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A Review of University Counselling Services

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Contents

Introduction

Results

Comparative Analysis

Recommendations

Introduction

This policy proposal is a research document published by *The Buchanan Institute*, Scotland's first and only student-led think tank. The purpose of this proposal is to investigate potential improvements for the University of Edinburgh's Student Counselling Service, while also increasing transparency about the service's current policies and procedures. Earlier in 2017, we recognized the urgent need for such a document; the public discourse surrounding the current counselling service among university students was consistently negative. The counselling service is a vital organ within the university's network of health services therefore it is crucial to draw attention to rising student concern over its function and effectiveness.

To conduct our research, we distributed an anonymous survey for University of Edinburgh students who have used the counselling service. In addition to this survey, we conducted several interviews with members of staff across the university health services, including the Director of the counselling service.

We hope that this document provides an unbiased, detailed and comparative analysis of the current counselling service at the University of Edinburgh. We also recognize that the pursuit of better mental health on campus must be holistic; engaging students and multiple avenues within the university will allow students to have the services they need to explore their mental health. Therefore, the recommendations listed at the end of this document are not necessarily limited to counselling service itself; we emphasize the need for multilateral collaboration between EUSA, the individual schools of the university, and the student counseling service in order to make mental health help accessible for all students in need.

Sincerely,

Nina Pusic, Ellie Cleasby, and Isabelle Rayner

Results

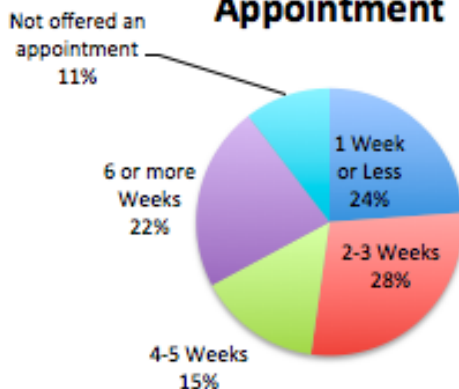
The following responses are the result of our survey which features 84 student's feedback, with a near-even distribution of year of study and a gender ratio of 81% female to 19% male. The survey was distributed to the student body through various sources, including social media and a publication reference in *The Student Newspaper*.

Waiting Time *How long are students waiting to be seen?*

Time Waited Before receiving an Assessment Appointment



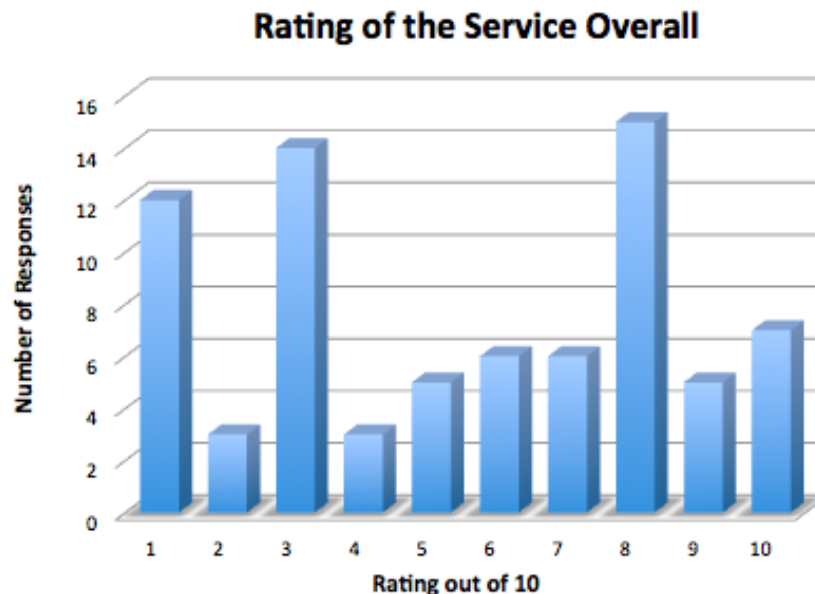
Time Before Receiving a Further Appointment



From the charts above, one can see that there was a plurality (47%) of students who waited one week or less to receive an assessment appointment, while nearly a third of students (28%) waited 2-3 weeks to receive a further appointment. It should be noted that 11% of students who responded said that they did not receive an appointment, either because it was

the end of second semester or their assessment found that they were not in need of professional counselling.

