



UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE

University Counselling Service

Student Counselling Service
Annual Report 2009 - 2010

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Overview of 2009/10

The Student Counselling Service has been under some pressure during this year, primarily because of a surge in the number of students seeking counselling. This did not seem to relate to any specific incident or growth in particular problem areas, merely a sustained and greater call upon our services. In turn this led to an increase in waiting times and our working more briefly than we would have wished with the people we were seeing.

However, the Service has continued to offer a broad range of support and therapy to students and staff across the spectrum of prevention, education, support, counselling and therapy. This has included consultancy to those in the front line of student support, providing self-help materials and resources to students and staff, and offered workshops and training sessions in Colleges. We have also appointed our first Mental Health Advisor to work with the growing minority of students who have quite serious mental health problems.

Here are few facts from 2009/10:

- The Service offered counselling to over 1,360 students, who were seen an average of 4.6 times
- Between 25 - 60 students sought counselling for the first time each week during term
- In addition to individual counselling, the Service offered up to 15 workshops or counselling groups per week during term
- Around 180 - 210 individual counselling sessions were offered each week, with a further 25 - 50 group attendances per week
- In addition to direct work with students, we responded to numerous requests for support and guidance from tutors and others in colleges or departments, as well as from GPs and others in the mental health field.

Challenges facing the Service

The rapid rise in the number of students seeking help from the Service alongside static staffing levels has resulted in both increased waiting times for counselling and briefer support being offered this year. If this rapidly rising demand continues, as seems highly likely at a time of turbulence in higher education, the Service faces difficult choices in the near future, as simply allowing waiting times to rise and offering less to each person accessing the Service risks undermining the effectiveness of our operation. As a result we have begun considering:

- Tightening up our triage systems to ensure we work with those most likely to benefit
- Expanding the guided self-help work we already do on a small scale
- Offering single 'consult a counsellor' sessions which are easily accessible but are not a normal route into ongoing counselling
- Further developing our group programme and offering some clients this option only.

University Staff Counselling Service

The University Staff Counselling Service is housed in the same premises and available to all staff with a University contract.

This Service is also overseen by the Head of Service, but is separated administratively and financially from our work with students. The work of the Staff Counselling Service is reported in its own Annual Report; the work and figures mentioned in this Report therefore relate solely to our work with undergraduate and graduate students, and staff of the Colleges.

Staffing during the year

There were a number of changes to staffing during the year. Carol Dasgupta retired in Dec/09 and Lucy King retired at the end of the year. Both had worked in the UCS for many years, in Dr King's case since 1974. We miss their experience and wisdom considerably. We were also sad to lose the services of Alison Gibson from student counselling, as she moved across to the Staff Counselling Service, and also of Jane McCann, who left at the end of the year after three years working on Peer Support and student counselling.

Jane Cooper was promoted to Senior Counsellor from Jan/10, and Anna Churcher and Maya Zvigi Cohen were both appointed part-time to fill vacancies resulting from the above departures.

We were also able to appoint a first Mental Health Advisor, Juliet Bristow, from Feb/10. There is more about this new role later in the report.

Placements for Associate Counsellors

Each year we offer placements to a number of Associate counsellors, who are trainees in the late stages of their professional counselling, psychotherapy or cognitive behavioural therapy training. Their work is carefully supervised and undertaken within professional guidelines on the use of trainee staff; clients can request not to be seen by an Associate if they would prefer.

Serena Askalam, Gudrun Haraldsdottir, Louise Martin, Susan Norman and Sally Jane Williams joined the team at the start of the year, and Kerry Elliott, Jane Knights, Sue Phillips and Sally Swain continued for a second year in the Service. Most did half a day per week but some were able to work for one day per week. We believe that this programme benefits both the Service, by bringing in fresh ideas and energy, and the trainees, who experience working in a highly professional service. Between them they undertook 12% of the counselling sessions offered in the Service during the year.

Counselling Work

Individual counselling

There was a marked rise (13%) in the number of students seeking counselling, being 1362 students seen compared to 1202 the previous year. The reasons for this rise are unclear as it did not relate to a particular time of the academic year, nor to a marked growth in any particular problem areas; rather it was simply a sustained increase in numbers throughout the year.

This considerable increase in demand meant that waiting times for counselling grew, from an average wait of 8 working days in the previous year, to 10 working days this year. It also meant that counsellors offered each person fewer sessions on average – down from 5.0 to 4.6 sessions each. Both these changes are of some concern as timeliness is crucial in the fast-moving Cambridge context, and we want to be able to offer people the support they need rather than trying to rush what cannot be rushed.

