

In the beginning... archaeological evidence of life before AUCC

Elsa Bell looks back at how things have changed and how the echoes of current challenges and differences remain to this day



One of the hazards of being one of the more ancient members of a group is being called upon at anniversaries to say something

that everyone hopes will be meaningful. To my horror it appears that I have become one of the ancients – not yet considered to be a dinosaur (I hope) but clearly expected to have the memory of an elephant! I follow on from Michael's fascinating insight into his experience of the beginning of student counselling and we agreed that while his account would have a more personal theme, mine should give you some of the facts. So for those of you who are new and enviably bright and young, here is some information about where we started. I'll leave it up to you to decide whether or not it is meaningful and thus avoid falling into the trap of believing that I'm wise as well as old.

Prehistoric data

If we assume that history began in 1970 with the first record of an organism called the Association for Student Counselling (ASC) we might be surprised to discover some rather interesting material in the substratum that pre-dates ASC's existence. Evidence of what looks like student counselling

can be found in a number of places throughout the country and in different geological contexts. Michael spoke of Mary Swainson¹ and went as far back as 1934. As a geography lecturer who subsequently trained as a child psychologist, she began her interest in the emotional aspects of teaching and learning and by 1945 she had developed a study skills programme that drew on psychoanalytic theory, her own analysis and her work in a child guidance clinic. In 1948 she was appointed lecturer in psychology and geography at the then University College Leicester and until her retirement in 1972 developed the formal, psycho-dynamically based Leicester University counselling service that Michael joined. Slightly later evidence is of a form of life that migrated backwards and forwards between North America and the UK to produce a specifically British variant of the species. By the 1960s, courses set up at Reading and Keele universities were based on the North American model of counselling and guidance as intertwined activities underpinned by a person-centred approach. Fulbright scholars from the USA, who were professors in counselling, were highly involved in these courses and thus influenced curriculum and practice in a fundamental way. Equally importantly individuals such as Audrey Newsome studied for a master's in counselling in North America and returned to the UK

with very clear ideas about how counselling should be implemented. She became responsible for the Appointments and Counselling Service at Keele and by 1973 had recorded its growth² as 'the only university in the country to operate a comprehensive counselling service for its own students staffed by counsellors *who see themselves primarily as educators and only secondarily as therapeutic resource persons*' (my italics).

In a different section of the rock-face the first student health service was established at Edinburgh in 1930³, and in 1951 the British Student Health Association (BSHA) was formed by a number of psychiatrists and physicians working in or attached to universities. The Association was given the impetus to move beyond the traditional medical model by a report, published that same year⁴, which recorded that more than one per cent of Oxford University's undergraduates missed at least one term's work because of psychiatric illness. Members of the BSHA thus focused attention on student psychological issues as well as the mainstream medical matters and this was supported by the first international conference on student mental health at Princeton University in 1956⁵ where Erik Erikson suggested that student problems could be looked at within a psychological developmental model that would have implications for treatment. The BSHA itself devoted its 1968 conference to the subject of



Student counsellors circa 1970: In the front row is Robin Dollery. From the right in the second row are Sue Wheeler, Elsa Bell and Ann Heyno. To the left of Ann Heyno is Edna Wijeratna, counsellor at Croydon College for many years; next to her is Elabn Erhlich, school counsellor in Israel; next to her is Ellen Noonan, who started the student counselling course at the then Extra Mural Department at the University of London and was instrumental in a great deal of early work of ASC and BAC; next to her is Peter Marden, student counsellor for many years at an art college in Kent; two from him is Caroline Kennedy, student counsellor for many years; and to her right, Francis Hunot, also a student counsellor in an art college. In the back row on the right is Norman Ford, head of counselling at Nottingham Trent until he died prematurely. Image courtesy of Ann Heyno and Elsa Bell.

student depression and Donald Winnicott was one of the main speakers.

