The positive wider impact
of counselling provision in colleges and universities

Patti Wallace, BACP's lead advisor for university and college counselling, offers a framework for discussion

This article is an amalgamation of research findings, my ideas and ideas that arose in discussion with others – Heads of University Counselling Services (HUCS), the Association of Managers of Student Services in Higher Education (AMOSSHE) and the National Association for Managers of Student Services (NAMSS). It is my first attempt at conceptualising what additional value embedded counselling services can and do deliver in further education (FE) and higher education (HE). In research, a framework based on current understandings is commonly developed so that some of the ideas within it can be tested. In my view, this is the stage we are at: demonstrating what I am choosing to term 'wider impact' or 'added value'. So my framework is presented here for revision, adaptation or complete rewriting as evidence emerges to support, develop or refute it.

Levels of analysis

In attempting to understand the wider impact or added value of in-house counselling provision in universities and colleges, I believe we need to move beyond the traditional focus on the individual. This is not to deny the importance of individual, face-to-face counselling, which forms the cornerstone of our work. It is, instead, to expand our horizons to include other areas and aspects of the institutions in which we work. Here, I think, we can be informed by organisational psychology, in which analysis is conducted at individual, group and organisational levels.

From within this model, interventions are considered to potentially impact at any of these levels. Therefore, in addition to intervention and impact at the individual level, interventions can also be designed to impact at group and institutional levels. So an organisational development assessment will involve determining at which level(s) it is best to offer which types of intervention, in order to achieve the desired or broadest impact. It seems to me that this model could be usefully applied both to assessing the current impact of counselling in universities and colleges, and to thinking about the types of interventions an embedded counselling service might be able to offer in the future, to maximise impact. This paper is a first attempt at applying this model to embedded counselling services in FE/HE.

Levels of impact

Figure 1 (overleaf) illustrates how the 'levels of impact' concept might be seen to apply to counselling provision in universities and colleges. At the base or foundation of the triangle is individual impact, as that is the main focus of counselling interventions. This is also by far the largest of the sections of the triangle, indicating that the greatest impact should be experienced at this level. Above that is the group level of impact. This, though smaller, is still significant, as some counselling interventions delivered by in-house services are directed specifically at groups. At the top of the triangle is institutional impact. This section is compact, as most counselling interventions are not directed at this level. However, it is my contention that an embedded counselling service will have an impact at this level, partly through a small number of direct interventions and mostly indirectly, through impact on individuals and groups within the institution. Finally, surrounding the triangle is a circle that represents wider society. It can be argued that any intervention that impacts on individuals, groups and organisations also has a broader impact on society as a whole, and this may be particularly true of institutions that guide the development of the younger generation.

At individual level

Much has been written about approaches to counselling in the university and college sector (see Amis,[1] Austin,[2] Moore,[3] Reeves[4] and Wallace[5] for recent examples). For the purposes of this paper, it is sufficient to say that the impact findings cited below are not based on a specific counselling approach or a defined length of contract. The services from which data were gathered offer a wide range of counselling approaches, varying lengths of contract but, in general, time-limited interventions (on average, four to five sessions per student and five to six sessions per staff member[6]).

It is at the individual level that counselling provided in universities and colleges has the most obvious impact. It is also at this level that impact has been most clearly evidenced by research. At this level, impact is assessed on individual students and individual staff presenting with broadly psychosocial problems who are about to receive, already receiving or have recently completed counselling. There are two main methods of assessing impact at this level. The most common is retrospective evaluation by those who have received counselling. This tends to be subjective reports (both quantitative and qualitative) by students or staff of how they experienced counselling and the impact it has had on the problems that brought them to counselling in the first place (and/or other important outcomes).

The second approach requires clients to complete standardised, and sometimes also subjective, measures before they begin counselling, and then to complete the same measures at the end of counselling (and sometimes at various points throughout counselling as well). In this case impact is assessed by change over time and impact is attributed to counselling as this is the 'intervening condition' (ie what happened between the first point in time and the last point in time), and the only intervention that is consistent across the whole group of students being assessed.

Previous reports[7] have provided evidence in support of the individual impact of student counselling and so will be noted only briefly here. CORE IMS's Benchmarks for Counselling in Higher Education,[8] based on 28,000 sets of data from students in 18 UK universities, addressed the impact of counselling on individual clinical outcomes and found that 75 per cent of students were either 'improved' or 'recovered' following counselling in their university counselling service. Wallace's research,[7] based on data from 5,537 students from 65 UK universities and FE colleges, found that over 75 per cent of students who completed counselling in their university/college counselling service considered that it:
• helped them stay at university
• improved their academic achievement
• improved their overall experience of being a student
• helped them develop employability skills.