Graduate (MA and PhD) students made up 43% of those being seen, compared to 32% of the student population. However, this discrepancy is not new or unusual.

There was also little change in the incidence of problems about which students came to seek help. Anxiety, relationships, academic-related problems and depression remained the most common reasons for coming to counselling. However, we were glad to see some reduction in the numbers who self-harm or had suicidal ideation; eating problems remain of concern, though.

Counselling Groups and Workshops

We have continued to run a wide variety of short-term workshops, including topics such as 'Disordered Eating', 'Writing up a PhD', 'Sleep Problems' and 'Time Management'. We also ran ongoing longer-term counselling groups for students who needed longer term support than could be provided in individual counselling.

This year we have been able to run a total 26 different groups, meeting a total of 287 times. 207 students attended these groups on a total of 895 occasions. (This group-work is in addition to the figures for individual counselling shown elsewhere in this report.)

Mental Health and Psychiatric Support

A significant and growing minority of our work relates to students who have serious mental health problems. We know that this is a national (in fact inter-national) trend, and is not peculiar to Cambridge. Given that the majority of our work is quite short-term, and referrals to the NHS mental health services are often not straightforward, we have wrestled with how to best serve this population.

We are grateful to the Distributors of Cranes' Benefaction for supporting the mental health and psychiatric support work of the Service. This is seen in two main ways.

First, Dr. Alison Jenaway, an adult psychiatrist and Consultant Psychotherapist, is available to the service for half a day a week during term-time to offer consultations to students about whose mental health we were concerned.

Secondly, we were able to appoint a Mental Health Advisor from February, the first such role in Cambridge. The role of the MHA is to provide support, advice and guidance to students experiencing complex or enduring mental health problems; as well as providing information and advice to staff across the Colleges and University in relation to student mental health. She is able to offer:

- Mental health assessments including suicide risk assessment
- Crisis intervention and crisis management.
- Support for students whose mental health needs justify her input.
- Liaison with GPs and Mental Health Services
- Liaison with the Disability Resource Centre
- Referral to appropriate services
- Drug and alcohol screening
- Advice to college staff about student mental health problems
- Support assessments for returning de-graded students
- Supporting evidence for the Applications Committee

Staff Development

The Service arranged a full programme of in-service training events to maintain continuous professional development for staff, as well as funding staff to attend relevant external training. We also encouraged staff to keep abreast of current research that relates to our work in the UCS, and to assess its relevance to our day-to-day practice.

Preventative & Outreach Work

Most of this report focuses on the face-to-face work we undertake with students, whether individually, or in groups within the UCS. However, this represents contact with less than 8% of the student population in any year, and face-to-face work is not what everyone wants or needs. Consequently, we put considerable effort into providing resources that students can access themselves, which offer self-help support, or quite specifically aids students in the successful completion of their academic studies. After all, our evaluations revealed that 59% of respondents said that their problems interfered with their capacity to study 'quite a lot' or 'a great deal'. 41% said that their problems threatened their ability to continue on their course, but of these 67% said that counselling helped them to stay.

The Counselling Service is just one corner is a comprehensive network of support systems that include the College Tutors, Nurses, Chaplains and student welfare officers in Colleges, as well as the CUSU and the Graduate Union. These people are in the front line of student support, and we receive a steady stream of enquiries and referrals. This collaboration is important to us and helps to ensure that coherent and 'joined-up' support is offered to students.

We are also pleased that several staff in the Service are active members of national committees relating to student and staff counselling, including the Executive and several sub-committees of the UK Association for University and College Counselling. Mark Phippen is also an active member of the 'Heads of University Counselling Services' in the UK and the 'Association of University & College Counseling Center Directors' in the US. Through these routes we are able to both stay in touch with what is happening elsewhere as well as have a voice at a national level.

The Service website (www.counselling.cam.ac.uk) contains information and booklists on everything from reducing levels of anxiety or dealing with procrastination, to strategies for departments in supporting staff following a traumatic incident. We believe it is the leading student counselling website in the UK and receives about 1,000 page-views per day.

The Peer Support Project

After six years of successful operation, the Peer Support project is facing a transition.

Charlotte Snoxall and Jane McCann continued to lead the project and were joined by Polly Brown as the scheme had continued to grow, and together they provided the training and the professional back-up that has been vital to its successful and safe operation.

A thorough evaluation of the scheme, both from the 'users' and the 'suppliers' perspectives, was published by the start of Michaelmas term. This showed both the effectiveness of the scheme and the ways that it complemented the existing welfare provision within Colleges and from central services such as counselling.

