

Counselling services in an institutional context

Students' needs are rarely neat and separate entities. **Hugh Clarke** suggests that Counselling Services need to drop their vanity and function as the frontal lobes of the institution



‘Courage and a better preparation for voluntary co-operation toward mutual goals is the best way to save the individual and society from the suicidal consequences of vanity’

These words by Leonhard Seif¹, a latter-day Adlerian, with their profound Existential meaning, can also be applied, at a more mundane level, to counselling services and the place they can occupy in universities. I am not about to say anything profound nor in fact anything very new. The idea that counselling services need to be more closely involved in the structural and political life of the institution has been around for some time^{2,3}. However, the idea has not entirely taken root.

Three roles for counselling services have been described by Ratigan³:

1. The ‘remedial’ role tends to be individual and problem-focused and describes the work carried out routinely with students who present with issues. Robert May² describes this role as ‘healing the wounded among the student body’.

2. In the ‘preventative’ role, the

counsellor uses skills, knowledge and his/her experience of the institution to facilitate groups, to target students most likely to experience difficulty and to advise and train staff.

3. The ‘developmental’ role is geared towards enhancement and growth, for the student body, staff and the wider institution.

As we move from the ‘remedial’ role, through the ‘preventative’ to the ‘developmental’, there is a corresponding shift in the direction of the work – from that which is problem focused, carried out alone, with individual students and with concern for the present, to that which is growth and enhancement focused, carried out with others, within the wider institution and with anticipation and planning for the future. The ‘co-operation toward mutual goals’ is most in evidence in these latter activities.

Through preventative and developmental work, the counselling service can make a significant contribution to structural change (involvement in policy making, working parties, training staff) and enhancement of the student experience (eg managing life transitions and the student-life cycle, or developing strategies to mitigate stress). To use a gardening analogy, these roles are less about pest and disease control and more about sowing seeds and enriching the soil.

The counsellor’s capacity to plant seeds and improve soil, has often been curtailed by theory-driven rules and regulations, a limited definition of the counsellor’s obligations and a constrictive definition of confidentiality. To meet the requirements of the preventative and developmental roles in particular, student counsellors need to give up, what Ratigan³ calls, our reluctance to ‘face up to (our) institutional responsibilities’. In addition, we need to become less student-oriented and more embedded within the institution. This is recognised in the report, Student Services: Effective Approaches To Retaining Students In Higher Education:

‘...with widening participation and retention, it is important to build up

strong working relations across the institution, with other student services and (with) administration, academic departments, teaching and learning strategies, staff development and induction, widening participation activities and the Students’ Union, to create a strategic approach.’⁴

In an age of instant information, students are no longer happy being bounced in vain from one source of information to another. They rightly require staff to know what other departments have to offer. An integrated student services, stitched into the university systems, creates an ideal environment for this to happen. A move from the ‘Isolation Model’ to this ‘Integrative Model’ may require counsellors to become more like those working in the building industry. My own recent experience of having

whole, in often difficult situations. Equally, counsellors (and others in student services) are sometimes obliged to give the builder’s answer: ‘I don’t do that, but I know a man who does’. In times of crisis, the well informed practitioner, familiar with what others in student services and the institution can provide, can be this reassuring voice.

Integration and fragmentation

The modern university or college functions like a small or large community, in fact many have a student population larger than a medium sized town and, for various reasons, they can resemble the clamour and impersonal character of the busy town, with an equal amount of fragmentation. Teaching takes place in large groups and there is an atmosphere of haste and

