

The impact of counselling on academic outcomes in further and higher education: the student perspective

Final research findings

The research

A year-long, sector-wide piece of research into the impact of counselling on academic outcomes was conducted by Patti Wallace, Lead Advisor, University and College Counselling, with data contributed by 65 universities and FE colleges across the UK.

The context

This research was conducted in the context of funding constraints across the FE and HE sectors alongside changes to the funding structures in Higher Education such that as of the 2012/13 academic year, central government funding of institutions will be considerably reduced and for most subjects, will instead be linked directly to individual student registration. In this uncertain economic climate, it is reasonable for budget-holders to look for evidence of the value that all university and college departments and services, including counselling, contribute to the institution and its main stakeholders, students. This research was an important step in developing an evidence base which demonstrates the contribution in-house counselling makes to both student and institution, by improving student academic outcomes and overall well-being.

Pre-existing evidence

CORE IMS's Benchmarks for Higher Education Counselling Services (July 2010) provide the main body of pre-existing evidence for the contribution made by

counselling in the sector. CORE IMS compared these benchmarks to equivalents at that time in Primary Care Counselling.

'Caseness' – The level of 'caseness' (that is the level and type of presenting problem) of students presenting for counselling in Higher Education counselling services was similar to patients presenting for counselling in primary care

Impact on clinical outcomes – 75 per cent of clients were either 'improved' or 'recovered' following counselling in Higher Education, compared with 71 per cent of clients in primary care counselling

Wait times

Finding 1: The average waiting time between referral and assessment in HE counselling was 9 days compared with 63 days in primary care counselling.

Finding 2: The average waiting time between referral and first counselling session in HE counselling was 16 days compared with 84 days in primary care counselling.

Provision of timely counselling is particularly salient in the student population which, according to the Royal College of Psychiatrist's report into the 'Mental Health of Students In Higher Education' (2011), may be more vulnerable than other young people as they face: the challenge of adapting to a new environment and to the demands of their courses; potential isolation without usual social supports; peer pressure to misuse drugs and alcohol; and the additional stress of financial pressures and the need to work alongside study.

This same report notes that ‘underachievement or failure at this stage can have long-term effects on self-esteem and the progress of someone’s life’ (p.21) thus highlighting the importance of early intervention.

Recent research – The impact of counselling on academic outcomes

Methodology

All members of the Association for University and College Counselling (AUCC) were invited via the AUCC, Heads of University Counselling Services (HUCS) and FE Counsellors’ mail bases to contribute to this research by distributing questionnaires with 4 quantitative and 2 qualitative questions to all students completing counselling in the academic year September 2011 to July 2012. Data from 5,537 students from 65 UK universities and FE colleges was submitted for quantitative analysis via SPSS. A smaller, but still significant subset of data from 1263 students from 53 universities and colleges was included in the qualitative analysis using Grounded Theory.

Quantitative findings

Retention

54% of all student respondents indicated that counselling was either ‘an important factor’ or ‘the most significant factor’, and another 27% indicated that it was ‘one of many factors’ in helping them stay at university. **Therefore, in total, 81% of students considered counselling to have helped them stay at university or college.**

Achievement

50.6% of all student respondents indicated that counselling was either ‘an important factor’ or ‘the most significant factor’, and another 28.4% that it was ‘one of many factors’ in helping them do better in their academic work. **Therefore, in total, 79% of students considered counselling to have helped them do better in their academic work.**

Student experience

55.9% of all students indicated that counselling was either ‘an important factor’ or ‘the most significant factor’, and another 26.9% that it was ‘one of many factors’ in improving their overall student experience. **Therefore, in total, 82.8% of students considered counselling to have improved their overall experience of being at university or college.**

Employability

59.9% of all students indicated that counselling was either ‘an important factor’ or ‘the most significant factor’, and another 18.2% that it was ‘one of many factors’ in helping them develop skills useful for obtaining future employment. **Therefore in total, 78.1% of students considered that counselling helped them develop skills useful for obtaining employment.**

Qualitative findings

Students were asked to describe how counselling helped and to comment on any ways in which counselling or any aspects of the service were unhelpful.

