriptions (and interests) of many advisers, to deliver a service that is accessible to students, students need to be aware of it. Advisers' offices need to develop a marketing plan with clear cut goals, actions and resources needed to reach those goals. This research indicates that it should be centred on making use of word of mouth and student's (good) opinions about the service. Also important, the advisers' titles should reflect their role, not just to the New Zealand colleagues but to their international clientele.

Availability and physical space

Clark (2002), in a dissertation based on interviews with students about their perceptions of the roles of International Student Advisers, revealed that some students give up on trying to see an adviser because the adviser was not available when the student wanted them to be. Students' perceptions were based on their experiences of going to the office and having to wait a long time because the adviser was busy with someone else, the adviser was out of the office recruiting students to the university, or the adviser had too many (200-300) students to look after. The more often a student finds an adviser is engaged in other tasks, or overseas, the more discouraging it is for them to return. In New Zealand, the reasons for not being available can vary from being involved in marketing overseas, attending meetings, teaching, or doing administration work. One adviser was well resourced in New Zealand terms (2 advisers to 450-500 students) commented that *"our students still say that sometimes they can't get to see an adviser. It is a catch 22 as we build closer trust relationships more students want to see advisers but then others have to wait! To ease this I would recommend that advisers are advising and not completing administration tasks as so often happens! They are an easy target for pushing admin work onto."* Two of the Chinese advisers spoke of the negative effect that an adviser not being available can have on Chinese students in that when these students approach an adviser's door for the first time it is often as a last resort and is something they are hesitant about. The unavailability of an adviser *"gives them an excuse to go away and not come back"* especially if they are a little reluctant having been referred to the adviser by someone else.

The physical location of the advisers' offices is also a factor. When students are referred or offices are some distance from where the majority of students are, it becomes much more a big deal to see an adviser. Advisers commented on having noticed the difference in the number of students who "drop in" when they have had a change of location and how a convenient location helped them get out amongst the students. As discussed, being a familiar part of the community is important to effective advising.

Shared offices and office layout was also a disincentive for students to "open up" when they had made the effort of going to see an adviser. Conversations with students were often stilted and whispered. It was evident that some students didn't want to talk. "*They might start to talk openly about why they are experiencing difficulty and if another student comes in to talk to my colleague, they will go quiet again*" or of the advisers not being sure how to react towards the student because of others in the office "*I find it very awkward for me to see students crying in the public office, especially male students. I am not sure if I should say something to comfort him or just keep quiet so others in the office will not notice he is crying*." These advisers had the option to take the student to a more private room (which was not always available), but this was awkward. They often had to interrupt a student "mid flow" to relocate offices or did not have all the necessary resources available in the other room which meant the adviser had to interrupt the interview to consult something in their office. This barrier was rated significantly stronger than any of the other practical barriers and at least five advisers had personal experience of having to share an office that resulted in students going silent when another person was in the office.

A less significant issue relating to physical space had to do with how advisers set up their offices to make them conducive to listening and openness. Any physical barrier between the adviser and the student is a barrier to communication. When this is a (cluttered) workspace advisers felt the student was likely to also feel anxious about "interrupting" someone's work. Advisers commented about having an area away from the workspace because a busy workspace can put pressure on adviser and student and the other because of the importance of the office looking welcoming. The Chinese advisers did not rate this as terribly important. Ideally, each adviser should have a private room that was set up to encourage openness including a space where they can sit with a student, apart from the workspace and without a barrier between them and the student. Peripheral items such as a map of China or a Chinese wall hanging can help the student feel more comfortable or facilitate small talk and getting to know students.

Expression

Getting students to make use of the services and making them student-friendly are what we would consider external factors. Once the students start coming to see advisers the advisers will require internal factors. One of these is trust, which is internal to the students, but there are things advisers can do to engender trust as we have already discussed. Once advisers have their offices the way they like, and the trust of the students, it is important that students can communicate openly and effectively with advisers and that advisers have the skills to be able to deal with the issues the students are bringing to them. This is probably the most crucial factor because without this, the best facilities, trust, and community relations will be worth nothing. The issues of communication and trust cannot really be separated because without trust there will be little open communication with Chinese students. However, for our purposes it is useful to analyse them separately so we can look at the details of how advisers have improved these particular facets of their work.