Thus many medical practitioners were highly active in promoting the development of student counseling, but one stands out in terms of tracing the evolution of the organisation that is currently AUCC. Nick Malleon, a psychiatrist, was appointed in 1960 as physician-in-charge of what was to become the University of London's Central Institutions Health Service. He wrote prolifically, for example on distressed students in *The Lancet*⁶, the link between emotional factors and academic achievement⁷ and on student wastage⁸. He persuaded London University to set up the Research Unit for Student Problems in 1960 and was one of the driving forces in setting up

the Society for Research into Higher Education in 1964. He founded the first UK in-service course in student counselling at the University of London with Ellen Noonan as tutor in charge (later to develop into the diploma and master's courses that would provide many influential figures in ASC and AUCC). By the late 1960s he recognised that there was a need for the increasing number of practitioners in student counselling to join together so that their voices could be heard, and persuaded Pat Milner, one of the UK's Fulbright scholars, who had trained in the US and was employed as a full-time counsellor at University College London, to convene a meeting with a view to forming an association. He was so much the driving force behind this that Walton⁹ in

biographical notes in a book to commemorate his work, mistakenly referred to him as the Chair of ASC. He was not, but was clearly the power behind the throne and a supporting presence in the important early development of the Association.

A recognisable form

In May 1970 Pat Milner brought together a number of practitioners in both higher and further education to explore the possibility of forming an association. The pre-history outlined above is drawn exclusively from the university sector within which there is a much more systematic record than the more difficult to trace development of counselling in FE. This is because, generally, counselling in FE was introduced gradually over a

‘It was suggested that the Association should be reserved for those who had formal qualifications and practised in identified counselling roles’

number of years and typically consisted of lone practitioners who had taken on a counselling role in addition to teaching. Many were members of the National Association of Educational Counsellors (NAEC) founded in 1966 by graduates of the Reading and Keele diploma courses and were expected to perform a multiplicity of tasks. Similarly, in the then Inner London Education Authority a number of Student Service Officers in FE colleges, who had trained as counsellors, expanded their role from traditional welfare and accommodation functions and viewed counselling as their main role but retained their original titles. Participants from FE at Pat Milner’s first meeting ensured that this ‘hidden’ cohort of counsellors became an active presence.

At this May meeting various options were considered. Might it be possible to form a subsection of the BSHA since a number of counsellors were already members? Perhaps a student counselling branch of the NAEC would be more appropriate? More radically, what about forming an association for counsellors working with young people in any setting? What about the newly developing Standing Conference for the Advancement of Counselling (later to become the British Association for Counselling and eventually BACP) under the auspices of the National Council for Social Services? Eventually, after much discussion and debate, agreement was reached that, although close working relationships should be formed with these organisations, there was a need for a separate and identifiable student counselling organisation and that the next step would be to advertise an open meeting from which a committee would be formed to progress the project.

The open meeting, listed in the *Times Educational Supplement*, was held in November 1970 and attended by 45

people (ASC archives). A number of written communications expressed support for the formation of an association and two letters suggested that it was unnecessary at that time. The content of the meeting covered a wide range of views, some of which are familiar in 2010.

It was suggested that the Association should be reserved for those who had formal qualifications and practised in identified counselling roles. Others thought that it should be inclusive of those who practised counselling skills in allied roles in education. Then it was argued that if the Association were to be inclusive, then two categories of membership would be required – one for ‘properly qualified’ counsellors and another for ‘lay’ members (who would be allowed to move to the higher level when they became ‘properly qualified’). Some thought it should be restricted to those practising in universities and HE colleges since it would be difficult for the Association to have any impact on salaries and conditions of service within the diverse provision in FE. Strong representation was made that care should be taken that the new Association would not be dominated by doctors and a medical agenda. The question was raised as to whether this was just an association for counselling, and if so, what was the difference between counselling and psychotherapy? Confusion was apparent about the role and status of the Standing Conference, the developing umbrella organisation for counselling.

Finally, Claude Palmer of Barnet College of FE, seconded by Gordon Miller of

the Institute of Education in London¹⁰, proposed that there should be an association with the provisional title of the Association for Student Counselling and should be open to all engaged in counselling in FE and HE. Significantly, the steering committee elected to carry forward the project represented a wide range of institutions in both, despite the earlier impassioned debate about exclusivity.

Standing up straight and walking forward

Pat Milner remained Chair of ASC for six years and was replaced by Brian Thorne who had worked alongside Audrey Newsome at Keele. On Mary Swainson’s retirement, Michael Jacobs became head of the service at Leicester and with Brian Thorne as Chair of ASC, the descendants of the early forms of counselling were now walking tall. A couple of years later Windy Dryden was a member of the first full-time course in student counselling at Aston University and in 1975 was appointed to a part-time post at the Aston University Medical Centre where Richard Nelson-Jones was in charge, with Wyn Bramley (University College London), Ellen Noonan (City University and the Extra Mural Department of London University) and Bernard Ratigan (Loughborough University) all on ASC Executive – clear evidence that student counselling was attracting future eminent writers and teachers. (Writing that sentence reminded me that somewhere in the mid-1980s I chaired a group on ASC’s behalf, consisting of Brian, Ellen and Windy, to produce a *Guide to recognising best practice*¹¹. I still quake when I think of it. How I had the nerve to imagine that I was supposed to guide their thinking and bring them to a shared conclusion, I do not know!)