How counselling helps

Open and axial coding:

There were many helpful factors identified. In the course of axial coding which considers relationships amongst factors (open codes), processes by which counselling impacts and types of impact that it has, emerged.

The **Context** was described as one in which the student found counselling to provide a safe space within the unfamiliar and challenging environment of their FE or HE institution.

The **Counselling Interventions** which they most valued were emotional containment, understanding, and being offered new perspectives and new tools for coping.

The main **Impact** of counselling was that students develop increased understanding and increased ability to cope.

This then changed their **Outlook** to one which was more confident, more optimistic and more hopeful about the future.

Selective coding:

The Core Code or the central process that appears to be at work when counselling is helpful for students in the Further and Higher Education setting is illustrated in Figure 1 (right). In this case the central, most useful impact of counselling is that it **increases students’ understanding of themselves and their problems(s)**. This results in **improved ability to cope** which creates **increased confidence**. These two continue to interact in a ‘virtuous circle’ to result in **increased hope for the future**.

Figure 1 – Core Code – see diagram (right)

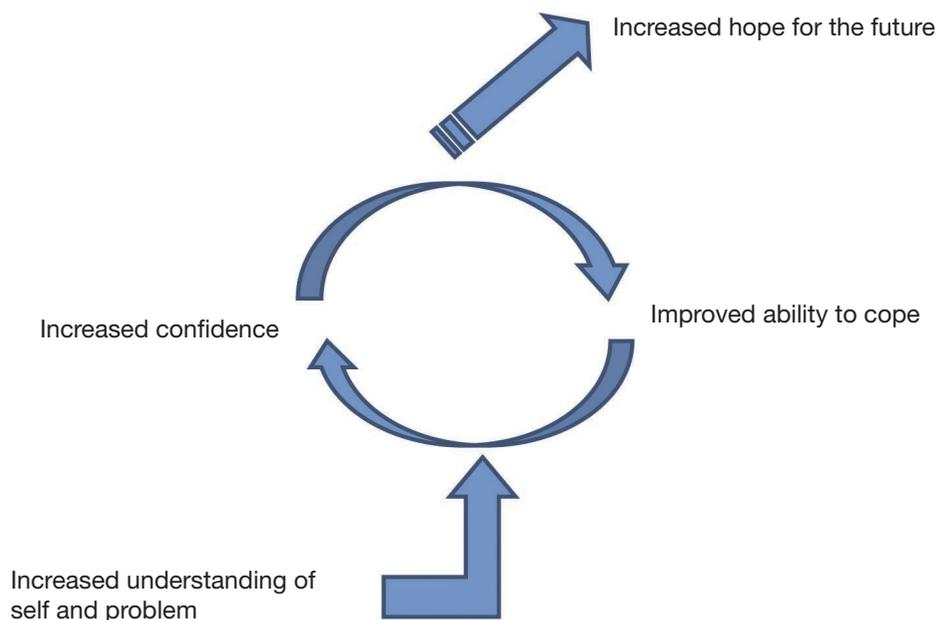


Figure 1 – Core Code – Central process

Aspects of counselling identified as unhelpful

Only 16.8% of the 1,263 respondents commented on unhelpful aspects of counselling despite a direct request to do so. Therefore there was not enough data to complete a Grounded Theory analysis and so a simple thematic analysis was conducted. The factors identified as unhelpful were largely **characteristics of the service**, specifically: insufficient number of sessions offered, waiting time to begin counselling too long (on average 15–20 days, so still on average only a quarter of the waiting time in primary care settings as identified in CORE IMS, 2010) insufficient early or late appointments to accommodate students working or living at a distance, length of each session too short (though invariably sessions were the standard 50–60 minutes in length), and location of waiting area too public. A few students identified unhelpful aspects of the **counselling approach**, specifically: not enough direction from counsellor, not enough focus on solutions or active coping strategies, not enough emotional containment at the end of sessions, too much ‘just listening’.