There are two major issues related to communication. The first is the fear that they may have to express emotions (Komiya 2001), and the second is a perceived inability to communicate in English. In the first case, it may be that it is considered shameful to express emotions to a stranger, or simply that they think counselling means they must express emotions which is something they have been taught to keep under tight reign. The language barrier may be a real or perceived barrier. It is likely that a student could, for the first time, be trying to describe a situation, or express themselves about topics or concepts that they have never had to do in English before. We will deal with the language barriers first.

Language barrier

Not being able to speak the students' own languages was identified as a barrier by the non-Chinese advisers. The barrier was obviously less for advisers who had access to Mandarin speaking staff or who were dealing with students with higher levels of English. It was recognised that especially where personal issues are involved that students wanted to talk in their own language. It was also a barrier as students would more easily thing "this person's a Kiwi, what could they know about …." Several comments indicated that more important than the language was the limited understanding or knowledge of Chinese students and their cultural differences. One Kiwi adviser mentioned that the time she had spent in Taiwan gave her "street credibility" and made her sensitive to the students' cultural backgrounds. Other advisers commented that in some cases it is better for a "kiwi" adviser to deal with an issue – although some students take quite a bit of persuading that this is the case. A Chinese adviser summed it up in the broader context of having to deal with many cultures *"It would be helpful if the adviser could speak the student's own language but it is not*

necessary and it is impossible for the adviser to be able to speak every student's own language. As long as the adviser has had some experiences of learning a foreign language, living in a non-English speaking country, the adviser should have the common knowledge and understanding of the basic problems. The most important thing is the passion, open mind, professionalism and love."

While this is a significant issue, there are some practical solutions that are easily available. Firstly, where the students have a low level of English, use an interpreter or a Chinese speaking counsellor. Another option that will be less popular is learn to speak Chinese. Learning to greet in Chinese is not going to help, it may help to get students to like, trust or relax in your company but it will not help a serious language problem. However, students at tertiary institutions should have a high level of English competence and the language problem is often a perceived problem, or a result of a reluctance to speak openly to someone outside their own culture. One adviser allowed students to express themselves in Chinese and then asked them to be their own interpreter. Often students relax when advisers point out that the student's English is a lot better than the adviser's Chinese, and it would be more useful to speak in English. From being an issue of shame about their language ability, this can turn it around to being a matter of pride.

Sometimes students simply do not want to speak to someone outside their own culture about their problems. While the issue of a language barrier is a strong one, a cultural barrier that is not as apparent, but as significant, also exists. Often students who have a good ability to speak English feel misunderstood because the adviser / teacher / counsellor does not understand the cultural or experiential context that the student is coming from. There are a number of things advisers can do to close this experiential or cultural gap.

Students respond very well when they realise that the adviser has had some similar experiences including living in another country and facing academic difficulties. Adviser's indicated that the advantage of this experience was two fold, one that the adviser could understand the experience the students were going through and the other that the students could relate better to the adviser. One comment was that when the adviser mentioned they'd been to China, *"…their eyes often light up and they are very interested in where and what I experienced. This can often lead to a build up of trust with the student".* When advisers share their own experience of, for example, culture shock or a problem with study, it goes a long way to building trust. Often it is a "quid pro quo" situation in which the adviser shares a little of themselves, in the hope and expectation that the student will do the same. This elicited several comments over how much sharing is good. The suggestions that emerged were that the sharing of personal information should be done deliberately as part of building trust with Chinese students – sharing of personal information is a normal starting point for Chinese as a part of the trust building process. It should be done to encourage students to open up. Care should be taken not to over-do the personal revelations to the extent that the student feels the conversation is about the adviser rather than them.

