CHAPTER 3

Counselling in Higher Education (HE)

Judy Moore and Ruth Roberts

CORE KNOWLEDGE

- The counsellor working in HE needs to be sensitive to the priorities of the institution as well as to the needs of individual clients.
- Many counselling services are still dominated by either psychodynamic or person-centred models of counselling, although cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is included by some services, reflecting the current national bias.
- Counselling services can be broadly separated into two models with subtly different purposes reflected by the nature of their work.
- In addition to what might be regarded as ‘traditional’ students who are school leavers studying full-time, there are also many non-traditional students who bring a wide range of presenting issues.
- A key issue that faces all university counselling services at this time is how to make best, and most appropriate, use of resources within the context of more refined provision elsewhere.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to introduce you to working as a counsellor or trainee counsellor in HE. This sector has undergone many changes in the last thirty years and the work of counsellors in HE has also changed and developed over that time, bringing new challenges and expectations. We begin by giving an overview of counselling in HE, followed by an outline of current trends and issues facing HE counselling services. We will illustrate some of these through examples of our work as counsellors at the University Counselling Service at the University of East Anglia (UEA). Although a number of university counselling services now include staff counselling as part of their provision, we have given more specific examples from student counselling as students form the largest client group and require more cross-service liaison. As ‘signposting’ – or directing the client to other support services within the university – is one of the key features of student
Counselling, we have given examples of this aspect of the HE counsellor's work throughout the chapter.

COUNSELLING IN HE

Counselling for students is now embedded in the vast majority of HE institutions as part of central student support services and an increasing number also now offer some counselling provision for staff. All HE counsellors will have undergone a professional training in counselling/psychotherapy and will follow the ethical guidelines of their professional body. However, the counsellor working in HE needs to be sensitive to the priorities of the institution as well as to the needs of individual clients.

The institutional view of counselling in HE

- The counsellor is employed by the university or college in which she works and needs to work with clients in awareness of other parts of the institution, particularly those where the student is taught and other student services.
- Counselling is provided by the institution to enable students to complete their studies and to enhance their learning experience.
- The counselling service needs to reflect the values and priorities of the institution and to work in conformity with its practices and procedures.

For the counsellor who comes to the HE context from private practice or other organisational settings where the priority is simply the client, the institutional context can come as rather a shock. The counsellor in HE needs to be aware that she is working both in the interests of the client and for the benefit of the institution. Sometimes, this sense of dual responsibility can raise important questions for counselling practice and give rise to some of the main challenges for the HE counsellor. This is particularly so when financial pressure and self-funding mean that students are expecting more of their counsellor while the cash-strapped institution is expecting more from her.

The early years and development of counselling in HE

Counselling in HE has developed through many different strands over the past fifty years. Pressure for counselling for students grew from those originally working in student health who recognised in the 1950s and 1960s that there was a need for a broader, non-medical response to students' psychological and emotional concerns. Courses in guidance and coun-
selling, based on the American HE model of provision, were run at the universities of Keele and Reading in the 1960s (Newsome et al., 1973); a full-time course in student counselling was launched at the University of Aston in 1971 and the first in-service training for student counsellors began at London University in 1972.

Bell (1996) identifies three main strands of influence on the development of counselling in HE.

1. Those who came from a background in psychoanalysis.
2. Those who came from a background in student health provision and lobbied for counselling for students.
3. Those who were influenced by the North American person-centred counselling model of Carl Rogers and the development of personal counselling in American universities.

Although HE counselling has now largely been removed from its early medical context, the legacy of those individuals who shaped the profession in its early days means that many counselling services are still dominated by either psychodynamic or person-centred models of counselling. This picture has shifted somewhat in recent years with the recommendation of CBT as the therapy of choice for mild to moderate depression and anxiety by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) in 2004. Although the NICE findings have since been disputed (e.g. Elliot and Freire, 2008) and a broader range of talking therapies has been included in updated recommendations (NICE, 2009), many counselling services in HE have chosen to employ a CBT practitioner or practitioners.

In recent years there have been significant developments in terms of university welfare provision for students (e.g. Grant, 2009) and some of the work once undertaken by the counselling service in terms of study skills and general mental health advice, for example, is now dealt with by teams of specialists in other parts of student services. A key issue that faces all university counselling services at this time is how to make best, and most appropriate, use of resources within the context of more refined provision elsewhere.

