



THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH

Student Counselling Service

Annual Report 2020-2021

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bacp | Accredited
Service



The Report

This annual report covers the academic session from August 2020 to July 2021.

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This report can be provided in alternative formats on request.

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“My counsellor was very approachable and responsive to my issues. I felt heard and understood. At the same time, it was very informative as we discussed about boundaries, multitasking and focusing on mental health.” Student feedback

1. Summary of Key developments

This report will reflect on

- activities over the past academic year,
- activities that relate to student use of the service and
- the student experience

The most significant specific changes implemented in response to disruption during the Covid-19 pandemic, were introduced prior to the 2020/21 academic year, and reported in last year's Annual Report. Those changes were further embedded within the Service during 2020/21. The key development for the service in response to the pandemic was achieved in the previous academic year, and continued into 2021/21 i.e. a hybrid delivery model in line with the University's approach to learning and teaching. This has been achieved in line with sector best practice, within the guidance from our professional body the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, and within Data Protection requirements to maintain a confidential service.

Summary of key developments in the hybrid delivery model in 2020/21

- Counselling was delivered in person, by video (MS Teams), telephone and email
- Health and Wellbeing Centre (HWBC) : we were able to move into the HWBC August 2020 and were open for student use at the start of semester one (though the Wellbeing Lounge at HWBC remained closed throughout 2020/21) and we also recommenced counselling appointments at Murchison House, Kings Buildings, during semester one.
- We were able to offer some in person on campus sessions, for students who have no privacy at home/poor broadband/ phone connectivity
- Covid-19 risk mitigations were introduced on campus, compliant with Scottish Government and University guidance.
- We have offered asynchronous email counselling as part of our service provision for years, predating the Covid -19 pandemic. We increased the number of staff trained to deliver email counselling, which we can provide to students who are located in countries where local laws prohibit us from delivering video or telephone counselling, (e.g. USA) and have seen an increase in its use. It is important to note that email counselling is a specialist, evidence based form of counselling delivery.
- Evening counselling sessions recommenced September 2020 and were delivered remotely.
- The Skills for Life and Learning psychoeducational programme workshops were adapted and delivered online from Semester 2 2021.

“Counselling has helped me regain self-confidence and understand better what is going on in my head and how to deal with it..” Student feedback

Reaccredited by the BACP as an Accredited Service.

BACP Service Accreditation is a recognised quality standard for organisations providing counselling and psychotherapy services. Service accreditation demonstrates that we offer an accountable, ethical, professional and responsive service to clients, staff and stakeholders. The accreditation process is required every five years, and is audited by an annual report to BACP. We have held Accredited Service status since 2006. There is a rigorous process required to meet the criteria for accreditation which cover management and administration; aims and objectives; equal opportunities; health and safety; evaluation and feedback; professional conduct; accommodation; publicity and community liaison. We are one of only four counselling services in Scotland, and the only Scottish university counselling service, with BACP Service Accreditation. A range of Service policies and procedures were reviewed and updated as part of the accreditation process, though not significantly altered, to make them consistent with the hybrid model of service delivery. The Assessors feedback on our application was that it was “Excellent”

“I loved the opportunity counselling gave me to reflect on my thoughts and problems in a guided and controlled way with a professional as opposed to the messy way my thoughts usually go. It helped me realize that it was ok to ask for help and that it’s the most important step to take to heal.” Student feedback

2. Key User statistics for 2020/21

- By the end of 2020-21 we had 3277 referrals (-0.7% on 2019/20)
- There was a new pattern of referral with increasing demand from March 2020 onwards up and this trend has continued into 2021/22 to date of this report.
- There was no significant change in the issues students present with. Where Covid-19 is mentioned it is as an exacerbating factor rather than the cause of referral.
- We did see an increase in the number of students presenting as being at the highest levels of risk of suicide or significant self-harm (up 22.5% on 2019/20), now one in six of all students attending initial assessments. We have also seen an increase in the number of students presenting as survivors of sexual or gender based violence. Our triage approach to assessment means that these students are regarded as requiring an urgent clinical response. While we aim to respond to all students as quickly as possible, with finite resources it does mean that students not at risk may wait longer for appointments to be offered.
- There was evidence of willingness to engage with (and for some students preference for) remote appointments. The failed appointment rate (last minute cancellations or not attending) dropped from 9.5% in 2019/20 to 6.5% in 2020/21.
- 103 students took part in the Skills for Life and Learning psychoeducational sessions online. Feedback remained positive.
- The profile of student users of the Service remain consistent with previous years: male 25%/female 75%; UG 64% PGT 24% PGR 12%; UK 57.5% International 43.5%

- Analysis of the Clinical Outcomes Routine Evaluation over 2020/21 saw for those in a clinical population (i.e. struggling psychologically more than the general population) the recovery and improvement rate was 74%.