Satisfaction *How Satisfied are students with the service?*



We asked students how they would rate their overall experience with the counselling service on a scale of 1 (extremely unsatisfying) to 10 (extremely satisfying). The modal values were 3 and 8 out of 10, both gaining around 20% of responses each. Half of the responses fall into the 1-5 out of 10, with the other half falling into the higher bracket, showing a lack of consistency in the performance of the service. However, more people scored their experience as 1/10 than 10/10. Following this, we asked whether the respondents would recommend the counselling service to a friend who was in a similar situation, on the same 1-10 scale. We saw a lack of consistency here too, with the most common answers being 1/10 and 10/10. However, here, the data is more skewed to the higher ratings (6/10 - 10/10), with a rating of 10 chosen by around 35% of respondents, compared to the next most common rating of 1 chosen by half as many respondents.

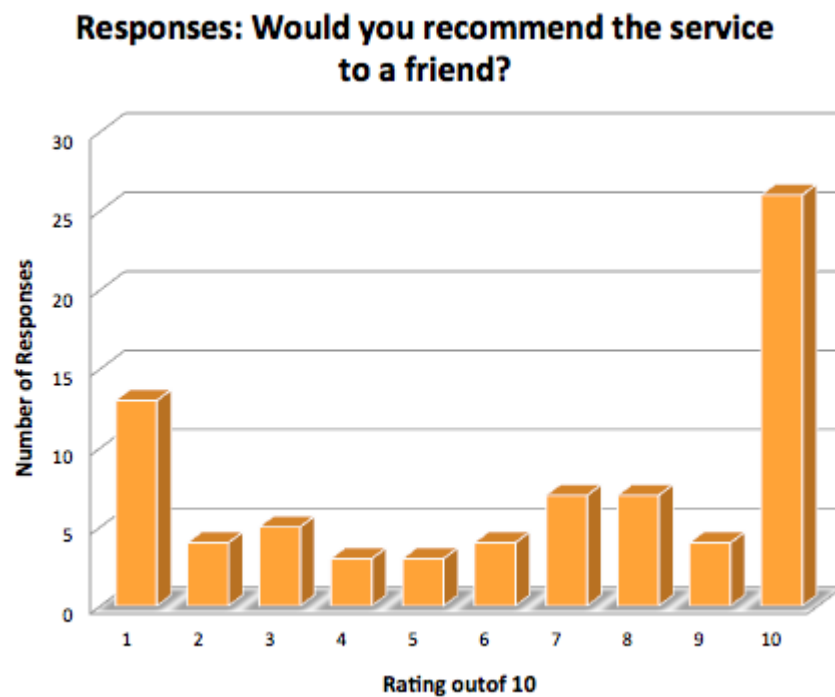
Within public discourse, it is clear that students are frequently dissatisfied with the number of sessions available to them. Our survey posed a series of questions on this topic.

When asked how many sessions they would ideally like, several students stated that they wanted 10 sessions, or as many as the counsellor deemed necessary without limitation of the current 4 session threshold.

Students were asked how many sessions they felt they needed after their experience with the service, with common answers being “long term counselling”, until they were no longer needed, “3 further sessions” and “no further sessions” at that time.

One respondent’s answer summed this up well, suggesting that a cap on the counselling service is not useful as many people will need more.

This wide range of responses shows that it is difficult to standardise mental health into a set number of sessions as each situation is personal and will require different amounts of time. One response noted that the 4 session cap made them feel anxious as it made them question the need to go if they were having a good week, for fear of using up a session that may be needed more at a later date. That being said, the [University](#) service is not set up to provide long term counselling, meaning that there is a tension here between student expectations and the actual intended function of the counselling service.



Student Suggestions for Improvement

At the end of the survey, we asked students if they had suggestions for improving the service. The following sections lists these suggestions:

1) More sessions and reduced waiting time

"4 sessions is inadequate and unreasonable. More support should be available"

"Unlimited sessions, more needs assessments, longer sessions"

"More sessions"

"It's not counselling if you can only give a few sessions - that's more like crisis management"

"More appointments more quickly!"