Show openness to learning the Chinese way or at least acknowledge that there is a Chinese way. In seeking solutions the adviser can ask "How would this problem be solved in China?" This enables them to explore the possibility of a solution that best fits the student's own expectations and quite often useful discussion can ensue as to why some things are inappropriate in New Zealand or Chinese culture. This benefits both advisers and students. If the adviser is not familiar with China then a visit to China, taking time to visit some schools or tertiary institutions and becoming familiar with the Chinese way of living and educating could go a long way to understanding Chinese students and their cultural context. Even a short visit is of value as it gives a point of commonality between the student and the adviser ("Oh, you're from Shanghai. I visited Shanghai last …."). Those advisers who had been to China indicated that it was particularly insightful into the Chinese culture and helped them to better understand and connect with the students and was a bit of an icebreaker. What was important is *"to have in deep understanding of Chinese way of living and educating"*

Expressing emotions

One adviser described herself as *"Mum"* because she deals with *"anything and everything"* while another commented that *"it requires many extra skills, time, information, network, knowledge, experience etc to be a good adviser."* Advisers are expected to be reasonably competent in a broad range of areas including solving personal problems, career counselling, providing academic support, solving the bureaucratic problems in the institution (ie have a very good knowledge of internal regulations and procedures), and laws relating to immigration services and other areas of life in New Zealand. As a result advisers often become a "one stop shop". Advisers commented on the expectation of the student that the adviser provide a solution rather than

pass them on to others. In particular, there is resistance to being directed to a counsellor by Chinese students. The reasons are similar to why students don't want to speak to advisers, but counsellors have an added stigma. With referrals from advisers to counsellors, students tend to think, "why should I explain myself to someone else when I've already talked to you?" Inevitably, advisers find themselves in positions whereby they become the student's principal, or only, professional support person, and it becomes important to develop counselling skills.

The studies by Li and Kim and by Zhang et al also compared the perceived effect of cultural competence on the students perceptions of the counselling sessions (Li & Kim, 2004, Zhang, 2001). The experiments involved the same counsellors, but different students, acting in either a culturally "neutral" way (really an American/Western way) or a culturally sensitive way. Cultural sensitive included attempting to say hello and goodbye in the student's own language, asking some questions about where the student was from, and displaying an interest in other cultures through posters on the wall. The students rated the counsellors who were culturally sensitive as more expert, attractive, trustworthy and offering better support than those who were culturally neutral. There was, unfortunately, in no study a measure of the actual ability of the counsellor to help solve problems, or of the likelihood of the student to return to the counsellor later. Similar experiments with Indian students gave similar results (Sodowsky, 1991). Au gives some specific guidance as to how to be culturally sensitive when counselling Chinese students and that involves, establishing family ties, establishing who has authority in the family, educating about counselling and the meaning of confidentiality, and showing cultural empathy e.g. through explaining your own experiences of having lived overseas (Au, 2002).

Advisers must be able to recognise when to refer students on to more professional people. It is equally important that these professionals are culturally sensitive. Admitting a limitation and then being prepared to lead the student to another professional is part of an adviser's professionalism and is important to put the students' best interests before the adviser's ego. All advisers would book appointments and sometimes accompany a student to another professional. This was true for both academic problems (e.g. where a learning adviser, or course dean was needed) and personal problems (e.g. where a counsellor was needed). The reasons for doing this were (i) to ensure students got to see who they needed to see and (ii) to show students they were not being "fobbed off" or abandoned, rather they were being assisted in finding a solution.

Chinese students have told advisers that they found it strange that they were passed on to other staff. They expect that when they come for help to the person who has been identified as the person in the institution especially for international students then they should be able to obtain the help they came for from that person. Often advisers do not come from a counselling or social work background and will need training to develop their counselling skills. There is a strong need to communicate with the students what advisers can and can not do to help. Because Chinese students are often results focussed, if no concrete steps towards a solution are made, then students are likely to see the adviser as not worth the effort of visiting (ie they don't want someone to help then to "feel better", but to solve problems). They mentioned that the term "adviser" or "designated person" is not always understood. One comment sums up how the adviser needs to deal with the issue, *"I think once the student has taken the step to see the advisor that we need to be able to follow it through as far as we can, and play a supporting role if other staff need to be seen. Basically advisors need to be masters of all trades!"* This is impossible. There is a tension between when to hand a student over to another professional for the best advice and to give the student what they may want. This is a professional judgement call that advisers must make, and it would be best if they had some tools available to help them to make that decision.