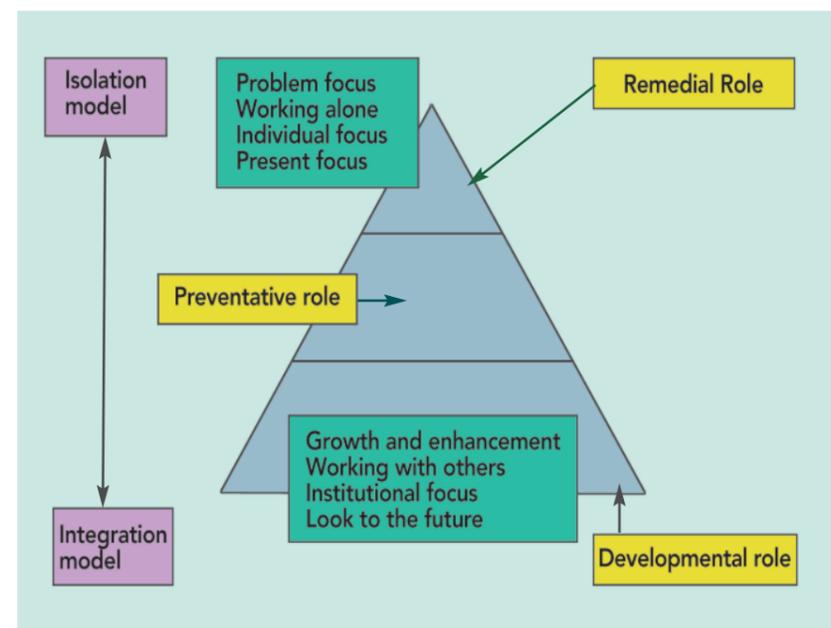
greater fragmentation of knowledge.⁵ In addition, modularisation presents the student with the challenges of regular course choices, being constantly under assessment pressure and a difficulty in forming long-lasting peer study groups. Competition for scarce resources means even greater fragmentation within the institution and with it, a less open attitude to co-operative projects.

It makes no sense for support systems to follow a parallel fragmentary path. Instead they should attend to students’ needs in an integrated way, involving the whole of student services and the wider institution. Students’ needs are rarely neat and separate entities, e.g. personal struggles, existential and spiritual anxieties, financial problems, career choices and intellectual difficulties are more likely to be part of the same picture. The benefits to students of integration are therefore many:

(It) ‘reduces stigma in accessing support, (creates) more efficient referral, students establish links with more than one member of staff and (it is) easier to access and find the right service.’⁴

In addition, integrated services are consistent with a psychosocial model,⁶ which stresses that development is a holistic and interactive process involving all parts of the person and the environment. The psychosocial model and an integrative model of support, operate on a ‘ripple effect’ principle, a helpful intervention in one area of life can lead to constructive change in another. It follows, that incoherent educational practices do not enhance the student experience. They are in fact more likely to have unwelcome practical and emotional consequences, which may later require remedial interventions, as implied by Earwaker:

‘As courses are broken up into distinct units, students need even more help in making sense of their varied experiences and in seeing things as a whole, yet the modularisation of



builders at my house, taught me a lot about how many different ‘disciplines’ (plumbers, carpenters, brick layers, plasterers, electricians, painters and decorators), can serve as a model for student services - working in teams, sharing the same space, with a workable knowledge of what others do, making timely and harmonised interventions and weaving them into a

pressure. The corporate institution creates difficult tensions for the student - the caring tutor and the inspiring lecturer versus the Finance Department in relentless pursuit of fees. Added to this are the difficulties associated with modularisation: the loss of a stable peer group; greater discontinuity of contact and more impersonal relationship with tutors and

*courses can render this practically difficult if not actually impossible.*⁷

By contrast, the counselling service sits like a refuge in the midst of this disjointed and frenetic experience. The counselling process is an opportunity to slow things down, to reflect, acquire skills in interpersonal relations and to achieve greater integration. The Service is not able to fulfil this role if it has marginalised itself within the institution. Instead, from the security of its base, the service needs to venture out.

Institutions rightly expect counselling services to contribute to the wider goals of improving retention and achievement. For some counsellors, this compromises their professional obligation to assist students with their personal goals and individual choices, which in some cases might entail transferring to another institution or quitting all together. There are many equally compromising issues affecting the work of the counsellor engaged with the institution: involvement in meetings and case conferences which are tantamount to disciplinary action with a student, eg student 'misbehaviour'; instigating the suspension of a student with mental health concerns who is posing a threat to other students or staff. Counsellors are therefore compelled to think about how their actions can be reconciled with a professional expectation to be non-judgemental. They must also consider how to work with two differing sets of clients – the student and the institution, and to do so in a way which does not view the institution as part of the problem, but instead, as another resource. While the counsellor's role gives him/her particular insights, it is important to value the perspectives gained by others, and therefore to have a 'collaborative' as well as 'consultative' role.

Containing anxiety and mental distress

Most student counsellors agree that part of their role is to reduce and contain anxiety and distress. Some may not agree that this role extends beyond the individual student to the

institution, yet the psychology of the institution (hierarchies, power structures, obstacles and resources) must be understood in order to understand the individual student experience. On top of this, for many students, there are the even more remote structures of government affecting their lives, eg the loans company, the disability allowance procedure and the Benefits Office. As a result many students, particularly those from lower socio-economic groups, can feel harassed and preoccupied to the extent that they are unable to study well. The counsellor is unable to tackle these problems alone, and is doing a dis-service to the students if he/she considers it good enough to merely 'sit with the discomfort'.