"More resources for quicker response, better prioritising of urgent cases"

"shorter waiting lists and more sessions per student, more advice on how to seek further counselling if needed"

"Definitely more sessions needed per client"

"Shorter time between assessment and first appointment"

"More sessions per student. Shorter waiting lists. If they can't increase the number of sessions available to each student, make it clear and easy for them to access GP provision"

"I got 6 appointments. However, others only get 4. It could be helpful if everyone could the opportunity of 6 appointments"

"find a way to shorten the waiting time for appointments: they say it's because people cancel so much, but there needs to be a system in place to reduce the 6 week wait. It's unacceptable for this kind of service"

"Much shorter waiting times. Two months seems like much too long from the time of booking the appointment to actually starting the sessions. Many people's problems may have become a lot worse in this amount of time. More flexibility with session times. Though 50 minute sessions are easy to schedule, I often felt that I was just starting to get into some of the problems and then had to leave, and other times felt like I only needed half an hour"

"Provide long term as well as short term counselling"

"The service should also offer more sessions to students rather than 4"

2) Link with external services and collaborate with other university services

"Referral to other services"

"Link the service with charities who provide counselling, hire more therapists trained in CBT and other methods, for more serious and long-term problems"

"Coordinate more with other services. Particularly the disability service but also personal tutors etc"

3) Suggest other types of counselling

"Put more emphasis on the promotion of alternative types (group, phone, Skype, virtual etc)...relieving the strain on the one-to-one service"

"The chance to go on group sessions with people with similar issues. When the counselling sessions end there would at least be a support network remaining"

4) Accessibility

"Publicize the services more on university website so that students know where to go to apply. Fix the online application forms. Allow people to apply in the disabilities office"

"The issue is more with availability and accessibility as the counsellors themselves are wonderful and the rooms which they use are very comfortable"

"More accessible"

5) General comments regarding the service and counsellor performance

"Less dismissive when semesters are ending...more empathy and less tick boxes, it felt more like an interview for a second session rather than a genuine session with someone who cared about my wellbeing"

"I found it unhelpful at the time, and felt the counsellors were judging me"

"My first experience was appalling with the counsellor being relatively unprofessional and unhelpful. My second experience I requested a different counsellor and she was absolutely fantastic!"

"the fact the University work is tough and counselling is horrible does not help at all. It seems like you don't care about the well-being of your students at all and that draws people away"

"Personally I didn't not feel like the counsellor was equipped to deal with real mental health issues and I didn't not find the session helpful, if anything it was more damaging and made me feel let down by the university"

"their insistence on self-help books is somewhat off-putting"

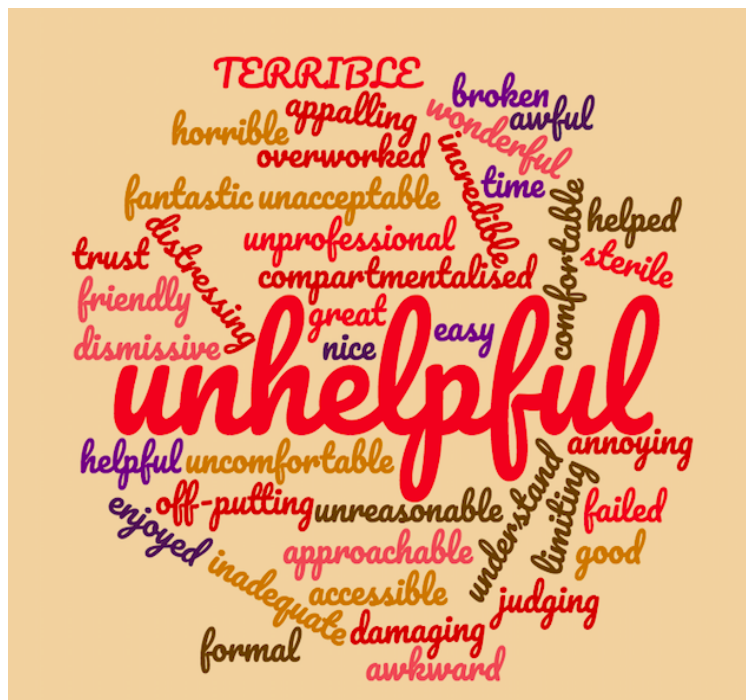
Recognition of current counselling service

"I think they do an incredible job with what they have"

"They've already implemented the changes I would make. More money"

"I know that they have no real choice in the matter but the waiting times are awful. It's hard to actually receive the help needed in so few sessions as well. But, I don't fault the counseling service. It's the Uni's fault for refusing to properly recognize the problem and underfunding something so vital."