The main priority for ASC was that it

‘The question was raised as to whether this was just an association for counselling, and if so, what was the difference between counselling and psychotherapy?’





‘While many argued the benefits of belonging to a larger and potentially more powerful organisation, others were furiously opposed to the move, believing that all the work they had done to raise standards would be instantly undermined by being part of an organisation that allowed those with limited training to join’

should see student counselling provision established and increased and that those appointed should be professionally qualified and competent. To achieve this, the Association embarked on a number of pioneering activities. For example in the late 1970s the Training Committee, chaired by Gloria Goldman of Brunel University, through paper consultation and visitation, undertook the task of determining how far established training courses were relevant to student counselling. This was the precursor for the work in the 1980s that produced *ASC's Guide to training courses* that described the essential and desirable features of training for student counsellors and invited course leaders to demonstrate how far they met these criteria. Later versions of this guide formed the basis for BAC's Recognition of Courses scheme (later to become course accreditation).

Equally importantly, between 1976 and 1979 ASC established its accreditation scheme and some would say this was the single activity that, on its acceptance by the AGM in 1979, did most to establish the profession of student counselling and counselling as a whole. With its definition of appropriate training, experience and supervision and its insistence on producing evidence for renewal at regular intervals, ASC was making itself the guardian of the profession. This scheme, along with the work done in the same area by the, then, Association for Pastoral Care in Counselling, was used as the foundation for the development of BAC's first accreditation scheme in 1983.

ASC's relationship with BAC was always the subject of much discussion and considerable ambivalence. ASC saw itself as the senior citizen but most members genuinely wanted BAC to succeed as a credible national association and Brian Thorne¹² recounts the very real difficulties he encountered when he became Chair in 1976 just as the subject of whether or not ASC should join BAC (formally established in 1977) was being debated. While many argued the benefits of belonging to a larger and potentially more powerful organisation, others were furiously opposed to the move, believing that all the work they had done to raise standards would be instantly undermined by being part of an organisation that allowed those with limited training to join. In a personal conversation¹³ Brian described the Extraordinary General Meeting called in 1976 to debate the proposed move into the new BAC as 'a painful and tense occasion'. Although by the end of the meeting it was agreed that entry to BAC should be negotiated, some executive members resigned and others left the Association in protest and the memory of this powerful experience lived on in the Association for many years. Those who voted for the move were determined that BAC should have the highest standards possible and, as well as ASC becoming one of its first divisions, individuals decided to become actively involved in policy and practice. It is not insignificant that Audrey Newsome became Chair of BAC in 1978 and was re-elected in 1979 and 1980. Since then five of the 12 Chairs

have come from student counselling – Derek Hope (1989-1991), Elsa Bell (1991-1994), Gabrielle Syme (1996-1999), Craig McDevitt (1999-2002) during which time BAC became BACP) and most recently Nicola Barden (2005-2008). In addition, numerous ASC (and eventually AUCC) members have been active in BAC/BACP's policy and decision-making sub-committees. No one will pretend that the relationship eventually became one of complete sweetness and light but there has been much fruitful endeavour within the creative tension of combining collaboration while still attempting to maintain a sense of identity.

I realise that with that last sentence I am straying dangerously towards the meaningful and pseudo-wise comments that I promised I would avoid, but writing the account of the first meeting and then the Extraordinary AGM of ASC made me think of aspects of my personal journey within ASC/AUCC. I hope you will allow me this small space to reminisce but will still view it as a narrative from which you can draw your own conclusions rather than as my directing you towards a lesson to be learned.