However, as the scheme has developed over the years, the time involved in running and supporting it had also increased to a point where a review of the staffing model became necessary. Following consultation with the Colleges involved and the Peer Support Advisory Group, it was decided to take the scheme forward in a less time and cost intensive format, and that the main 'ownership' of the scheme should lie with the participating Colleges. Discussions have taken place to this end and are currently preparing for the launch of the revised scheme in January 2011. In the mean time, the Service will continue to support existing peer supporters until the end of Michaelmas Term 2010.

We are proud to have initiated and developed peer support, and for it to have been adopted by the Colleges as one element of the excellent student support that is available in Cambridge.

Accountability

Clinical Responsibility

The service works within the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy's 'Ethical Framework'. This covers issues such as codes of ethics and confidentiality, and the levels of clinical supervision necessary for the counselling work undertaken.

Counselling is an emotionally demanding job. Therefore it is a professional requirement for accredited / registered counsellors to have professional clinical supervision of their practice. We are fortunate to have the continuing services of a number of highly experienced clinical supervisors. Carol Gilboy, Alun Reynolds, Michelle Reynolds and Wendy Bratherton provided clinical supervision to the employed student counsellors and Helen Henry offered consultancy to the Head of Service. Between them they ensure the staff continue to work to the highest professional standards.

Executive Committee

The service is accountable to an Executive Committee chaired by Prof. Robert Mair, Master of Jesus College. This committee contains representatives of the University Council, Senior Tutors' Committee, Bursars' Committee, Students Unions and two GPs, as well as a counsellor from the Student Counselling Service and the Head of Service. In turn the Executive reports through the University Health Services Management Committee to the Council.

The full membership of the Committee is shown at the start of this report and we are very grateful for their continuing support.

How our work is financed

The total cost of the Student Counselling Service in 2009-10 was over £620,000. Because responsibility for student welfare is vested in the Colleges, funding arrangements exist whereby they finance the direct costs of counselling, with the balance paid by the Chest for service administration and facilities.

Under these arrangements each college paid a *per capita* sum of £20.60 to the Service for each registered student in residence. This amount was proposed by the University Counselling Service Executive Committee and approved by the College Bursars' Committee.

Those Colleges whose student bodies were higher users of the Service paid an additional 'use-related charge' in accordance with a formula agreed by the University Counselling Service Executive Committee and the College Bursars' Committee and at a level proposed by the former and approved by the latter.

The administration and accommodation costs of the Service continued to be met by the University.

The Peer Support project is separately funded by those colleges that participate in the scheme. The Executive Committee also oversees this budget on behalf of the participating colleges.

Crane's Benefaction

The Benefaction of John Crane has supported the Counselling Service for many years in our work with students who have mental health problems. We are grateful to the Benefaction for their continued funding of psychiatric consultations within the Service conducted by Dr. Alison Jenaway.

As mentioned above, the Benefaction is also funding the new Mental Health Advisor position for an initial period of three years. Residual funds from an earlier research project funded by three Cambridge Colleges have also been applied to this new position.

The Madeleine Davis Fund

The Madeleine Davis Fund is a bequest enabling the Service to see students who have de-graded or intermitted their course, and who would otherwise have been ineligible to use the Service when they are not in residence. Such students are thereby enabled to have access to counselling at the very time that problems cause them to degrade or intermit.

Over the last period interest on the capital held in the Fund has been much reduced due the prevailing economic climate, and consequently we are very grateful to Prof. John Davis for agreeing that a portion of the capital may be used for the stated purpose. We are very appreciative of this ongoing support.

Health & Safety

During the year the Service's Health & Safety Committee has continued to oversee risk assessments with the Service, with particular emphasis on preventing physical attacks or other threats to Service staff, especially our reception staff.

Priorities for 2010/11

The development of the Service is managed within both a 5-year Strategic Plan agreed with the Colleges and the University's 5-year Planning Round. During the coming period we intend to:

- 1 Consider the most effective and efficient means for delivering support to students at a time of budget reductions.
- 2 Develop the role of the Mental Health Advisor to help us to respond to students who have significant or enduring mental health problems, supporting them to access the professional help most appropriate to their needs.
- 3 Develop the work the Service already does to support tutors, nurses, chaplains and others who are in the 'front line' of student support.
- 4 Assist the Colleges and Student Unions in developing the new version of the Peer Support scheme.

While we look forward to working on the matters above, we are determined that the Counselling Service will continue to offer a high quality service.

Mark Phippen
Head of Service

October 2010