

A day in the life



Géraldine Dufour, Head of Counselling at the University of Cambridge, describes how being 'new' brings both challenges and opportunities, including a chance to mingle with Sir Ian McKellen



I have been asked to contribute to this issue of the U&CC journal themed around the concept of 'new' as I am the new Head of Counselling at the University of Cambridge. Even though I have been in post for over six months now, I am definitely new in comparison with my predecessor Mark Phippen, who was here for over 16 years. In an institution as old as this university, even the counselling service, which has existed for over 42 years, is relatively new!

As can be read below, I have a multi-layered role, hence no really typical day. There is much about the University of Cambridge that fascinates me with regards to its traditions. In some ways it lives up to the expectations: it is over 800 years old and, as I cycle to work through its medieval streets, past St John's and Trinity Colleges, it can feel as though I am on a film set. In fact, during Easter term, I actually cycled through a real film set in front of King's College!

Because of its long history, some of the language in use can seem rather arcane. For instance, some college officers are known as Praelector (I'm still not quite sure what they do). The academic terms are known as Michaelmas, Lent and Easter. But, besides the linguistic anecdotes, its people and traditions are awe inspiring. Most people ask me if I have seen Stephen Hawking yet (no), but I have almost sat in Darwin's chair at Darwin College (I was too

shy when invited to do so). I was also present at Senate House when Sir Ian McKellen was awarded an honorary doctorate. It is a remarkable ceremony that dates back 500 years. Other recipients have included personal favourites such as Hilary Mantel, Nelson Mandela, Albert Einstein and numerous other Nobel laureates. It is not often one comes back from the office having heard a ceremony conducted in Latin and Elvish!

But, unsurprisingly, I don't spend all my days as Head of Service sipping pink champagne on the lawn of Senate House to celebrate honorary doctorates (more's the pity!). Instead, a fair amount of time is spent more prosaically in the office, answering emails and attending meetings. Entering the building, a beautiful if sometimes impractical Georgian house, I am greeted by one of our friendly and very competent receptionists. They have to be very capable indeed, to deal with the huge demands placed on our service.

Introducing change

In term time, we see about 180–200 clients a week. We have a large team of clinicians: counsellors, mental health advisors and CBT therapists. Every morning our intake team meets to process the 50–70 new referrals that we can get daily. We are lucky to have a very competent team of senior clinicians and an office manager to oversee

this process. To cope with such a high volume of work, they need robust systems. One of the ways in which I am trying to support them is by introducing a new IT system. From August we will be using Titanium, a combined electronic diary and database system. This has necessitated changing all our old computers, switching from Macs to PCs, as well as integrating a new IT support team in the university. Many of my days have been taken up with meetings, looking at procurement, protocols and transition planning. The changeover is a logistical challenge, with a lot of different 'new' systems – and I can tell that sometimes my team have enough of the new and wish it could just be the same old! It is fair to say that having a new Head of Service can be both an exciting and unsettling experience for a team.

In a collegiate university like Cambridge, welfare is primarily an individual college responsibility, and much support is available and delivered at this level – through tutorial staff and college nurses, for instance. Therefore a good amount of my time is spent liaising with members of the colleges on matters of student welfare. As well as college-specific support, there are also central services in the university, such as the Disability Resource Centre, Careers Service and other specialist services. At the moment we all have separate locations but the university has started to develop

plans for a new student service centre, which will open in Michaelmas 2017. I have been going to many consultative and planning meetings in preparation for this change, and discussing plans for the future new building with architects and other heads of services.

Staying with the not knowing

One of the benefits of being new is that you look at everything afresh and seek different solutions. However, I have had to adapt to a new environment, moving from somewhere where I felt valued and knew my surroundings to somewhere new where I kept on getting lost, and needed to learn to find my way around, metaphorically and literally. And, like the students that we see, the quality of my past relationships has helped me cope with my new experiences.

I was fortunate to come from a secure place (thank you, Birmingham City University colleagues) and yet the transition has not been without its challenges. As a psychodynamic counsellor, I make use of Bion's theory of learning¹ in my clinical work. For many of us, as for students, this can be an unsettling experience. In order to learn, we have to be able to allow a state of not knowing – and this can be a difficult stage to bear, for we get in touch with our vulnerability and limitations. Sadly, knowing about a theory intellectually does not enable me to bypass those difficult feelings, though it does give me some insight into its process. Being a new member of staff at the university is very similar to the transitions that students go through. Learning from my experience has resonated with my clinical work.

Although I do not see clients every day, I do have a small caseload and I still very much enjoy working with students. I have mostly seen clients individually, but I have also facilitated some of the work block group sessions for students who are struggling to engage with their work. Although I have had to learn about the administrative systems, the clinical work has felt familiar and therefore quite comforting, because it is something I know how to do.

In the same way that there isn't a typical day, I have yet to meet a typical student, Cambridge or otherwise. They

are all fiercely intelligent and many work hard, or struggle to do so, but most of the individuals I have met do not fit any stereotype. I have been struck by how diverse the student population is.

A supportive environment

As we know as counsellors, feelings are made easier to bear when we are well supported. Though I am new to Cambridge, I am not new to managing a university counselling service and I have many colleagues and friends in Heads of University Counselling Service (HUCS). I have always valued its helpful and responsive JISCMail and the support we give to each other via email and face to face, but I have especially valued it this year. While HUCS is a known quantity, there has also been some newness there too, as I have been the new Chair since July last year.



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As a new Head of Service, I have been instrumental in setting up new projects. One of the strengths of our university counselling service is its comprehensive group programme, most of which is well established. This year, however, I was excited to be part of the launch of a new lesbian, gay and bisexual student support group.

Another new project I am involved in is the development of a mindfulness programme for students. We are hoping to roll out a series of mindfulness groups in the colleges. This will be combined with a research project to test our hypothesis and discover if mindfulness does increase resilience in students. This is an exciting new development, linking research and practice. We are liaising with researchers and applying for funding, which are new processes for us. So, some of my days have been spent meeting academic

colleagues in other departments and writing proposals for research funding with administrative colleagues. It has also involved presenting our proposal to different committees. The hierarchical structure of the collegiate university is multi-layered and initiatives are discussed in different arenas, going through a sort of internal peer review process as they pass through the different committees.

Taking up my role and developing these projects has required me to find my way through the structure of the university, with help and guidance from some of my new colleagues. It is a privilege to be influential in setting up support for students, but it is also a huge responsibility. However well a service is resourced, it cannot be everything to everyone, and funds are by definition limited. To ensure that the counselling service meets its objective, there is a tight structure of checks and balances. As the Head of Service I report to the University Counselling Service Executive Committee, which functions like a board of governors. On the committee we have representatives of the student union, both undergraduates and graduates, senior tutors and bursars representing the colleges, and GPs from local medical practices. This committee itself feeds back into the university Health and Wellbeing Committee, which reports to other committees, following a strict hierarchical structure laid out in the university statutes and ordinances. As an outsider it takes time to learn about this complex structure. This steady-paced progression ensures that changes are accepted at all the different levels of the institution and that all voices are heard in the process.

In my role, I have a real sense of being able to shape the future of the service. I have a responsibility to think strategically about where to position it so that it is fit for purpose in years to come, and can grow and develop in a holistic way. I have also recruited some new staff, who will be starting at the beginning of the academic year. Of course, to them I won't be the new head, just their new manager, so I will lose more of the newness of my position.

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Reference

¹ Bion WR. The psycho-analytic study of thinking. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*.1962; 43: 306–310.