

A sustainable future

– responding to the needs of students, staff and counsellors



Making sense of the student experience 2012 and beyond: **Robin Dollery** considers the challenges and opportunities for counselling services

The terms ‘student experience’ or ‘student journey’ variously describe the application process, the academic experience, the extra-curricular experience and a seemingly ever growing number of league tables which compare and contrast definitions of what our students encounter in further or higher education. The following is an attempt to look at the student experience by thinking about the internal capacity of students and what the institution does to help or support this.

Inside us all we have a finite emotional and intellectual capacity to deal with the demands of life. Depending on who we are, our abilities and our particular circumstances, we can feel that we are operating within our capacity or conversely at times we are overstretched and working beyond our tolerance levels. This is familiar to us all and our internal capacity is not set in stone – it can change as we develop, as a result of greater understanding and awareness or as a result of our particular circumstances.

Our students arrive often with a heady cocktail of enthusiasm and apprehension. Many are at an important stage of their physical, emotional, and

intellectual development; others may be aiming to effect major change in their circumstances through the addition of new skills and qualifications.

There are a potentially large number of demands – new learning styles, new large campuses, the need to manage money, making new friends, managing time, meeting both their own expectations and those of partners and families, meeting deadlines, handling challenging tasks, negotiating new social opportunities, and so on. Many arrive with a good internal capacity and a resilience which allows them to thrive on the new challenges. However, those whom we meet in counselling services may have less well-developed capacities and/or are already dealing with considerable demands. It is a potentially daunting change for many students, which can be overwhelming to the point of causing illness, certainly a poor experience and sometimes an early withdrawal from course, college or university... the demands seem to be so much greater than the individual’s capacity to manage.

Is it therefore possible to think of the institution, however big or small, as a provider of a containing structure that supports and fosters the internal capacity of our students? How might that look? What can we



take from our understanding of the best elements of a containing counselling relationship that might also have a wider relevance?

A model, shown above, that fits my own institution is a structure bounded as follows:

- The academic or course delivery is central to why students choose our universities and colleges and comes with a framework of syllabus, academic requirements and often support from tutors. At best this is clear, supportive and unambiguous.
- The living environment – particularly relevant for students away from their usual homes – can be a transitional space where there is easy opportunity to forge new social structures, and where there is organised and orderly accommodation available. Where living conditions are challenging or problematic, more internal resource is used in order to survive.
- By ‘social life’ I mean a wide range of activities outside the academic or vocational course framework. It may include student societies, sports societies and social groups. Where this works well, there is real opportunity for personal development and expression.

• Support networks are of course of particular interest to us as this is where we ply our professional trades. Where there is a sensible network of support services, which are skilled, of high quality and visible, there is also a sense of reassurance and security. When this containing framework works well and the constituent elements can talk together, something rather important occurs. This institutional capacity provides a space where an individual does not have to use all his or her own capacity just to survive – there is therefore some spare internal capacity. This is where the additional creative activity can take place – whether it is on the academic or vocational course or whether it is in outside activities; this is where the student experience is enriched.

When this works well we get happy students who are creative and successful on their courses.

So how do counselling services contribute to this? There is much that we understand as counsellors about the constructive containing and therapeutic value of appropriate boundaries within our services – that understanding is much less well developed across our institutions as a whole... something extremely valuable that we can demonstrate and encourage.

Our institutions will often need assistance in thinking through what may be happening in the college or university as a whole. When we are able to get into conversations across different departments and functions, we have valuable insights to add. We do of course have to tailor these insights in a way which is easily heard and timely.

Students will tell us, often graphically, when our containing boundaries are not clear. Indicators such as retention levels provide broad information, but behaviour will often give further feedback. There follow three different examples to illustrate:

The first example is from a further education (FE) setting a number of years ago. A joint project with two local comprehensives and the FE College was aimed at 15 and 16-year-olds with a strong history of truancy. The idea was that a tailored course, two days at college and three at school, would be designed to meet the particular needs of this group. Our philosophy was to treat these students in the same way we would treat our older students and hopefully elicit a better engagement and attendance. All went well to begin with, attendance was high, there seemed to be a positive response to the atmosphere of taking responsibility, discussing problems and issues and agreeing resolution.

However, after a few weeks, lunch in the local pub was interrupted by the entrance of around 20 of these students. This caused us some concern; after all, the

majority were just 15 and were our responsibility. We decided to hold a course meeting to discuss the issue and the problems in a suitably mature way. That discussion seemed to go well; all agreed that it was not appropriate for them to go into the pub and they would not do this again. We congratulated ourselves on our handling of the situation.

On the very next day, lunch in the local hostelry was interrupted once again by the same group, who even offered to buy us a drink! All rational, measured thought went out of the window as they were ordered back to the college immediately where a very one-sided, somewhat angry conversation took place. The impact was striking. Rather than provoking conflict, there was a calm sense of relief among the group, all settled down and the course progressed successfully.

It was important learning for us – the group were not reassured that appropriate boundaries were in place; they did not feel contained and so pushed us until more secure boundaries were found. They did not have, at that stage, the internal capacity to manage that new and challenging situation.