Figure 1 Broader impact of embedded counselling provision in FE/HE
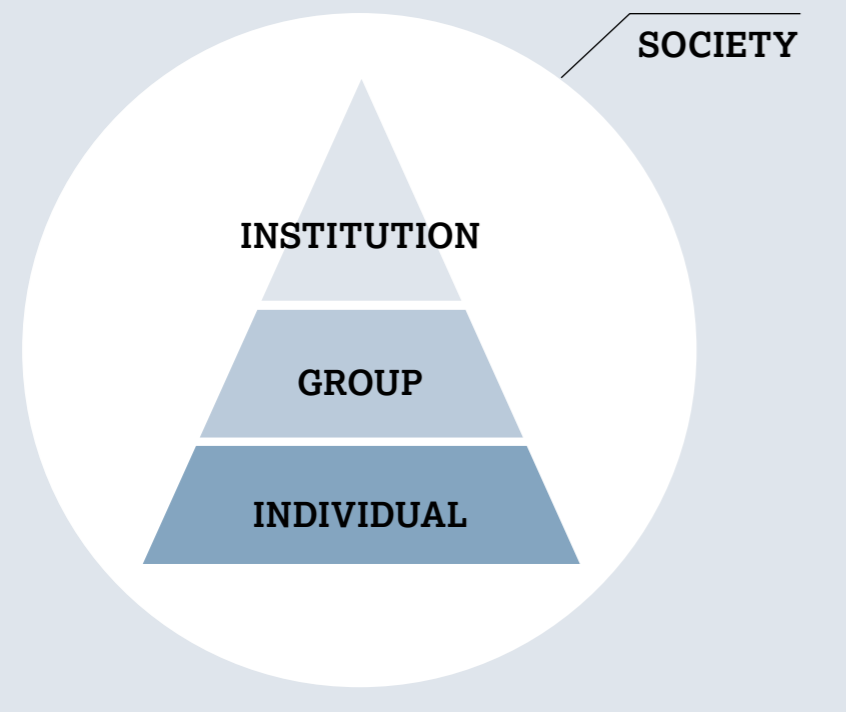
In addition, qualitative findings based on data from 1263 students in that study indicated that counselling impacted on broader student wellbeing by improving:
• self-confidence
• coping strategies
• hope for the future.

There is also evidence of impact at the individual level for staff counselling within a university setting. Within one university staff counselling service, Collins, Dyer and Shave[9] paired 182 staff with 100 matched controls. They reported that, prior to counselling, the treatment group was 'much less well' than the control group, but post-counselling (on average seven sessions) this difference had 'virtually disappeared'. They concluded that there was 'clear evidence that workplace counselling represents an effective way of improving functioning within a workforce by reducing distress, dysfunction and underperformance' (p17).

It is important to note here that all of these findings are based on data from embedded or in-house counselling services within UK universities or FE colleges. There are no data available for impact of outsourced services and so no conclusions can be drawn as to the comparability of its impact at the individual level of analysis.

At group level

One of the advantages of an in-house counselling service is that staff, because they are embedded in the institution, are in touch with issues and behaviours that arise for students and staff on a regular basis across the academic year: for example, homesickness and exam anxiety. Through their embeddedness in the university and college counselling sector as a whole, staff will also be aware of current trends: for example, the (mis)use of ADHD medication by some students to enhance academic performance. These understandings allow in-house counselling services to develop and deliver both what I will term ' treatment' and 'preventive' interventions at the group level. By 'treatment interventions' I mean groups that address specific presenting problems; by 'preventive interventions' I mean groups that inform or develop individuals' abilities to cope with specific issues before they become problematic.

In the most recent BACP UC annual survey,[10] based on data from 37 UK universities and FE colleges, 67 per cent of HE and 40 per cent of FE institutions reported offering group level interventions to students. The majority of these are likely to be in the form of psychoeducational

groups. These, arguably, are a cost-effective way of addressing issues that are common to many students. They provide a combined professional and peer intervention, which can be particularly suited to and beneficial for young people. They are also likely to result in fewer students requiring interventions at the individual level and/or in each student requiring less input at the individual level. In the same study, 25 per cent of HE and 40 per cent of FE institutions reported the provision of group interventions for staff.

Preventive interventions

In addition to 'treatment' interventions, there are also preventive group interventions. Some of these can be planned activities. For example, there is considerable evidence for the effectiveness of mindfulness-based interventions for stress reduction in non-clinical populations (eg Grossman,[11] Shapiro et al[12]). On this basis, mindfulness meditation groups are being offered by a number of university counselling services to any interested members of the student or staff body.