One important facet of this is that they should recognise symptoms of major crises (e.g. eating disorders, drug use, suicidal tendencies, depression, etc). They then need to have the counselling skills to help the student get to the point whereby the student will be able to work with a psychologist, psychiatrist or counsellor with advanced skills. This was acknowledged by some as a difficult area as the nature of the adviser's job is to be a primary source of support, but sometimes situations can become "too big." The question then is; is it possible to let go and pass the "case" on? Whilst it is recognised that this may be necessary it is also recognised that it is not always possible and the adviser may stay involved. This requires some degree of counselling skills. Furthermore, advisers need training to pick up early signs of problems. In this context, professional supervision and debriefing was also mentioned as important.

Another step in this direction would be trying to get students to open up by asking trigger questions. Asking a suitably general question sometimes means a student reveals a bit more than they may have intended initially. For example, asking "how are things at home?" whereby it is left to the student to decide what "home" means may mean that the student will talk about "home" in China if that is what is on their mind, or about their "flat" if something is happening there that disturbs them. Advisers commented, on the importance of keeping questions simple and clear and one offered this suggestion *"Sometimes I ask students to imagine a scale of 0-10. 0 = no work and 10 = working hard. I find that some candidly confess to a 3/10 on the scale and the conversation proceeds from there."*

Observing students' body language is also a useful tool. Advisers observed that a Chinese student who avoids looking at you, is fidgeting a lot – perhaps doodling, or exhibiting other "odd kinds" of behaviour may indicate they are only reluctant to be with you and have something that they don't want to talk about. Several cautionary comments were made about noting the body language yet being careful in how to interpret it. One Chinese adviser commented "*It is kind of normal for Chinese students (especially boys) not looking at your eyes when they are talking. They might be shy or take advisers to be the one with authorities."* Another said *"It is understandable as the students are sharing their "secrets" which not all the people have the courage do this with a stranger. They may have their first experience to do this and not sure how to handle it such as how much of their privacy to share, what the consequences will be of letting people know their secrets and how much the people they talk to can help etc. As aside, counselling services are not widely available and accepted in China. It is not common concept yet by talking to people about your trouble to get helped."*

Look for what motivates the students. Chinese students in particular seem to need motivational counselling. To motivate a student will require spending time with them to search out what motivates them. Whilst this was seen as important one adviser said they were not resourced for it.

Another indicated the importance of involving peers in the support and motivation of the student. Seeking commitment from students in following up steps to solve their own problems often takes the onus off the adviser and makes students responsible for their own solutions. During a session work through the issues and identify the solution in a series of practical steps that the student can take. Before a student leaves the office advisers should make sure they are committed to some course of action or at least a step along the way. They should also book a follow up interview if necessary before they leave otherwise follow up through telephone or email. This was identified as important as it means when the students leave the office they feel they are on the way towards solving the problem. Students often become de-motivated when a problem seems to be beyond their control. By committing them to tasks, they take control again.

Clark (2002) noted some students have an experience of an adviser that put them off seeking support from the adviser. This was because of a perceived distance between them and the adviser. This distance appears to have been caused by contact via e-mail only or only being "official." The "officialness" made students feel that advisers were merely doing an administrative task (signing an immigration form) or acting in a very "professional" way that distanced them from the student, but had no genuine interest in the student or their problems. An adviser asking "How can I help you?" (i.e. centred on the problem) rather than "How are you?" (centred on the person) was a put-off for students and they felt uncomfortable dealing with the adviser (Clark, 2002). The perception that the adviser is listening to the problem and has a genuine interest, firstly in the student, and, secondly in getting the best solution, is very important. If a promise is not followed up on, or the student is rushed out of the office, or passed on to someone else without explanation, then it is likely to mean the student won't return. The Chinese advisers both commented: *"Definitely, Chinese students like the personal friendship as they can consider somebody as a friend very easily if the person offers a genuine help"* and *"Absolutely true. They want to see that you are truly concerned about their problems and trying your best to get the results."* Another adviser commented on the high workloads on advisers that put pressure on them to remain interested.