The second example is more recent and taken from a higher education (HE) context. A mature international student was registered on a master's course. There were problems in funding which worsened shortly after arrival. Upon raising the concerns, the student was repeatedly told 'not to worry', 'we will sort something out', 'these things have a habit of being all right in the end'. These possibly well meaning responses were ill founded as the individual's circumstances further deteriorated alongside her mental health. She unfortunately became quite unwell and let her feelings be known by attacking the door of her tutor's study with a knife. She had to leave the course and return home. In this case the institution was not at all clear what was possible and what was not.

It was a situation where it was seemingly too difficult to be robust with the student in the early stages. The student felt that the regulations/fees boundaries could be moveable... I think she probably felt betrayed by the tutor and the institution for presenting what were, at the very least, mixed messages.

Where there is a cultural or international dimension, there is further potential for misunderstanding, lack of clarity and resulting uncertainty. My third example concerns a working relationship with a Chinese colleague on a project about international students and mental health. At the beginning of our project work, I recommended some background reading and was surprised when this very conscientious person returned to following meetings not having read what was suggested. It took us some time to understand what had gone wrong. I had used typically English phrases such as 'you might like to read...' or 'you might find this of interest'... or 'it might be worth thinking about..' These phrases were understood by my colleague to mean uncertainty and doubt – and also caused a good deal of consternation and insecurity, which in turn led to inactivity. Not being thoughtful



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about language and therefore understanding, can create anxiety and place further demands on the internal capacity of, in this case, a colleague, but also of course, our students. Though at first look this seems a relatively minor example, if this misunderstanding within a relationship is repeated between lecturers and students or between a student health centre and a patient, the potential for creating uncertainty rather than security becomes very real. 'You probably might like to do about 20 hours' research around this module'... or 'It might be a good idea to take anti-depressants...'

The understanding of boundaries and the containing structures within our institutions can therefore contribute significantly to the understanding of individual students, their tolerance capacities and the student experience. Counselling services understand the importance of containment better than most.

Challenges and opportunities

But how does this sort of thinking match with the current and possible future demands? What do we think might be around the corner?

Austerity has become an all too familiar word – it is unlikely that resources are going to improve much over the next couple of years, and we may again be asked to do more with less, or indeed experience reductions in resources. We are now also in an increasingly market-driven culture with institutions competing with each other. (Colleagues in industry are often amazed that we share and liaise with each other in the way that we do, but long may it continue!). It is likely that there will be an increased expectation as the first cohort of full fee-paying students enrolls. That in turn will increase the expectation that students have on themselves, that supporting parents may have on successful outcomes, and that departments may have on support services, including counselling. Expectations and pressure on staff at all levels are likely to rise.

The development of mental health advisors within our institutions has been a very positive addition to the range of support available. However, this is a different type of service and should not be seen as a competitor – evolving the best partnerships of course requires a good deal of work. External services in the mental health field are at best going through a major transition; at worst we are seeing a significant reduction in services available to students. Outsourcing of services has been something on the periphery of our vision for some time; however, it is interesting to note that where counselling services have been outsourced, there is some evidence of them then being reintegrated back into the institution. There are, however, other services being outsourced, eg dyslexia support, as private companies offer, on the face of it, attractive packages. This is a cause for concern as it weakens the containing environment and allows institutions to displace concerns. It is a case of 'watch this space' as the new competitive market place develops.

The current climate seems to be one where, if you cannot prove the effectiveness of what you do, then you become vulnerable in the competition for resources. I have some hesitation about how and when you make your case for the effectiveness of counselling services; timing is everything and each institution is different. There is a balance too between how much resource it takes to collect the information that you need to make useful analysis.

There is however some useful material around at the moment. You may already be doing much within your own colleges and universities and there is certainly a growing bank of resources available via the Association of Managers of Student Services in Higher Education (AMOSSHE)¹ and the value and impact campaign. It looks too as though the work currently being undertaken by AUCC² is going to be helpful and productive. In addition there is recent work completed by Jill Collins³ and colleagues at Cambridge which looks at the effectiveness of short-term work with staff.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists⁴ report again identifies very helpfully the range of work undertaken, what counsellors can contribute and the need for cooperative work.

In the face of what can seem like a daunting set of challenges, counsellors and counselling services need to remain resilient. Resilience is not about avoiding difficult situations and challenges; it is about retaining the capacity to think; retaining the capacity to reflect and make sense of; and retaining and perhaps developing the capacity to communicate some of that thinking in a way which the institution can understand.

The student experience will remain key. The capacity of the institution to provide a clear and containing environment will have a major impact on the quality of the student experience. Counselling services have a major role to play in our support structures and contributing to the overall containing environment. Key to sustaining this will be:

- 1 Delivery of high quality services
- 2 Intelligent reporting to the institution about effectiveness and value that is added
- 3 Taking or creating opportunities where the capacity of a service to think about the wider institution can be used
- 4 Holding in mind the relationship a student has with the institution as a whole as well as the relationship the student may have with the service
- 5 Working with overlapping services, eg mental health workers, health services, disability, study support, both within and outside the institution
- 6 Staying sharp – engaging in research and training.

In what may become a challenging struggle for resources, counselling services will need to retain a visible and positive profile as an important contributor to the student experience.

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