During my time on the Executive and as Chair of ASC, I was one of the voices that argued strongly for an FE sub-committee and for designated FE places on the Executive. With the agreement of the AGM in 1986 that an FE sub-committee should be formed, it seemed to me that we were finally beginning to allow a constitutional place for difference. Until then we functioned as if we could not identify different and sectoral needs in case it resulted in a divided ASC. Then, just after I moved to Oxford from what was then Hatfield Polytechnic, I attended a workshop at the ASC conference on managing services, led by Lesley Parker, who had been the Head of the Edinburgh University service before becoming deputy at Cambridge. What I was able to identify for myself during that workshop was just how different it was attempting to manage a service in an old university from how it had been in the polytechnic and how much I would welcome talking to those who

were also in the university sector. So in June 1990 we had the first informal meeting of what was to become the Heads of University Counselling Services (HUCS) group. I felt reasonably confident that even if other ASC members might, for a brief moment, think this was something of an elitist move, they knew enough about me and my working history in FE and other HE institutions that they might just allow that this was my response to a personal need rather than a statement about status. About a dozen of us began to meet on a regular basis and I, and I am sure others, gained a lot from this avenue of support and a place to think together in a small enough group. When the polytechnics became part of the university system in 1993, the informal and intimate nature of the group had to change and a more formal structure was required. The 1995 ASC AGM agreed that the constitution could be changed to allow for interest groups and thus HUCS became incorporated into ASC structure. Writing the section about the debate on exclusivity versus inclusivity at the meeting to launch ASC reminded me of the sense of loss I felt when our small, informal meetings had to become larger. There were many people in this new group that I liked and admired and had worked with companionably over the years so they were not strangers – but I knew, because I had worked in both settings, that their preoccupations differed. I realise that that experience might well not have been dissimilar to those who attended the first ASC meeting. A number of them had already been meeting regularly in settings organised by Audrey Newsome and indeed during the 'summer conferences'

that Michael described, and one person who attended these, Pat Given, told me just how important they had been in gaining support from those who understood the setting in which she worked. It is easy to imagine that the thought of joining a larger group with diverse needs might make them believe that peer support would be more difficult to find.

Two years ago at a HUCS management session we were invited to choose small groups to discuss how we might understand a particular issue within the context of our own institutions. I took a deep breath and suggested to Mark Phippen from Cambridge that the two of us formed our own group. It felt potentially provocative and even mischievous but at the same time I believed that others who knew us would accept that we both felt it was necessary. We so rarely had time to just sit together and think about the challenges of managing services in our very specific and, some would say, peculiar settings. I was also able to say that I was glad that I had done it but also sad that in doing so I had missed out on hearing what others did and possibly missed an opportunity to learn from practice in a different setting. So for me one of the valuable aspects of ASC/AUCC has been the chance to explore with others the similarities in our practice but also to be bold about defining the differences.

That is a specific opportunity that I have been granted but there are many more and I am going to choose one of them to give us a framework to think about ourselves in our past context and in what might be a major challenge for us in the future.

‘Just when we have expanded our horizons and increased the opportunity for greater career and personal mobility, some of our fellow nationals, and that includes our students, have a much bleaker view of who-is-like-me and who-is-not-like-me – who should be inside and who outside’

‘We know that if people do not have a clear map, they begin to lose their way. They can become disoriented and lose their sense of which turning they should take next in order to be on the right route to reach their destination.

Developing identity and balance in a rocky environment

When thinking about the challenges for student counselling in the future, the obvious spring to mind – the financial situation, IAPT, registration etc. You are all fully aware of these challenges, so instead, I am going to use my experience of working with student counsellors in Europe as a way into thinking about what might be an underpinning issue for all of these challenges. I will always be grateful to Brian Thorne for the fact that when he was invited to the meeting in Athens and Delphi where the European association for counselling and guidance in higher education (FEDORA) was to be launched, he gracefully declined and told them that it would be more appropriate to ask the current Chair of ASC. So with ASC’s backing and funding,

practitioners. They all seemed to be careers advisors or involved in what the French called *orientation*, the process of guiding potential students into universities or in what the Germans called *Beratung*, giving advice. Craig and I began to wonder what on earth we were doing there and whether we had set out without a proper compass and ended up in the wrong place. This went on for about a day and a half and, based on the assumption that the invitation had gone to Brian Thorne for a reason and wondering if we were just not meeting the right people, we made a large notice and put it up in a conspicuous place. It said, ‘Hello, we are psychological counsellors who work psychotherapeutically with students who have personal, emotional or psychological problems. Are there any more people like us out there?’