Students continue to make good use of the digital support available via **Togetherall**, the **Feeling Good App**, and **Silver Cloud**. We have seen an increase in usage of Silver Cloud (online CBT modules) 1018 students were users of Silver Cloud (up by 15% on 19/20). Of these 83 opted to be supported through the programme by a counsellor, rather than needing individual counselling session.

We have now adapted our **Service Evaluation** to reflect hybrid delivery and have moved the evaluation online. Feedback is in line with previous evaluations which were paper based. Students rate the service very highly in terms of the Service being informative, approachable, responsive, and accessible, and where dissatisfaction is expressed it is in relation to the student’s experience of the wait they have for an appointment.

The online evaluation includes the **Clinical Impact on Academic Outcomes (CIAO)** evaluation:

“To what extent would you say that counselling...”	
helped you stay at University?	68%
helped you do better in your academic work?	87%
improved your overall experience of University?	92%
helped you develop skills that might be useful in obtaining future employment?	89%

“Counselling provided me with a safe space where I could talk. I found it very useful to be able to speak to someone who does not know me and whom I will not see in the future again.” Student feedback

3. Key Performance Indicator

Key Performance Indicator – Response Times

Referral to Assessment	2019-20	2020-21	Assessment to Counselling	2019-20	2020-21
1 week	50%	49%	1 week	31%	28%
2 weeks	16%	15%	2 weeks	18%	20%
3 weeks	18%	13%	3 weeks	7%	8%
4 weeks	9%	9%	4 weeks	6%	5%
4+ weeks	7%	14%	4+ weeks	38%	39%

Despite the impact of Covid-19 and it’s disruption to our capacity to deliver counselling, we largely maintained our KPI response times from assessment to counselling (4 weeks) though overall our response times from referral to assessment were challenged. However, this was

largely a feature of pressure during semester 2. During semester 1 we had offered 73.5% of students an initial assessment within 2 weeks and 97% were offered a subsequent counselling appointment within 4 weeks. Specific factors in semester 2 contributing to longer response times were:

- Extended Christmas New Year closure – 3 weeks, and additional Easter closure (respite days)
- Staff turnover and recruitment lag
- Significant increase in demand from March onwards, with 33.5 % of all student users referring in that period (average over previous three years would be 23%)

Generally, waiting times for appointments vary widely across the year and are dependent on a number of variables including such factors as student-stated availability for counselling (which can be very limited or very open), including when students choose to wait longer than we are able to respond; students' stated preference to work with a certain type of counsellor or model of counselling; the triaging process and level of failed appointments.

Summary of reflection on the student experience:

- The Service is now at its most accessible, and students have been able to engage with support in person, by telephone and by a wide range of video and digital resources.
- Hybrid delivery is proving to be no barrier to students' use of counselling, with evidence of greater engagement.
- Clinical evaluations show good outcomes whatever the format of brief therapy.
- Overall positive feedback, though there is understandable dissatisfaction with extended waiting times.

4. Challenges and Opportunities

What has worked well

- Staff flexibility over hybrid working (location and the complexities in hybrid delivery)
- HWBC – the move went well and we have been settling in, albeit we were not able to fully occupy or use the building to the extent we had hoped. Users and visitors have commented positively on the design and capacity of the space we now share with Student Disability Service.
- Co-facilitating the Understanding and Responding to Student Mental Health training for staff online with Student Disability Service colleagues continued to work well over the course of the year, with an uptake in attendance and highly positive feedback about the training
- Partnership working with Sexual Violence and Harassment Liaison Manager. The SVHL Manager role was established in August 2020 to facilitate a coordinated response and support for those affected by abuse and be a key contact person to help those affected consider their safety needs and options for reporting the abuse, as well as accessing both short term and longer term interventions and supports.

Survivors of abuse can also self-refer to the Student Counselling Service for counselling, and referral to other supports as required. The SVHL manager works closely with the Service Director and one of the Assistant Directors, and there has been a good experience of cross referral and appropriate confidential information sharing and collaboration.