SOME BASIC FACTS ABOUT COUNSELLING IN HE IN THE UK

Participation in HE

In 1997, the Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, colloquially known as the 'Dearing Report', recommended that the government prepare for an expansion of up to 45 per cent participation in HE by 18–30-year-olds by the year 2017 (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997). Twelve years on from that report, participation
rates have increased to 30 per cent of all 18–30-year-olds – approximately 2.3 million students. In addition, in 2007–8, approximately 341,000 students from outside of the UK were studying in HE in the UK (www.hesa.ac.uk). The number of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the UK is also increasing, with approximately 264 HEIs operating in the UK in 2005 (AUCC, 2007).

Types of counselling services in HE

Counselling provision in HE varies according to many factors, in particular, the size, function and financial situation of the institution. It is difficult to give a generic picture of the sector as services vary widely in terms of staffing levels, physical presence and the quantity and kind of interventions offered to clients. Counselling services can be broadly separated into two models, with subtly different purposes reflected by the nature of their work. These models can be seen in Table 3.1.

In reality, most services offer an amalgam of the two models represented in Table 3.1. However, the philosophical approach of a service in terms of the counselling modality or modalities offered is likely to influence the kind of provision offered.

Where staff counselling is included as part of the service’s provision, its operation is generally supported by the university’s Human Resources department.

**REFLECTION POINT**

The majority of counselling training courses focus on a single counselling modality and integrative approaches also often have specific models for working rather than offering a pluralistic toolbox of skills. Increasingly, however, counsellors in HE are required to adapt their work to the structures and demands of the institution – e.g. by offering time-limited therapy, one-off longer sessions, group sessions or preventative psycho-educational workshops as well as supervision for trainees.

Consider the nature of your own counselling training:

- Are you philosophically committed to a particular way of working?
- How might you need to adapt your practice for the HE environment?
- What kind of CPD training might you need to undertake?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mission and purpose</th>
<th>Types of interventions offered</th>
<th>Location within the institution</th>
<th>Referral routes in and out</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To enable students to be psychologically well enough to complete their studies</td>
<td>Time-limited; solution focused; goal oriented; CBT</td>
<td>As part of one-stop-shop student services</td>
<td>Tutors and advisers&lt;br&gt;GPs&lt;br&gt;Self&lt;br&gt;Friends and family&lt;br&gt;Referral onwards of clients with longer term, enduring emotional or mental health problems and particular learning needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Focused group work; bibliotherapy; online and guided self-help</td>
<td>May be physically located in the same building or discreetly elsewhere on campus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Preventative initiatives – groups, workshops and psycho-education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To enhance learning and personal development and to facilitate life experiences while at university</td>
<td>Time-sensitive; person-centred&lt;br&gt;Open and closed therapeutic groups&lt;br&gt;Couples counselling&lt;br&gt;Preventative initiatives – groups, workshops and psycho-education</td>
<td>Autonomous service within broader context of student services. Usually located separately from other services</td>
<td>Self&lt;br&gt;Friends and family&lt;br&gt;Gp&lt;br&gt;Tutors and advisers&lt;br&gt;Referral onwards of students with enduring serious mental illness and special learning needs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1: Two models of counselling service.
ACTIVITY 3.1

Counselling service mission statements are often available to view on the internet. Look up two or three mission statements for different services. What clues do they give you to the nature of the counselling offered, the philosophical approach of the service and the relationship of the service to the institution as a whole?

The location of university counselling services

- In a campus-style university a stand-alone counselling service is likely to be located in separate premises. It will have its own reception and waiting area.
- In a city-centre based university the counselling service is likely to be found in one of the large admin or teaching buildings. Most counselling services have their own reception and waiting areas.
- A one-stop shop can be found either in a campus-style or city-centre based university. Here a central reception area serves many different areas within student services.
- Staff counselling might be provided within the counselling service building used by students, usually with staggered or protected time-slots so that staff and student clients wait in reception at different times. In a few instances staff counselling is provided in a separate building, generally within the Human Resources department.

REFLECTION POINT

Consider the implications for practice of the different physical environments in which counselling is undertaken.

- What are your thoughts about confidentiality when collecting a new client from a busy waiting room?

Although most counselling rooms are suitably appointed, counselling services are rarely located in purpose-designed buildings. As such, counselling rooms can vary from location to location. Sessional counsellors, who are often part-time, rarely have their own permanent office or personalised working space. Consider your own needs as a counsellor.

- Do you favour a particular furniture arrangement, e.g. sitting in the chair nearest the door?
- How might you adapt to working in a non-personalised space?
- Are you able to build time in your day to arrange the space to meet your needs and those of your clients?
- Do you need an extra chair for two-chair exercises or access to a desk for paper-based exercises?