And we know beyond doubt that if they become too anxious they might opt for a very stark and polarised view of where, and who, they should be in their world

Craig McDevitt, who was Deputy Chair, and I set out. It was a bit of a strange experience at first and not just because it was a conference in Greece organised by Italians and we could not quite get used to sessions not starting on time and promised buses to take us to various destinations arriving very late or not at all – a real challenge not just to our psychodynamic tendencies but to our northern European concept of time. The greater challenge was that we seemed to be in a strange land as far as the content of the conference was concerned and from quite another country compared with the other

If so please come and have breakfast with us tomorrow morning. On the first morning there were about five who appeared, including Gerhart Rott from Germany, who some of you will remember from the AUCC conference in Brighton, where he was a keynote speaker. By the end of the conference there were about a dozen of us who had come together – some were therapeutic counsellors like us and some were using therapeutic ideas within their main guidance activities and were interested in making contact. On the last night back in Athens and, just to make you envious, dining in the

open air just in front of the floodlit Acropolis, Tony Raban, the newly elected first President of FEDORA, came over to our by now boisterous group and suggested that we find a way of getting some of our ideas into the main part of the next FEDORA gathering to be held in Berlin, three years hence. Whether it was the effect of the wine in the warmth of the evening or the warmth of the colleagues I had met and the friendships that were developing, I agreed that, together with Gerhart Rott, we would do so. In fact during those three years we found and brought together a number of fascinating practitioners from Denmark, France, Italy, Ireland, the Netherlands, and of course Germany and the UK, and together we formed PSYCHE – Psychological Counselling in Higher Education – and at the conference in Berlin we were accepted as one of the sections, or working groups as they were called, of FEDORA. Since then we have met in many different countries, learned more about our similarities and differences and formed lasting friendships. And it was because of that I was invited to Leuven, in Belgium, earlier this year when it too was celebrating its 40th anniversary.

In fact, were I to do a trawl of most northern European countries, I think we would discover that student counselling, as we would recognise it today, seems to have become established at roughly the same time, that is in the mid-1960s and early 1970s. This is not just a coincidence. Student counselling developed in a particular political and cultural climate. Malleon's research interests and the practical implementation of his findings happened at a time when there was a great interest in the application of ideas drawn from psychoanalysis. Not the five times a week for many years psychoanalysis of the consulting room, but an interest in how theories about relationships in the present might have their roots in the past and how relationships not just with significant people but with structures, systems and organisations and, specifically of interest to us, with study and the whole process of education, might be

applied to understand and enhance the process of teaching and learning. At the same time in other countries in Europe, for example in Norway, Denmark and France and in the US in places like Harvard, Princeton and Chicago, this interest in the quality of the teaching and learning experience was being informed by theories drawn from psychoanalysis, and student counselling services were being set up as one way of putting these ideas into practice.

The parallel source of creativity and major strand of influence that came directly from the US, with the combined activity of guidance and counselling, began within the context of developing theories about the value of a student-centred approach to education that challenged the prevalent didactic style of teaching and learning. (Those who have an eagle eye will have noticed that these themes underpin the Bologna process which has radically changed the structure of university education in Europe in recent years.) And with reference to the debate at the inaugural meeting of ASC as to the difference between counselling and psychotherapy, I do not need to remind you of the oft recorded story of how Rogers first used the title counsellor instead of psychotherapist but it is interesting that the early differentiation in the US between the two terms has caused reverberations and, indeed confusion, right across Europe up to today. (One of my Italian colleagues dryly commented that using the title *consiglieri* in certain areas in southern Italy and Sicily might lead to quite a different set of confusions). It is not my task here to get into the whys and wherefores of this rather esoteric and, at times, bewildering professional debate, but simply to note that our preoccupations in the UK with how the register for counsellors and psychotherapists might be constructed and therefore impact on our work, is very live in mainland Europe where in some countries only those with a medical qualification can call themselves psychotherapists and therefore people who do our job call themselves counsellors – as we do. However, in many other countries, student counselling is

delivered by psychologists with a psychotherapy qualification who would never describe themselves as counsellors because they would see that as a downgrading of their professional status.