Likewise, most embedded counselling services offer consultation to both academic and administrative staff to support them in dealing with particular issues or managing specific students. Some preventive interventions are more likely to be deliverable by an in-house counselling service than by an outsourced service, as they are often dependent on the accessibility of counselling staff. For example, supporting a group of students in shared university accommodation following violent or self-harming behaviour by one of their flatmates may prevent these students requiring counselling for unresolved concerns at a later date. However, this intervention requires a fairly immediate and flexible response, more easily provided by a campus-based service.

There is, as yet, relatively little published evidence for the impact of group-level interventions in the university and college sector, as this has not been the focus of research. However, at least for treatment interventions, similar research methodologies could be used as for individual interventions, so the potential is there to collect, collate and analyse data from those institutions providing group-level interventions.

The impact of preventive interventions is notoriously difficult to evidence as, by definition, it is an attempt to demonstrate

that something has not occurred as a result of an intervention. Collection of robust data on changes over time in the incidence of specific behaviours among the student group may allow some inferences to be drawn, but this will always be relatively weak evidence. In a real world setting, it is not possible to isolate the cause of a change in behaviour of groups of students, as many psychosocial factors could be having an influence at any given time.

At organisational level

The most readily recognised organisational impact of an embedded counselling service is probably the protection of institutional reputation. There is no doubt that universities and colleges often call on counselling services in situations that might result in negative attention from parents or the media. An example is when a student takes his/her own life on campus and the university management wishes to demonstrate that appropriate psychological help was available, whether or not the student chose to use it. At this time, the counselling service may also assist parents, staff and other students to deal with their feelings about this sad event, all of which reduces negative impact on the organisation as a whole.

Outside of this type of crisis situation, intuitively it seems probable that having a counselling service embedded in a university or college will impact on how psychological issues are understood, addressed and managed at the organisational level on a day-to-day basis. Specifically, it is likely that mental health and psychological issues will be better understood, more accepted and have a higher profile. This will impact not only on the experience of individual students and staff who come for counselling, but also in a more general way on individuals who do not need or choose to seek help, through the creation of an atmosphere and ethos within the organisation that it is more understanding and accepting of mental health issues.

Anecdotally, there are examples of this type of impact. For example, I have spoken at a number of National Union of Students (NUS) conferences over the past two years and have met many students who say that their understanding and awareness of mental health have expanded due to the openness with which these matters are addressed in their university or college. This is attributed in part to counselling and

mental health services having a high profile in the institution.

Likewise, in some institutions, heads of counselling sit on institutional committees where they can ensure that mental health issues are considered in the development and implementation of university/college policies and procedures. Certainly, many universities and college counselling services hold mental health awareness days and ensure that mental health is on the agenda at freshers' weeks, both of which are likely to impact at the organisational level.

To date, no research has been conducted to assess the impact that embedded counselling services might have on the university/college as a whole. However, there are examples from organisational psychology in which the impact of the introduction of specific interventions (eg flexible working) to an organisation is assessed by measuring a range of attitudes/knowledge/behaviours/felt experiences pre-intervention and then any changes in these at various points following implementation. It would be possible and potentially productive, in terms of providing evidence for the broader impact of embedded counselling, to use a similar research design in an institution that was introducing counselling provision for the first time.

At societal level

I am fully aware that I am now straying well beyond an argument that can be evidenced in the way that is normally expected of a psychological intervention. However, all research derives originally from an idea, and so on that basis I offer my understanding of how counselling within universities and colleges (among other things, of course) might impact on at the societal level of analysis.

The basis of my argument is that the young people being educated in our colleges and universities today will become the parents, workforce and leaders of our society in the future. Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that the more socially aware and psychologically resilient these young people are helped to be now, the more they will be able to positively influence our society in the future. My contention is that counselling services in universities and colleges have an important role to play in helping students attain that awareness and resilience. If I extrapolate from my own research cited earlier in this article,[7] surely sending out into the world young people who have a wider range of

coping strategies and who feel more self-confident and hopeful about their future is better for our society than sending out young people who feel burdened by anxiety, depression and are uncertain about the future?

To the future

In conclusion, I suggest that we need to look beyond traditional counselling research methods if we are to demonstrate the added value embedded counselling provides. I hope this initial attempt at a framework will be useful not only for thinking about and describing the impacts of our work, but also for guiding a broader research agenda in the university and college counselling sector.

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