SOME GENERAL FEATURES OF STUDENT COUNSELLING

Counselling for students at all HE institutions in the UK is free. The counselling service, together with all student services, is centrally funded. Counsellors are employed by the university and the counselling service is responsible to the university for the professionalism of its work. The counselling service is both a discrete service and part of a much broader team concerned with many aspects of student welfare. Cross-service usage within student services is common and most clients, particularly those who are living away from home for the first time in their first year, are likely also to be registered with the university medical services.

The likelihood is that at a university counselling service – whatever its context or set-up – you will be involved at some time in liaison with other professionals. University students are generally very open to this kind of contact between services and other individuals, such as the academic tutor, and this can come as a surprise to counsellors who are used to working independently or in other kinds of counselling agency.

COMMON PRESENTING PROBLEMS IN HE

Students encounter all sorts of problems while at university. These may be external issues affecting a person’s ability to study or issues directly related to their academic experience. Respondents to the 2006–7 AUCC Annual Survey ranked ‘Depression and Mood Changes’, ‘Anxiety’, ‘Relationship Issues’ and ‘Academic Concerns’ as the four most common presenting issues.

Depression

Depression is the most common presenting issue for student counselling in the UK (AUCC Annual Survey, 2006–7). There are many reasons why depression is so prevalent in student life. The ‘Students Against Depression’ website (www.studentdepression.org) notes the following contributory factors.

- Rapidly increasing numbers of students attending university.
- Lack of control both in terms of students choosing university as a life path and the unstructured environment of university learning.
COUNSELLING IN HIGHER EDUCATION (HE)

- A sense of inferiority and unfavourable comparison with others.
- Perfectionist or all-or-nothing thinking about attainment in HE.
- Lifestyle issues such as late nights, heavy drinking and poor eating that do little to support well-being and mood.
- Peer pressure and the need to establish new social networks.
- Chronic stress and life events.

Signposting issues

An understanding of the contextual issues affecting students is vital for working with presenting concerns such as depression. Many students, regardless of how long they have been at an institution, are often unaware of the range of services available to them. In addition to services on campus, clients can also be signposted to online resources such as ‘Students Against Depression’ (www.studentdepression.org) and other support groups or resources to help deal with their problems.

Anxiety

Many students experience anxiety at university, especially in relation to academic work (explored in more detail below). However, students also experience other types of anxiety which can be closely linked to the precipitating factors for depression noted above. Clients sometimes present with acute forms of anxiety such as panic attacks or other anxiety-based disorders such as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder or social anxiety.

Signposting issues

In such instances it might be useful to signpost the client to additional sources of help such as the GP or their academic adviser should special arrangements be required for exams or presentations.

Transition issues

The transition to university life can prove particularly stressful for some students, especially those arriving from a different culture. However, the experience of living away from home and forging new relationships can also be stressful for UK students. Equally, at the end of a student’s university life, new anxieties might arise relating to moving on, entering the world of work and leaving behind the familiarity of formal education.
Signposting issues

It is useful for counsellors to have an understanding of transition issues and culture shock (for further information, see www.ukcisa.org.uk) and to know where students can find other appropriate help through signposting to the university careers service or the international students’ officer.

Relationship issues

Over the last thirty years the student profile has changed significantly and UEA is no exception to this. In addition to ‘traditional’ students, who are school-leavers studying full-time, there are also many ‘non-traditional’ students who bring a wide range of presenting issues. Mature students might be struggling to balance their academic work with family responsibilities; many come to recognise the inadequacy of existing relationships as they forge a new identity through new interests and new friends.

Overseas students are adapting not only to a new course, but also to a new culture and often feel particularly isolated. They require particular sensitivity on the part of the counsellor who will need not only to be aware of nuances of language but also might need to ask the client to explain unfamiliar aspects of their culture.

Younger students may have difficulty forging new relationships or experience difficulties when sharing lodgings for the first time. Often, students experience significant relationships for the first time or leave behind important relationships at home. Issues around sexual identity and finding a partner are also frequent concerns.