And just as it is not my task here to unpick the finer points of the name that we give to the work we do, it is equally not my task to pretend that I can give a learned exposition of the cultural, political or philosophical conditions from which the practice of student counselling grew. On the larger scale there were many significant events in which students called for change in a very active way – the civil rights movement in the US; *les événements* in Paris, where, as in Germany, Italy, Japan and Brazil, students demonstrated and even rioted in an attempt to bring in what they defined as a new moral state; the spring uprising in Czechoslovakia that was crushed by the Soviet Union and which prompted Jan Palach, a student, to set fire to himself in Wenceslas Square in 1969 to be followed by three other students who died in the same way in that year. And 2010 is not just our anniversary. It is the 40th anniversary of the deaths of students at Kent State University in Ohio who were demonstrating against the Vietnam war. These were huge, huge events that challenged the state, and the nature of university education. Perhaps they are too large for us to think about and analyse today so I am going to confine myself to much more modest thoughts about how we have developed, and identify a specific challenge that we and our students face today.

It is no coincidence that one of the major influences in European student counselling, that held as its fundamental premise the idea that our past is always in our present, came at a time when we were all recovering from two major wars and our theories of how university education might be constructed were equally influenced by our desire to understand our past and not to repeat our mistakes. Equally it is useful to examine the basic concept of the theory of counselling we imported from the US and note that its emphasis is on the *current* relationship – that it is

‘The jury is out on whether what we now have in the UK is a true change in how politics will be conducted or whether it is a product of our national anxiety and that unconsciously we have propelled into power a sterile pairing’

not valuable to keep going over the past and that the experience of a good relationship in the present is, of itself, what will heal our past. This theory of counselling came with the concepts of education that valued terms such as ‘empowerment’ and ‘self-determination’ and a belief that students will learn when they are ready – not when we tell them they should learn and what they should learn.

Since that time our institutions have had to function in quite different political and financial climates, and student counselling services have been no less influenced by the prevailing ideas. I began working in student counselling in the mid to late 1970s when there was still enough optimism around and a belief in the transformative experience of education and my practice reflected that. We worked with students for as long as they needed and we were seen as contributing to the development of the ‘whole person’, a term still very much in vogue and which we could use without feeling that we had to inject a slightly sardonic tone in order to defend ourselves from attack. How quickly we seemed to move into another age where Margaret Thatcher firmly stated that ‘there is no such thing as society’ and that the significance of the story of the Good Samaritan from the New Testament was that on seeing the person injured by the side of the road the Samaritan was able to help because *he had the money and resources*. Here we were in a much more utilitarian view of what education and success in education might mean.

And now?

The current financial and political contexts will bring their own changes to which we will have to respond.

Our most recent history with the development and expansion of the EU suggests on the one hand an age of greater unity and a vision of collaboration, yet we know that it has also produced, in some instances, a reversion to a more limited view of nationality. Just when we have expanded our horizons and increased the opportunity for greater career and personal mobility, some of our fellow nationals, and that includes our students, have a much bleaker view of who-is-like-me and who-is-not-like-me – who should be inside and who outside. I have watched with grim fascination how the right-wing party led by Geert Wilders has been elected as the third largest political group in what has always been known to us as the liberal Netherlands and even more recently how the Belgians have voted into power the party that has as its main plank the creation of separate states for its French and Flemish-speaking citizens.

Our students face this challenge of defining who they are and who they will become in an increasingly complex world and they join universities and colleges faced with the challenge of admitting more and more students in order to support the ideals of the knowledge economy, while funding, at the very least stays the same, or is cut. Years ago, when I went to continental Europe I would arrive at a ferry port in France and as I drove along I would be aware of my sense that I was on the edge of vast acreages of land. As I arrived in France I was stepping out onto a land mass that went on and on and on. But even then I had an idea that Europe stopped somewhere definite. I might have been hard put to draw a precise map but my internal map, acquired through school and the stories

my family told me and later by my interest in, but only partial knowledge of current affairs, told me that Europe, as I knew it, was bounded by the ‘iron curtain’. Mainland Europe might be vast compared with the tiny section of Europe that normally defined me and told me who I was, but even with these extended horizons, I had a mental boundary, the curtain, that created a framework that allowed me to give definition to myself as a European. The first time I crossed the water after the Berlin wall came down, my experience had changed. I no longer knew for definite where Europe ended. I did not have so clear a framework or boundary within which I could define my identity and I know from the students I see now that this sense of boundaries becoming diffuse and certainties being lost is as much a part of their internal world as it was of mine. And we know that if people do not have a clear map, they begin to lose their way. They can become disoriented and lose their sense of which turning they should take next in order to be on the right route to reach their destination. And we know beyond doubt that if they become too anxious they might opt for a very stark and polarised view of where, and who they should be in their world.