- We received additional resources to extend sessional counsellors' hours over the Spring vacation and into June and July to help reduce response times.
- In semester 2 we were eventually able to recruit to a variety of counselling posts: (a) three new full time counsellors funded by the Scottish Government via the Scottish Funding Council each for three years (b) we created from existing vacant posts two full time BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) counsellors as instructed by the University Executive. We are not unaware that the term BAME is controversial, but this initiative was to increase our capacity to respond to requests for BAME counsellors, and we have had, and do have other BAME counsellors working for the Service.
- As part of our ongoing Service training policy and provision of Continual Professional Development for staff we engaged <https://www.nafsiyat.org.uk/> to provide an online training day on Cultural Competence. This was well received by the counselling team, and should be seen as complementing core training covered in graduate and postgraduate professional counselling training and other past CPD trainings on multicultural therapy provided by the Service. Our example of using Nafsiyat is now being followed by other University counselling services in the UK.

What worked less well

1. Budget: in line with other areas of USG our service did see a reduction in our budget for 2020/21, which could only come from either direct frontline service or support for frontline services
2. Staff turnover and limit on recruitment: we started the year with vacancies for sessional counsellors and saw other counsellors leave in the course of the year. The University's pause on recruitment delayed our ability to fill these vacancies timeously, or to recruit to the SFC funded posts (see above). This was further compounded by the introduction of the People and Money system, which has been operationally challenging. As a consequence of this recruitment lag, we had reduced number of counselling appointments at the start of the year and into semester 2.
3. Project with Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre: in conjunction with the other local Universities (Heriot Watt, Edinburgh Napier and Queen Margaret) the University entered a service level agreement, whereby ERCC would allocate a specific counsellor to work with University students in delivery longer term counselling for students who had received trauma informed counselling via University services. Starting in February this outcome has not yet been achieved, with students referring to ERCC receiving brief therapy, but with longer waiting times than University services can provide. With further resourcing from the Scottish Government and ERCC's reorganisation of this project we anticipate the project will be back on track in 2021/22.

"It was just good knowing that someone was there listening to me. Especially after moving to a new country in pandemic, knowing that someone cares for you helps" Student feedback

Comments on the Service arising from the University's Student Support Service quality assurance review process

- The service is vital to supporting students at the University. It has benefited from new premises but these are yet to be fully exploited due to Covid. The service has continued to offer a hybrid model of delivery, which allows students to engage both in person and remotely – this appears to have resulted in a decrease in the failed appointment rate which is good news for those wishing to access the service. The service also reaches out using asynchronous email counselling which has been particularly important to the international student community. The service's willingness to be considerate, adaptable and flexible in its approach within imposed University constraints is commendable.
- Continued resource development that is accessible online is to be commended also, showing an acute awareness of the growing need for a range of support to ensure our students develop personal resilience as well as gain much needed support.
- Excellent support service, aware of the needs of the community and engaging with external service providers to shore up service. The reflection and awareness of the service is highly commended, and undoubtedly reflects best practice in the sector
- The partnership working with the SVHL should be commended as a positive strengthening of the service to support the increased numbers of students presenting as survivors of sexual or gender based violence.
- Despite the challenges of managing waiting times and staffing levels, the service continues to embed hybrid working and should be commended on accessibility as appointments can now take place via telephone, by email, in person and online (via Microsoft teams).
- A further area of good practice is the retention of BACP accreditation giving external recognition of the high standards of the service. Due to the rigour required to meet the criteria, the retention of this accreditation is an area staff within the service should be proud of.
- The staff within SCS should be proud of the difference they make to students. It's clear from reading the student feedback and from the evaluation scores, students value the service and the impact this has in improving their University experience, and helping them to do better in their academic work and helping them develop employability skills. The team have clearly adapted well to new ways of working and to a new location.

"I would definitely recommend. As a matter of fact, I already have recommended it to a few of my friends. It has really helped me in understanding my own wellbeing. Counselling has helped me to know the real meaning of self-care." Student feedback

5. Going Forward

Going Forward into 2021/22

We have fully integrated the hybrid model into our service delivery. We anticipate an increase in demand generally and for in-person services, and we will scale up our capacity to deliver more in person working over the course of the year, maximising our presence on all our campus sites. However, any improvement on our response times, in view of the likely increase in demand, will require additional resources for effective frontline delivery.

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