**ACTIVITY 3.2**

Consider how you might work with the following clients and list any appropriate signposting issues and other sources of help to which you might refer the client:

a. Anne was a mature student completing her final year dissertation; she came to counselling because her marriage had broken down and she wanted to talk through her decision to leave the family home.

b. Pan was a Chinese student studying maths. Although he had passed all the necessary language proficiency tests before coming to UEA, he was finding it very hard to understand his lecturers and was falling behind with his work. Pan was very ashamed to seek help and had not told anyone he was struggling.

c. James was a second-year undergraduate who came to counselling after an acrimonious break-up with his girlfriend. James felt isolated and low as he and his girlfriend shared many mutual friends at university. He had failed to submit two assignments and wanted to ‘get back on track’ with university life.
COMMENT

We make the following suggestions for Activity 3.2:

a. Depending on Anne's circumstances, it might be appropriate to signpost her to RELATE for couple counselling. Occasionally, university counselling services also offer couple counselling where one partner is a registered student. If Anne's home life is affecting her ability to work, it would be appropriate to advise her to inform her personal tutor as soon as possible and to seek advice about her academic situation. Tutors may be willing to grant deadline extensions or postpone work until the stressful situation has improved. In the authors' experience, schools of study usually prefer students to act proactively to avert academic problems rather than have to mitigate failure after the fact.

b. Pan would be appropriately signposted to an International Students' Officer or Learning Enhancement Tutor for additional help with assignments and English proficiency. Again, this person would usually be advised to seek advice from his school of study regarding the late submission of assignments before the situation deteriorated further.

c. Depending on the severity of James' low mood, his counsellor might suggest that he also see his GP to discuss how he is feeling. The non-submission of work might further lower James' motivation and mood. Again, it would be appropriate to advise the client to speak to his personal tutor regarding the late submission of assignments and ways to remedy his academic situation.

Academic concerns

Students often present for counselling complaining of general work-related problems such as procrastination, work-related anxiety or a lack of motivation. In these instances, there may be several underlying issues contributing to a global problem. It is useful for counsellors to have an idea of the kinds of educational problems students might encounter so that they can be appropriately signposted for specific help when needed.

Signposting issues

Students presenting with procrastination or a lack of motivation may have poorly developed study skills and would benefit from referral to a study skills tutor. Many students do not have experience of the kind of selective and pragmatic reading required for HE assignments. They become intimidated and bogged down by long reading lists and lose belief in their ability to work at an appropriate level and pace for HE. In these instances, guidance on reading skills, planning and structuring assignments is useful and appropriate.
For other students, the concept of independent learning can be frightening and full of risk, especially when often the only feedback students receive is on substantive assignments that contribute to their final mark. New students are often unsure of the academic territory at university and are looking for hard-and-fast rules for working. Some present for counselling in high distress following their first experience of ‘failure’. Counselling for these clients is often about understanding the meaning of failure, learning to trust themselves and accepting risk. The challenge for the counsellor in these instances is to stay with the anxiety and uncertainty of the client rather than to refer immediately to a study skills tutor or reference guide.

Academic members of staff are often the first to encounter a student’s distress or anxiety and may recommend counselling as a way of managing problems. Alternatively, however, academic tutors may have no idea that a student on their course is struggling emotionally and/or academically. Often, a counsellor’s only communication with academic staff is in the form of a memo or letter supporting a student’s academic appeal or submission of mitigating circumstances.

Counsellors rarely communicate with academic staff unless there is a specific request from the client to do so. Occasionally, an academic department might request confirmation that a client has attended counselling as a condition of returning from intercalation or to repeat a year. Again, any contact of this kind has to be agreed with the client.

**REFLECTION POINT**

At certain times of the year, e.g. prior to the exam period or prior to the main submission date for dissertations and project work, counselling services experience increased demand for sessions. At these times, some students present for counselling when they are at the point of imminent failure. As noted above, clients often request a ‘supporting memo’ for the submission of mitigating circumstances to the board of examiners when appealing against an unfavourable academic decision or to request a deadline extension.

- How might you respond to a client’s request for a supporting memo when the client had attended an initial assessment but then subsequently failed to attend their ongoing sessions?
RECENT CHALLENGES FOR COUNSELLING IN HE

Mental health and student well-being

In 2003, the Royal College of Psychiatrists’ report *The Mental Health of Students in Higher Education* set out a series of recommendations for HEIs to manage the increasing numbers of students with emotional and mental health needs. These included, in brief, promoting and providing information about mental health to students; providing appropriate care through counselling services and developing networks with local health providers to ensure the smooth transition of care for those whose needs cannot be met by the institution.

Most HEIs have now appointed a ‘Mental Health Coordinator’ or ‘Adviser’ to develop this mental health agenda, to encourage good practice and increase awareness of mental health issues across the institution. The role of the mental health coordinator is also to develop links with local providers, including the Primary Care Trust, psychiatrists and the Community Mental Health Team (CMHT).