The report *Degrees of Disturbance*⁵ recognises the increase in numbers of students who are presenting with more

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severe mental health problems. Since the report was published, the numbers have probably increased, creating further challenges for student peers and teaching staff, who may also need to be supported, especially since it seems that students are more inclined to seek the help of their personal tutors before coming to counselling. Staff outside student services and outside counselling services, are often ill equipped to respond to distress and mental health concerns. Despite good intentions, their anxiety often leads to an over-reaction and a closing down of their ability to think things through in a

reasoned way. Reflecting on these situations, the report from the Institute for Access Studies, at Staffordshire University, makes the following recommendation:

‘A key change therefore may be that student services staff could be less focused on remedial work with problem students and increasingly concerned with supporting other staff in managing student issues.’⁴

We could therefore say that the counselling service functions as the frontal lobes of the institution, making sense of what is happening and how to address it. To function as the frontal lobes, counsellors must have a communication system radiating through the university body, giving it the ability to see, hear, gather information, and when necessary, to modulate emotions and take appropriate actions. With this shift of emphasis, the authorities within the university can be reassured that if serious concerns arise; as a result of mental health issues, there is someone there to deal with them. This is good for counselling services!

Identity and contribution through work

A key element in the psychology of Alfred Adler⁸ is that every individual is faced with three major life challenges: being an individual in a wider society; love and relationships; contributing through work. It is clear to us all how important work is, since on first meeting a new person, we are generally always asked what we do. This indicates not just the importance of being able to locate someone, but also the part played by work in shaping our identity. This has implications for institutions committed to the 'widening participation' agenda since these will have a diverse population, some of which may be disadvantaged in the job market, with ensuing psychological consequences.

More recent evidence⁹ suggests that students with a definite direction and purpose and who know what they wish to do later in life, generally do best. At

the risk of advocating a utilitarian view of education, one way of obtaining this is through developing a sense of one's career direction. Helping students in this area is an ideal opportunity for closer liaison with Careers Advisers, indeed in the aforementioned Access Studies report, the need to adopt a holistic approach to the student life-cycle was frequently mentioned by respondents; many of whom advocated increased collaboration with the Careers Service to increase student employability. Such collaboration can come about through joint work, on issues such as: career identity, life planning; decision-making (eg further education or work) and developing interview and related personal skills.

Poverty is the root of all problems?

How often, after meeting with a client, have we thought, 'if only they had some money their problems could be solved'. We know the extent to which poverty is often at the root of student problems, particularly for those involved in widening participation. I have many times listened to students speak of the dire living conditions and financial hardships they endure and, according to the rule book, I am expected to 'hold' the accompanying pain and therefore help my clients endure and come to terms with it, or at a practical level, find ways of gaining employment. However, because we work in a student services department, with colleagues offering other forms of support, including careers, chaplaincy, advice and information, disabilities and dyslexia, we have information that the student may not be privy to. Despite what the counselling text books might teach, there can be no value in being withholding so, faced with the opportunity to 'do the student a favour', it makes sense for us as counsellors to provide appropriate information to a Student Adviser, so that the student can be given money from an emergency fund.

Cultural differences

There is ample evidence¹⁰ that students from countries outside Europe, do not

necessarily share generally held 'Western' notions of morality, time, the sense of self, the nature of reality, the significance of place and psychological development. Take the following example of character analysis from the novel, 'A Sunday At The Swimming Pool in Kigali' by Gil Courtemanche:

‘People are shaped somehow by their climate and the land they live in. Those who live by the sea are like currents and tides; they go and come, and discover many shores. Their words and loves are like water that slops between one's fingers and is never still. Mountain people have fought the mountain to win their place. Once they have conquered it they protect their mountain, and others coming from far below in the valley risk being seen as enemies. Hill people take time before greeting each other. They study one another and only slowly accept one another, but once their guard is lowered or their word is given, they will be as firm as their hill in their commitment.’¹¹

By contrast, Western theory has given rise to such abstract counselling concepts as freedom, responsibility, self actualisation, reality testing, cognitive distortion, private logic, individual choice, the therapeutic hour and the therapeutic space. These, along with the practice of counselling itself, may have limited meaning for students from other cultures, whose experience of shame and guilt because it involves the disclosure of information not normally discussed outside the family and the community.