"A vast increase of funding to allow the service to provide more long term services"



During our meeting with the representatives from the counselling service, we asked questions regarding the booking process, who the service is designed for, how it best operates, and what they would like to do going forward.

Here are some key points following this meeting:

- The counselling service is appropriate for every student at the university, no matter what brings them to use it
- The service cannot, and does not, aim to provide long term counselling. The representatives noted that this is the role of the NHS
- When asking about waiting times for the service, the representatives suggested that their waiting times were much shorter than the NHS service's minimum waiting time of 18 weeks

There are clearly vast differences in the aims and function of the university counselling service and the NHS. It is problematic to compare the two since both cater to different patient bases. The counselling service focuses on helping a transient student population; semesters are only 11 weeks long therefore the current waiting time takes up a large proportion of a student's time at university.

While the NHS waiting time is longer, this service is perhaps more appropriate to people permanently based in their location. Given the long waiting times of the NHS, oversubscription of other voluntary counselling services in Edinburgh and the prices associated with private counselling, the counselling service may well be the best option for students.

Comparative Analysis

To have a better understanding of how the counselling service at the University of Edinburgh performs, we looked into other universities across the UK which rank highly in student satisfaction.

University of Bath

Along with their Student Counseling Service, Bath has a separate set of Wellbeing Advisors who have **drop-in sessions** throughout the week and over the weekend, and are also available from 9am-10:20pm Monday to Friday and 11am- 7pm during the weekend. The counselling service also work with Residential Tutors to give residential support to students in university accommodation. The students' association run a **student-led peer support group**, Positive Minds, which offers a free six-week course aimed at helping students experiencing low mood and mild depression, which has been very successful in other universities in the UK. Finally, the university offers group workshops run by a member of the Counselling and Mental Health team.

University of Cambridge

At the University of Cambridge, students are offered a maximum **six 50 minute appointments per year**. They will occasionally offer long-term support but this will predominantly be in a counselling group. **The waiting time**, as of 14/5/17, was estimated at **2-3 weeks**. Short term group sessions are offered covering topics such as understanding and managing anxiety, longer term group sessions of 4-6 weeks cover managing your mood and bereavement and actual group counselling that last for 10 sessions throughout the semester. The University is also taking part in a pilot programme in certain colleges of **College-Based Counselling**, where students are trained to discuss mental health issues with other members of the college on a voluntary basis.

University of Durham

Durham has **Same-Day Bookable Consultations** (SBCs) available as part of their Mental Health Services. These Same-Day Consultations allow students to have immediate, early interventions that are not therapy nor a psychological assessment. These SBCs allow students who are unsure of exactly what they need to have access to

Mental Health help quickly and accessibility. The Counseling Service also offers evening services, along with regular one-on-one long term counseling sessions.

The Service is accessible and transparent, intruding the counselors online with photos, and also encourages students that “they will be made very welcome by all team members”. Different sections of the website increase accessibility by including sections with information if a student is concerned about someone, how to get **immediate help** in a crisis, and **information on sexual violence**.

University of East Anglia

UEA’s counselling service appears very similar to the University of Edinburgh’s service, offering 1-1 brief counselling or therapy sessions, as well as wellbeing support groups and workshops. Additional support comes from an Advice Place, Nightline and a multi-faith centre. Unlike what we have heard in Edinburgh, UEA’s service seems to be positively perceived on their campus. A host of **student-led peer support initiatives** mean that there are a wealth of support groups for issues ranging from **eating disorders** to **sexuality** and **gender identity**.

University of Exeter

Exeter has both a Mental Health Team and an “AccessAbility” Team as part of their mental health services. They also provide **Mental Health Drop-In Sessions** and provide a checklist online to help students decipher whether or not the service is the right fit for them. Exeter also has a **telephone referral appointments** so they can refer students faster than walk-in appointments.

University of Glasgow

Glasgow’s counselling website states that “there is sometimes a **waiting list of up to three months for this first appointment**.” Regular counselling sessions are weekly and last 50 minutes. **Drop In Consultations** are offered: four 50 minute appointments available each day, two in the morning and two in the afternoon.

Glasgow’s website states explicitly that “due to resource constraints, Counselling and Psychological Services **cannot provide longer term counselling on an open-ended basis**.”

The website provides students with information about e-counselling, podcasts, personal development books and online courses.