Some university counselling services have regarded the introduction of mental health advisers with suspicion, particularly because they take on an advisory role within the institution and liaison with medical professionals previously regarded as the domain of the counsellors. The reality is that, with sensitivity on both sides, the mental health adviser’s specialist role frees counsellors to concentrate on those clients for whom therapeutic engagement is more possible.

*Signposting issues*

Counsellors need to have a good understanding of referral routes beyond their own service for clients whose needs are too complex or specific to be helped by the counselling service alone. Counsellors need to recognise and work within their own level of competence; not to do so risks reducing the student’s chances of obtaining appropriate help and wastes valuable counselling resources.

**Case study 3.1  John**

John was a regular counselling client, returning to counselling one month after the summer vacation. At the first session John appeared very withdrawn and told his counsellor that he had stopped taking his anti-depressant medication. He had not engaged in any work since returning to university and reported that he did
not feel like 'going on any more'. It was also apparent to the counsellor that John was not attending to his personal hygiene and the client admitted that he was 'barely eating'. John said he did not want to die but could not see how to get better. John's counsellor thought he should see his GP as soon as possible. With the client's permission, the counsellor walked with him to the University Medical Service to make an appointment to see the duty doctor that day and also contacted the university mental health coordinator to discuss how John could be best supported in his residence and with his studies.

**REFLECTION POINT**

An important theme of this chapter is the appropriate use of limited counselling resources. Counsellors are increasingly required to consider which clients can be best served by counselling and who might be appropriately referred elsewhere for help. Counsellors need to make important ethical decisions about the nature of the counselling offered. Some of the key debates raised by HE counselling include the following.

- Is counselling in this context appropriate only for symptom relief and problem solving? Or is it also appropriate and possible to offer deep relational work leading to broader personal development?
- Alternatively, should HE counselling provide ongoing support for clients with mental health difficulties who do not meet the criteria for intervention by other services?

In terms of your counselling experience so far, and the theoretical model of your work, consider the following questions.

- Who, in your view, are the kinds of clients who can be best helped by counselling?
- What is the difference between counselling and crisis resolution?
- In what circumstances might you decide to take action regarding a client's mental health?

**Learning disabilities**

The last thirty years have seen a large expansion of the numbers of students entering into HE in the UK and during that time there has been much talk about 'Widening Participation and Access' to HE. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) defines the widening participation agenda as:
Ensuring equality of opportunity for disabled students, mature students, women and men, and all ethnic groups.

(www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/)

HEIs are charged with ensuring not only fair access to prospective students but also equitable treatment of students during the course of their studies. Following the implementation of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001, FE and HE institutions are required to make reasonable adjustments for students with a disability to ensure that they are able to participate in academic activities to the same level as their peers. The legislation also requires that, as far as possible, adjustments should be anticipatory rather than reactive and applicable to all aspects of HEI provision. It is therefore relevant to counselling as a part of student services. As part of their work in HEIs, counsellors need an awareness of equality issues in their work, especially with regard to learning disabilities and other ‘unseen’ disabilities such as dyslexia, Asperger's syndrome or ADHD.

Signposting issues

A basic understanding of the common indicators for dyslexia might prove invaluable for a client who presents with issues to do with organisation and time management. The underlying problem might not be apparent to the client who presents with a set of symptoms relating to their learning that are causing anxiety and distress. Counselling may enable a client to manage difficult emotions regarding learning but, where there is a specific learning difficulty, it is not likely to assist them in passing their course unless they are also offered practical, tailored help specific to their needs. A referral to a dyslexia tutor would be appropriate in this case.

Financial pressures

Apart from those from the wealthiest backgrounds, many students experience considerable financial pressure, often needing to engage in menial part-time paid work to supplement their income. (The recent case of 'Belle de Jour' also highlighted the fact that some students reportedly go to extreme lengths to support their studies.) In recent years it has also been recognised that students from non-traditional – which are often the poorest – backgrounds are the group that are in greatest danger of dropping out of their studies and require a particularly high level of support.

Most undergraduate students in the UK take out loans for both their tuition fees and for their living costs throughout the year. Some students from low-income families may qualify for a full maintenance grant, currently £2,906, but will need to supplement this by taking part-time paid work. Other students operate on a combination of student loan and parental contri-
bution supplemented by part-time work. Postgraduate students may be funded by research councils and other charities, but many postgraduate students support themselves by taking out a Career Development Loan. At the end of their degree courses, therefore, most students end up considerably in debt. While signposting to Financial Advisers is part of the work of the student counsellor, financial pressure impacts more generally on students’ well-being and often features as one of many concerns in counselling sessions. A recent AUCC article points out that it is not uncommon for financial pressures to be a contributory factor in the emotional and academic decline of vulnerable students (2007, p.19).