Counsellors are generally sensitive to individual and cultural difference, but may not be conversant enough with the issues facing international students in the UK, for instance, the complicated Border Agency regulations on visas, financial requirements and eligibility to study. To provide a comprehensive service to international students, counsellors must work alongside International Advisers and other departments within the institution, including chaplains, who may be better

able to understand what the Access Report⁴ refers to as, 'the importance of religious and spiritual support in redressing the problem of cultural isolation.'

There are other areas where a lack of cohesion exists between the culture of the student and the culture of the institution. Of particular relevance here is the experience of specific groups such as: working class students with no ethos of education in the home; young people who are the first in the family to enter Higher or Further Education and consequently have to manage a change of identity with no available role models; international students who have been accustomed to a diet of didactic teaching and rote learning. It has been thought for a long time, that harmony between the culture and values of educational institutions and their students, will lead to greater satisfaction and success. counselling services can play a big part in bringing about this harmony but, it is important not to become victims of vanity by believing we are the only experts in this area, or that we can do it alone. We can work best with these students when there is a sharing of knowledge and expertise.

‘There is resistance on the part of some students to counselling and for others counselling is not the ‘right’ approach. However, different approaches need to be integrated to provide a co-ordinated service which is institution-wide.’⁴

Clearly, many students do not share the counsellor's professional values, particularly on non-directiveness. When they come seeking advice, if we cannot give them what they want, we should refer them to 'someone who can'. This may be to services which adopt a more directive approach, such as Advisers or International Advisers, rather than attempting to put them in touch with their 'inner locus of control'.

Confidentiality?

With greater integration across the university, several issues which require careful management are those of confidentiality and relationships with

other parties, eg conscientious tutors who are concerned for their students. Very often the tutor has referred the student to counselling with an expectation that the counsellor will keep him/her (the tutor) informed about the student's progress. When there is no communication from the Service, they often feel that something has disappeared into a black hole. They can feel diminished, excluded and sometimes abandoned and these reactions will discourage subsequent referrals.

It is important to have a good working relationship with others outside counselling and for all concerned to be clear about the nature and boundary of the relationship. However counsellors rightly ask:

- (a) How do we encourage support and referrals from other members of staff when we have a unique understanding and tight rules about confidentiality?
- (b) How do we reassure people that the 'problem' students they have referred to us, are being looked after? Fortunately, to some extent, this problem takes care of itself, as most students, when the advantages to them are explained, are very willing for information to be shared, particularly if they are given reassurances that disclosure will be on a need to know basis.

For example: The Counselling & Wellbeing Service is part of a wider integrated Student Services Department. There are times when a counsellor may be better able to help you by speaking with other professionals in Student Services. We would do so only with your permission and only essential information would be discussed. Please sign if you agree to this.

Conclusion

For counsellors to operate effectively in Higher or Further Education, we need to be less precious about some of the beliefs, values and subsequent practices, which are deeply embedded in our theoretical models. We need to be guided less by the principles often associated with private practice, such as, non-directiveness and the adherence to strict boundaries of time,

place, agreed activity and confidentiality. It is clear that the textbook contracts are unworkable in a student counselling context: appointments at a regular and unchanging time each week, with no rearrangements¹² no offering time beyond the agreed hour;¹³ no involvement in other issues in the client's life;¹⁴ no phone calls outside the therapeutic hour except to negotiate sessions and; as followers of a recent HUCS debate can testify; not being seduced by gifts and invitations offered by the client. I must not forget to mention those injunctions against what I referred to earlier as 'doing a favour' for clients¹⁵ or making direct and disempowering interventions on their behalf.

In reality, the counselling service fulfils a variety of roles with students, from advising, befriending and teaching, to disciplining and accompanying them to hospital. If we follow theoretical ordinances too rigidly, we become less human. In addition, we diminish the student experience and lose those students who pop in unannounced for a five minute chat, to tell us about passing an exam, to invite us to an exhibition of their work, or the international student, several thousand miles from home and family, for whom the counsellor is often the person most involved in their lives.

It is difficult to have our cake and eat it. Counselling services have willingly stitched themselves into the university network (have we bargained with the devil?), and are happy to have done so. This is illustrated by the annual ritual of requests we receive from students for support with mitigating circumstances. In this, the counsellor knowingly finds him/her self in a very powerful position, with a person whom he/she has a close relationship, being asked for a *favour*, which could make a difference for the student between pass and fail. Is this an ethical dilemma? ■

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