There are a range of courses and groups available including “mindfulness based stress reduction” and “compassionate mind training”. There is a list of courses for Mandarin speakers including “Female students’ health and wellbeing”, “Understanding British culture and teaching styles” and “Understanding self-esteem”.

University of Leeds

The University of Leeds has **Drop-In sessions** with their Mental Health Team (11AM-12AM everyday), Mental Health Workers, and Student Counseling Centre (3PM - 4PM). Although the number of students who partake in drop-in sessions are lower than those who pursue one-on-one sessions, the drop-in sessions are still relatively abundant. The Student Counseling Service also offers Online Counseling. Additionally, their website includes detailed guidance for what to do while waiting for one-on-one sessions, which includes plentiful self-help resources.

University of Oxford

The counselling service in Oxford is open during term time from 9am to 5pm but is **available until 8pm** for those with **pre-arranged appointments 4 days a week**. The service sees 11-12% of the student body per year. Individual, group and online counselling; workshops and podcasts are all offered as avenues for support. The service is **flexible**, allowing students to **choose whether to have sessions in consecutive weeks** (as recommended), or in a more spaced out way to practice new ways of thinking. The University also offers a college based **peer support system** where peer supporters attend fortnightly supervision to consolidate their training, develop their skills and to ensure they themselves are not over-committed. Currently 30 colleges are involved in the programme, with ~350 peer supporters at any one time.

University of St Andrews

Counselling sessions focus on “**brief, solution focussed interventions**” and “most students meet with a counsellor for **no more than four sessions**”. These sessions tend to be **40 minutes long**.

St Andrews’ Support Advice Team informs students of appropriate coping strategies, directs them to the NHS or other services, helps them access E-books or other self-

help material, refers them to a university counsellor or guides them to workshops and group/peer support groups.

Accessing counselling can take **up to four weeks** but a support adviser provides interim assistance and is a second person for students to turn to in the future if urgent assistance is needed.

There are workshops for students, advice and support for academic staff and collaborations with university departments and external agencies. There is support for student-led campaigns to reduce stigma regarding mental health and providing self-help material in the university library and online.

The "Personal Matters" tab on the web page lists 22 topics to suit individual needs. For example, the alcohol and drugs section defines the issues associated with alcohol and drugs, states contact details for the counselling service and lists several supportive E-books and useful websites.

Overall, there seems to be **more student led support** at other universities compared to what is on offer in Edinburgh. They also seem to offer more **group led counselling sessions**, which, according to the representatives from the Counselling Service, has proven to be ineffective in Edinburgh. Online self-help information is also a recurring theme on many of these university counselling websites. In universities with a college system, **peer support** seems to be effective as a way to utilise all possible resources.

While most universities' services echo Edinburgh's own aims in regards to short-term counselling, other universities seem have greater website transparency, accessibility (group counseling, online counseling, straightforward online guidance, drop in sessions), and peer-led support schemes.

Recommendations

Based on the research and comparative analysis above, the following section recommends improvements for the University of Edinburgh counselling service. These recommendations are multidimensional as they require efforts from the Edinburgh University Students Association (EUSA), the individual schools within the university, and the student counseling service itself.

Short Term Goals

1. **Improve counselling website and website application process** through offering extensive and comprehensive information for online self-help that is specific to common needs for example bullying, gender identity, depression, anxiety, etc.
2. **Increase transparency overall** through creating a Digested Annual Report with key notes of where money is going and how they are continuously improving, and distributing this throughout student populations (leaflets in the Student Association/Library, & social media, partner with EUSA)

Long Term Goals

1. **More flexibility with organisation and structure of sessions.** For example, in Oxford, students can choose to have their sessions in consecutive weeks or more spaced out as a way to respond to feedback from their counselor.
2. **Introduce Drop-In Sessions** Similar to Durham, Leeds, Exeter, Bath, and Glasgow, where students can come in on the day for immediate short-term support through the University Counselling Service
3. **Collaborations with services** Such as creating a **EUSA Peer Support Scheme** (similar to Oxford college-based scheme), with trained students to give consistent counseling to other peers in Teviot or Potterrow.
4. **Offer group support on a trial basis.** This would act as long term support after the 4 sessions offered have finished. While group counselling has not proven effective as an alternative to individual counselling in the past, it may help students to continue counselling while they wait for support from the NHS or other services.