Long-standing mental health issues and complex life circumstances add to financial pressures to make the experience of students from non-traditional backgrounds in HE particularly challenging. At the same time, the steady rise in tuition fees and the need for almost all students to take out some level of maintenance loan means that students increasingly regard themselves as consumers and have high expectations of the kind of service that they will receive.

**ACTIVITY 3.3**

- How might a client’s financial situation impact the counselling process?
- What expectations do clients bring with them when they see themselves as university customers paying for their education?

**GENERAL ISSUES FOR COUNSELLORS TO CONSIDER**

Waiting times and counselling contracts

The demand for places can lead to pressure on services and inevitably a wait for clients for ongoing sessions; 63.5 per cent of respondents to the 2006–7 AUCC survey reported a ‘significant waiting list’ during the year.

For the year 2006–7, however, only 38.5 per cent of respondents reported that they imposed a limit on the number of sessions offered. This seems a relatively low figure given the reported pressure on sessions. The nature of counselling in HEIs would seem to preclude the need for long-term counselling contracts in the majority of cases. In 2003, the Royal College of Psychiatrists reported that the average number of sessions in HEIs was 4.5. There are many reasons for the brevity of this average contract, for example, the majority of students are only continuously present at their institution for short periods of time (between 8 and 12 weeks for most undergraduates). Also, student clients often experience relatively quick
periods of change and progress with their issues. There are also many other factors as to why student clients are less likely to opt for longer term counselling. For example, students are often at university for relatively short periods of time with long breaks for vacations that can interrupt ongoing counselling relationships; client issues are often most pertinent at specific times during the year, e.g. during examination or transition periods and do not warrant longer term counselling; and termly timetable changes and extra-curricular commitments can also result in a temporary or permanent termination of sessions. The transitory nature of the student body also means that issues to do with relationships or interpersonal difficulties in shared accommodation can be resolved ‘naturally’ at the end of the year.

**Reflection Point**

Consider your experience of counselling to date.

- Has the majority of your work been long or short term?
- What is your usual pace of working?
- Do you set goals and plan your work with the client or do you allow the client to set the pace and direction from session to session?
- What are the implications for practice when working with a limited contract of six or eight sessions as opposed to an open-ended ongoing contract?
- Given that HE counsellors often work to a limit of six or eight sessions, what issues might be discussed in supervision and case management regarding clients who require extended episodes of counselling?

**Time boundaries**

Many students at university find themselves in an unstructured environment where they have long gaps in their timetable for self-directed learning. On the other hand, some courses have very busy timetables which vary from week to week. Attending a weekly counselling session can therefore be a challenge to many students. Counsellors may find themselves having to renegotiate appointment times or agreeing to alterations in the frequency of meetings depending on the client’s availability.

Where services operate a time-restricted counselling contract, the model used at most services is for a standard contract of six weekly sessions of 50 minutes duration, although research indicates that eight is the optimum number of sessions for short-term work (Cooper, 2008). Nevertheless, some flexibility is required for students who are on placements or for whom a tapered end to sessions will be most useful and for those who are particularly vulnerable or at risk, these boundaries have to be extended.
Counsellors also have to deal with the issue of non-attendance and frequent cancellations of sessions. Sometimes, this means ending a counselling contract with no satisfactory closure on the part of the counsellor. This can be an uncomfortable experience when the client was anxious or distressed but subsequently missed several sessions. Service policies will vary on this issue. Some services follow up a missed appointment by an email or telephone message and a provisional booking for the next one or two appointments. However, at peak times this might mean holding sessions that go unused when they could have been taken up by another client.

ACTIVITY 3.4

Write a list of the issues you might need to consider when terminating a counselling contract due to client non-attendance.

Personal boundaries

University counsellors sometimes have to negotiate interesting personal boundaries with clients. For example, counsellors may bump into clients on campus or when using university facilities such as the library, nursery or sports centre. Some counsellors have a blanket policy of never greeting a client unless first greeted by them. Others negotiate the issue of bumping into clients early on in their sessions or of necessity after a particularly awkward encounter.

Trainee counsellors who are also students at the institution where they are undertaking their placement might need to negotiate issues around partaking in campus social life – for example, being seen by clients in the union bar or attending the counselling service as clients themselves. Counsellors might themselves undertake study on part-time courses which clients might also choose to attend. Counsellors need to assess the appropriateness of participating in such activities, especially if the nature of the course necessitates self-disclosure or group work, while also balancing their own needs for CPD and self-development to gain or maintain accreditation.