Developments based on these research findings

One of the very positive outcomes of this research has been CORE IMS’s interest in developing a measure of counselling impact on academic outcomes based on the research questions and findings. This measure, known as

CIAO (Counselling Impact on Academic Outcomes) is now available for use by all FE/HE counselling services using Corenet. For FE/HE counselling services who do not have access to Corenet, a BACP Excel spreadsheet has been developed to provide basic data collection and analysis. A major advantage of these developments is that data can now be collected and analysed on an on-going basis, thus allowing the continued development of a robust evidence base for the impact of counselling in FE and HE.

A proposal for funding to conduct a randomised controlled trial (RCT) of counselling in the FE and/or HE sector is currently under consideration. This would be an important next step as RCTs constitute the ‘gold standard’ test for the effectiveness of an intervention by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE).

Conclusions

The positive impact of counselling

Based on the quantitative findings, we can conclude that over 75 per cent of students who completed counselling within the 2011/12 academic year at the 65 institutions involved in the research found that counselling:

- helped them stay at university or college
- improved their academic achievement
- improved their overall experience of being a student
- helped them develop employability skills

These are significant findings in themselves. However, from the qualitative findings emerges an impact of perhaps greater significance; that is that the experience of counselling also:

- improved students' self-confidence
- increased their hope for the future

The fact that these findings are based on the responses of over 5,000 students from 65 different universities and FE colleges across England, Scotland and Wales, makes this as powerful an argument for generalisation as is possible within this research paradigm. ***So, it is reasonable to conclude that in general, the majority of students who complete in-house counselling at universities and colleges in the UK, will find it impacts positively on their academic outcomes, improves overall self-confidence and increases hope for the future.***

Counselling approach and length of contract

It is important to note that in this research, the models of counselling and the number of counselling sessions completed varied across students and institution, and so the positive impact is associated with counselling provision in general, not a particular model or number of sessions. This is important information for FE/HE counsellors and those employing them, as these findings support the current position in which a range of counselling approaches and lengths of counselling contract are employed. The main finding regarding length of contract derives from the few negative experiences cited. These were largely from students who saw themselves as having complex and/or multiple problems and where counselling ended before the student felt ready, due to service-imposed limits on the number of sessions that could be offered. This suggests that flexibility of length of contract to suit the individual student's needs may be helpful,

particularly for students with complex needs. The main finding regarding counselling approach suggests that a fairly active, interactive counselling approach, with a focus on present coping rather than past problems is what students find most helpful. Both of these are consistent with current practice in most FE and HE counselling services, and demonstrate the particular value of in-house services provided by counsellors who understand the specific needs of this client group.

And finally, what the students said...

'Counselling helped me gain strength and confidence in myself and be able to look forward to the future with optimism.'

'Counselling has been the best thing I have ever done. It has given me a fresh, positive outlook at a very difficult and challenging time in my life.'

'Counselling has helped me turn my life around for the better.'

'It has helped me through some very tough times – probably LIFESAVING!'

'It has given me a very optimistic outlook on my university experience and indeed life.'

'The results have been priceless. I have been given hope for my future life and career.'

References

CORE IMS. *Benchmarks for higher education counselling services*. CORE IMS. July 2010 (available online).

Royal College of Psychiatrists (2011). *Mental Health of Students in Higher Education. College Report CR166*. Royal College of Psychiatrists. London: September 2011.

If you would like further information about this research or about the issues raised in this briefing, please contact: Patti Wallace, Lead Advisor, University and College Counselling at patti.wallace@bacp.co.uk

More information about university and college counselling is available at: www.aucc.uk.com

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