In seeking a solution to a problem, ask students what their family would advise. Students will respect the time taken to listen and understand them and their families and they will see the genuine concern of the adviser. Occasionally, especially with some academic matters, the conflict is because they are unable to

achieve what is wanted by their family. Advisers may work to explain things to their family, as well as spell out alternatives (e.g. another course). Some advisers comments were along the lines of "be careful" as sometimes *"what the family wants is not good for the students"* or *"students may not be willing to tell the truth about their families or background."* The importance is to take families into account, but not to generalise and think that they always have a significant role to take with every student and every issue.

Advisers should not have multiple roles. We have already commented that it is not clear to students automatically what the role of the adviser is, and when they have multiple roles it can be even more confusing**.** Advising is a profession in and of itself requiring a broad range of skills and spending a lot of time with the students. It is crucial that advisers are available. Those that have multiple roles and are often not available will not be as effective. Furthermore, the advising tends to get squeezed, because, other than in crises situations, much of it does not have deadlines that teaching or marketing may have. If it is not possible to have a dedicated adviser in a role then they should have a very well defined job description including the proportion of their time being given over to advising. They should be available every working day for the students (eg at set hours for most matters, with an open door for emergencies) and should be given set, and sufficient, hours to follow up students' needs. In some contexts having an adviser with only advising roles was impractical and was a matter of resources. The only other role mentioned in a positive light with that of adviser was that of a teacher as this helped them to understand the students better. Other benefits to being involved in other ways with students is additional contact time in a non-advising role, and seeing students in the corridors and passages for follow up on issues and tasks set for them. A lot of informal advising happens in the class room and during breaks. There is the possibility of a conflict of interest for students being taught by an adviser. Some advisers commented that students and staff don't understand their position properly. One adviser just put out this plea "*Please start recognising this as a specialist position!"*

Being directive / authoritative.
Most Chinese students expect that their advisers will be people of authority. One way of showing this is to use a little more formality than is common in New Zealand, but would be expected in China. This may mean being called Mr or Miss. Students may also want to see that you are qualified and so displaying qualifications (e.g. certificates on the wall, letters on a business card) may not be the New Zealand way, but it may be an effective way to gain acceptance by the student.

Chinese students come seeking solutions – they expect to be told them what to do. Sometimes, there may need to be a choice made and it is OK to offer a menu of options. However, they should not be offered for the sake of being non-directive (or because that is what is perceived to be the correct way of doing things in a Western culture). If one option is the obvious choice then the student should be told so. Two advisers cautioned against generalising and cautioned that advisers should make sure that they read the individual student and make sure that the student knows they have unconditional help. Other comments from advisers pointed out that Chinese student's lack the practice of being independent and making their own choices, hence the need for somebody like the adviser to play the role of an authority figure.

Several studies looked at the difference between indirect (or non-direct) and direct styles of counselling. In Li and Kim's recent study (Li & Kim, 2004) involving "Asian Americans" the difference as the nondirective counselling[1] was that having listened to the clients problem the counsellor in the directive style gave her opinion about what she considered the source of the problem and what were the most common issues, offered suggestions about goals for future counselling sessions, and suggested steps the client could take to resolve the problem. The main goal of the directive style was concrete guidance. The non-directive style involved the counsellor telling the client that he or she had the capacity to solve the problem, allowed the client to choose the goal for the session and to generate ways to resolve the problem. No interpretations or suggestions were given. The clients rated the counsellors with the directive style as "more empathic and culturally competent, and the session as having a stronger working alliance and depth, than did clients exposed to the nondirective style." Zhang found a similar conclusion amongst Indian students (Zhang, 2001). Munnings talks about the socially defined pattern of communication often being one-way from an authority figure and Iowa State Counselling service talk of the expectation of direct assistance in, at least, logistical matters surrounding an emergency (Munnings, 2002, Iowa State, 2004).

[1] Note: This study involved career counselling, not mental health counselling.

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