Some clients develop strong feelings of dependence for their counsellor and experience loss and abandonment when sessions finish. Some may be very pleased to know that their counsellor is around on campus and may seek to prolong contact by inviting their counsellor to events such as art shows or drama productions long after counselling has finished.
REFLECTION POINT

Consider the boundaries of your therapeutic relationships to date.

- Are you likely to meet your clients outside of the counselling hour? If so, how do you prepare for this possibility?
- How would you feel if you bumped into a client at the gym or bar?
- How might you respond to an invitation from a client to attend an event on campus?

Counselling in a small community

In 2007, the AUCC estimated that the ratio of counsellors to students in the UK was about 4650:1 (AUCC, 2007, as yet unpublished). The potential for overlapping relationships between clients and counsellors is, therefore, great. Counsellors might become aware that they are seeing clients who are housemates or course peers. Sometimes, clients are overt in wanting friends to see their counsellor and this may be discovered during the assessment session of the friend in question or mid-way through the counselling process.

Case study 3.2  Barbara and Jane

Barbara had seen Jane, a second-year student, for several sessions when the client announced ‘Sally and I really think these sessions are helping. She tells me all about her sessions when she gets home but I don’t really say much about mine. If I’m honest, I was a bit jealous when she started to see you too.’ Until this point, the counsellor was not aware that the clients were flatmates as she saw them on different days and had never had occasion to use their contact details.

Confidentiality

All university counselling services abide by the ethical guidelines of a professional body such as the BACP. A copy of the Ethical Framework for Counsellors is generally visibly displayed and it is made clear that all counsellors subscribe to the principles of this Framework and that the service as a whole is run in keeping with its guidelines.

The counselling service in HE is a confidential service and clients can trust that no communication about them will ever be made without their explicit consent. In practice, this means that even if a parent or a member
of academic staff rings the service to query whether or not a student is attending counselling, the receptionist would not give this information. Notes kept on individual clients are confidential to the service. Although communication with other parts of the university about individual clients is common, it is only done with the explicit consent of the client. The extremely rare exception to this is when a client is regarded as being an extreme risk to self or others and the counsellor might choose, having consulted with senior colleagues, to break confidentiality and inform the medical services or the student services department of their concerns.

Risk

The evaluation of risk is an important aspect of working with clients in HE and aids the counsellor to make decisions about onward referrals. Most counselling services have an agreed risk policy whereby the files of clients who report that they are 'at risk' are flagged in some way to aid awareness of reception and counselling staff. Each counselling service will have its own approach to risk and you will need to be aware of policies and procedures regarding dealing with suicidal or 'at risk' clients.

Signposting issues

The fact that a university counselling service generally exists as part of a broader network of support is particularly helpful when dealing with an at-risk or suicidal client. The client would normally be asked if they have discussed how they are feeling with their GP or one of the mental health advisers. If appropriate, the counsellor might then ask if the client would be willing for contact to be made with the GP so that the most appropriate form of support could be discussed. It is extremely important in all these cases that the client's permission is sought where possible, as this kind of liaison needs to operate within the strict bounds of confidentiality.

When working with an at-risk or suicidal client, it is also useful to ensure that the client has information about out-of-hours crisis services such as the Samaritans or the out-of-hours GP. Most counselling services have local resource lists or crisis cards detailing such information that can be given out to clients during sessions or made available to clients in waiting rooms and on the internet.

Research summary

Most counselling services engage in some kind of evaluation of their counselling practice and give clients questionnaires to fill out at the end of their counselling
process. Other counselling services engage in more systematic evaluation through computer-based systems such as CORE (Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation). Qualitative data from questionnaires and quantitative data from outcome measures such as CORE can be included in the service's annual report to provide evidence of the usefulness and efficacy of the work of the counselling service to the broader institution.

**REFLECTION POINT**

- What experience do you have to date of using evaluative questionnaires with your clients?
- In terms of your own philosophical approach to counselling, what issues would you need to consider if required to routinely implement a measure such as CORE in your work?

**PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS AND PERSONAL QUALITIES NEEDED IN A COUNSELLOR IN HE**

Any counsellor wishing to work in HE will be expected have a degree plus a professional qualification in counselling, generally from a course accredited by BACP, UKCP, BABCP (the British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies) or (in Scotland) COSCA. Other practitioners may be registered with the BPS (British Psychological Society) or BPC (the British Psychoanalytic Council). If they are not already accredited by their professional body they should be working towards accreditation and to have completed at least 450 counselling hours. They need to be experienced in short-term as well as longer-term work and be prepared to work within the constraints of a time-limited framework.