I have spoken about the splits and fractures in our sense of who we are and how we must live and work but I am equally fascinated by the strange times we live in in the UK with this very foreign concept to us of a coalition government – specifically most foreign to the English since other parts of the UK have experienced a form of local coalition in recent history. How are we supposed to understand it and its meaning for our immediate future? Is it, as they would have us believe, a healthy move into a less adversarial and more collaborative period in politics when splits might be healed? If that were true then the context in which we work and our students study would certainly be very different. But I am not so sure.

Some of you might remember me speaking at an AUCC conference four or five years ago about Bion’s theory about how groups and institutions

function when they are anxious. In summary he defines the *work group* – when the group or institution is working well, collaboratively and on task. But when there is anxiety that is too much to handle or is out of awareness, the group retreats into defensive behaviour to protect itself from the un-named anxiety. When the group is acting as a *basic assumption* group, as he defines it, it can look as if it is very productive but in fact it is usually preoccupied with one or other of the main phenomena he describes: fight-flight, messianic hope (there will be something or someone better around the corner), creating an ethos of dependency as if it is up to the designated leader to resolve what is un-named and, what I am most interested in, the phenomenon of pairing, where two members of the group are unconsciously elected by the group to produce something creative on the group's behalf. You have been in one of these groups where two people get on with talking to each other, often looking as if they are really working hard, but the rest of the group has become silent and passive and maybe even voyeuristic – it might have elected the two protagonists to work out its script but in no way is it going to let them achieve anything truly creative. The jury is out on whether what we now have in the UK is a true change in how politics will be conducted or whether it is a product of our national anxiety and that unconsciously we have propelled into power a sterile pairing – but I have my suspicions...

In taking you around Europe I have been attempting to identify challenges that face us and specifically AUCC as an organisation as it deals with the multiple challenges of reduced funding, registration and all the other things that are bound to make us anxious because they challenge our sense of who we are and what we are here for. We will need to be much clearer about our identity and purpose as student counsellors if we are to make headway in these debates – we will need to be able to describe, unequivocally, what we are and the value of what we do and this might require us to be honest with

ourselves about just how much difference there is within the practice of student counselling, within our own Association. This will not be easy but we must get the boundaries of our particular bit of the national map in place and, within that, identify where local differences in the terrain and climate exist. But it would be very destructive if, in our anxiety, we draw smaller and smaller circles around our professional identity and end up forming a kind of counsellor nationalist party. In these and in coming days we will need to learn how to form healthy coalitions that recognise difference but are able to get on with the vital task of working collaboratively together.

I salute our forefathers and mothers in ASC who had enough perspective to see what we would gain from coming together and I salute those who, throughout the history of ASC and AUCC, have continued to allow us all to be different. And to those of you who are the new generation of AUCC, I salute you too and wish you courage and wisdom as you take on the task of being our cartographers of the future. ■

Elsa Bell, head of counselling, Oxford University.

References

- 1 Swainson M. *The spirit of counsel*. London: Neville Spearman; 1977.
- 2 Newsome A, Thorne B, Wyld KL. *Student counselling in practice*. London: University of London Press; 1973.
- 3 Read J. *Warnings from the left*. London: Pica Editions; 1974.
- 4 Parnell R. Morbidity and prolonged illness among Oxford undergraduates. *The Lancet*. 1951; 13:731-733.
- 5 Funkenstein D. (ed) *The student and mental health: an international view*. Proceedings of the First International Conference on Student Mental Health. Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press; 1956.
- 6 Malleon N. The distressed student. *The Lancet*. 1954; 1:824.
- 7 Malleon N. The influence of emotional factors on achievement in university education. *Sociological Review Monograph*

No 7. Keele: University of Keele; 1963.

8 Malleon N. Student wastage in the United Kingdom. In: Rudd E, Butcher HJ. (eds) *Contemporary problems in higher education*. New York: McGraw-Hill; 1972.

9 Walton H. Nicholas Malleon: Some biographical notes. In: *Students in need*. Guildford: Society for Research into Higher Education; 1978.

10 Minutes of ASC. ASC archives; 1970.

11 Bell E, Dryden D, Noonan E, Thorne B. *Guide to recognising best practice*. Rugby: ASC/BAC; 1992.

12 Thorne B. Guidance and counselling in further and higher education. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*. 1985; 3(1):22-34.

13 Bell E. *Counselling in further and higher education*. Buckingham: Open University Press; 1996.



PHOTOGRAPHY: DANI SINGER