It is not necessary to have a degree in any specific subject, but it is very important within the HE framework that counsellors have good written and oral communication skills in order to communicate effectively with colleagues within the broader university community.

Counsellors in HE are often expected to engage in some kind of teaching or group work, whether it be running counselling groups, leading sessions on stress management or teaching mindfulness to students or staff. Sometimes, teaching will be done in liaison with colleagues from other departments, particularly other sectors of student services. It is therefore not unusual for 'teaching and/or training experience' to be listed as one of the 'desirable' qualities on the person specification for a new counsellor post.
Many counsellors in HE now hold a master's level qualification and an increasing number of counsellors are qualified to doctoral level. The most important thing, however, if you want to work in this particular kind of counselling environment, is to gain relevant experience, either through being on placement at a university or college counselling service or through seeking voluntary work in this area. It would be very unusual indeed to be employed as a counsellor in HE immediately after obtaining a basic professional qualification, even if that qualification were at level 7. Table 3.2 outlines essential and desirable qualities for counsellors in HE.

**CHAPTER SUMMARY**

Counselling in HE operates within a highly structured context and is, in most successful HE institutions, a recognised and valued part of university welfare

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essential</th>
<th>Desirable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A degree</td>
<td>A Master's degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Diploma in Counselling from a BACP (or equivalent)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>accredited course</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual accreditation by BACP (or other professional body)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or working towards accreditation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experience and achievements</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience of time-limited or time-sensitive work</td>
<td>Teaching and/or training experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Skills and knowledge</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent written and oral communication skills</td>
<td>Specialist understanding of one or more counselling-related areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal attributes</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ability to work collaboratively and cooperatively with a team</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ability to work independently</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A willingness to work flexible hours when necessary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Special circumstances</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience of working in a HE or FE context</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2: Essential and desirable qualities for counsellors in HE.
provision for students and, in some institutions, staff. Counselling contributes to student retention and to the overall well-being of the university population. The counsellor working in this context needs to have understanding not only of the need for accountability but also of the broader structure in which counselling operates. In particular, the counsellor in HE needs to be aware of how and where to signpost students to other services when appropriate. As a counsellor in HE you are likely to find yourself negotiating a student’s needs with colleagues in other student service departments or writing memos in their support to academic staff. Managing the boundaries of confidentiality within this context needs to be done with sensitivity and helping other colleagues within the university to better understand the role of the counsellor is an important aspect of the work of the service. You might find yourself participating in the service’s evaluation and outcome procedures and perhaps writing a case study of your work for the annual report.

As universities nationwide face a funding crisis, counselling services are under great pressure: client numbers are increasing while resources remain either static or shrinking. Maintaining professional standards under this kind of pressure is an ongoing challenge for all counselling services in HE at this time. Students are themselves under financial pressure, amassing significant debt as they study, and the role of the counsellor in HE is increasingly one of enabling them to unpick the general sense of being overwhelmed with which they often present. The current challenge for the counsellor is to resist being overwhelmed herself: to understand when and how far counselling actually can help the student and when other resources – including those provided by the mental health adviser – are more appropriate. The counsellor in HE needs to work sensitively with the client and intelligently in terms of the client’s context.

Students in HE, whatever their age, are in a state of rapid transition and their potential for growth and change is huge. Those who become clients of the counselling service are likely to benefit not simply in terms of improving their current situation but in developing insight, self-awareness and coping skills for the rest of their lives. For the counsellor, the challenges of working in the HE context are many, but the rewards, particularly in terms of the benefits to individual clients, are great.

**SUGGESTED FURTHER READING**


A concise overview of HE in the UK.

Counselling in HE from a Psychodynamic perspective.


Counselling in HE from a humanistic/person-centred perspective.


A useful book for students.


Research into student needs in HE.


Counselling in HE from a psychodynamic perspective.

---

**ONLINE RESOURCES**

For counsellors:

[www.aucc.uk.com](http://www.aucc.uk.com) Association for University and College Counselling (AUCC).

For students:

[www.student.counselling.co.uk/index.htm](http://www.student.counselling.co.uk/index.htm) Student counselling in UK universities.

[www.studentdepression.org](http://www.studentdepression.org) Students Against Depression.

[www.thestudentroom.co.uk](http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk) Student discussion site.

For research postgraduates:

[www.vitae.ac.uk/](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/) For international students:

[www.ukcisa.org.uk/](http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/)