Learning and teaching in Counselling and Psychotherapy

A report identifying the current needs of the academic community delivering teaching and training in Counselling and Psychotherapy.

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Contents

Executive summary 3

1. Introduction 4

2. Background 4

3. Types of Counselling training in participating institutions 5

4. Challenges and opportunities for Counselling as a profession 6
   4.1 Work-life balance and self-care 6
   4.2 Students on Counselling courses 6
   4.3 The role and status of Counselling within HE 6
   4.4 Organisational issues 6
   The role of senior management 6
   Fees 7
   College-based HE 7
   Aspects of practice benefiting from research and/or development work 7
   4.5 Aspects of teaching deemed excellent and ideas about dissemination 8
   4.6 Overlaps between teaching methods in Counselling and other disciplines 8
   4.7 Career development 8
   Research methods teaching 8
   Working with students 8
   Lecturer development 8
   4.8 Issues facing the academic community that might benefit from HEA support 9
   4.9 Evidence-based practice in Counselling learning and teaching 9

5. Conclusion 9

6. Contributors 9
Executive summary

This report was produced as part of a scoping exercise conducted by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) to explore the current needs and aspirations of the Counselling and Psychotherapy higher education (HE) teaching and training community. Interviews with individuals from various stakeholder organisations, including universities, a further education college delivering Counselling training at higher education level, and the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy were used to inform the report.

Key priorities for the Counselling and Psychotherapy learning and teaching communities were identified as follows:

- there is a need to develop a research-informed evidence base around best practice in learning and teaching in Counselling and Psychotherapy;
- Counselling and Psychotherapy lecturers have a varied and demanding workload, incorporating the usual academic responsibilities alongside a requirement to maintain private practice, and support would be welcome for training to manage work-life balance and self-care;
- Counselling and Psychotherapy students are diverse and require additional support for their personal development; the community would benefit from continuing professional development opportunities to learn best practice in working with such students;
- there is a perceived lack of value of Counselling and Psychotherapy staff and courses, and those working in this area are keen to gain recognition and reward from the wider HE community;
- college-based staff perceive challenges with regard to working at HE level in a context where colleagues are delivering pre-tertiary education, with a different set of expectations and requirements, and would welcome additional support and HE-specific training;
- Counselling and Psychotherapy lecturers identified a need for training in research methods (quantitative and qualitative) both to inform their teaching and to support them in conducting pedagogic research.

There is a general enthusiasm within the community to develop learning and teaching practice with a view to enhancing the student learning experience, and the individuals we interviewed also identified some areas of existing best practice which they felt could benefit the wider HE sector. Specifically, they felt that Counselling and Psychotherapy tutors established good pastoral relationships with students, blended theoretical with practical learning, and facilitated students in developing strong employability skills. Peer feedback mechanisms are also well developed. The Counselling and Psychotherapy community would benefit from opportunities to disseminate these elements of good teaching practice, both within their own community and more widely.
1. Introduction

This report was produced as part of a ‘scoping exercise’ carried out by the Higher Education Academy in order to identify key priorities for those involved in learning and teaching within the Counselling, Psychotherapy and related fields. It provides a ‘snapshot’ of Counselling course provision in the United Kingdom higher education (HE) sector. For the purpose of this report, only Counselling learning and teaching in HE settings will be considered. This will include HE in Further Education (FE) provision, but not Counselling Psychology, which is delivered at professional doctorate level and regulated by the British Psychological Society (BPS) and the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), FE provision or training delivered by the National Health Service (NHS).

Background information about Counselling training was collected from tutors delivering HE-level training in Counselling and related disciplines, who were approached opportunistically, and asked for their views via emails, phone calls and visits.

2. Background

Counselling and Psychotherapy are helping professions focusing on encouraging people to talk about their problems and implement change through this. Their roots are diverse – there are links to psychology, education, religion and medicine, which makes for a very diverse set of professions and professionals. There is some debate about similarities and differences between Counselling and Psychotherapy, which centre mostly round the level and duration of training, and the type of work undertaken with clients. There is no universal agreement that they are indeed different professions, or just two words for the same occupation. If distinctions are to be made, usually Psychotherapy is seen as a more in-depth training (typically to Masters degree level) and working with clients on deep-seated rather than recent issues.

There are many theoretical models of Counselling, as well as integrations of these models and eclectic approaches. The most well known of these models are psychodynamic, person-centred and cognitive-behavioural approaches. Evidence suggests that (once researcher allegiance effects are controlled for) there are no significant differences in effectiveness between approaches. Most HE-delivered Counselling training is either within one theoretical framework, or integrates several of these into an integrative model, which can then vary in terms of its theoretical basis.

In addition to different theoretical models, there appear to be differences in the ‘level-ness’ of courses in HE, with some awarding practitioner-level courses at undergraduate level, and some at postgraduate level. This results in it not always being clear whether a counsellor has a qualification at pre-tertiary (these are not so common anymore now that the Further Education Funding Council, FEFC, funding has ceased for vocational courses), undergraduate or postgraduate level.

Professionalisation of Counselling has also been complicated due to the great diversity in approaches, training and employment/voluntary work settings. In addition, practitioner psychologists and some practitioners in allied health professions, such as art therapists, have become regulated by the HCPC, but Counselling and Psychotherapy are not.

There are currently two main bodies representing counsellors and psychotherapists – the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) and the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP). They serve as both membership organisations as well as upholding standards for professionals, although this has no legal standing.

Despite (or maybe because of) the long-standing absence of statutory regulation, BACP and UKCP accreditation have become ‘industry standard’ over the past years. UKCP accredits courses, and by following one of those courses, the individual student becomes accredited by UKCP. The largest scheme, BACP accreditation, exists in two types: course accreditation and individual accreditation. Completing an accredited course does not confer automatic individual accreditation, but makes the individual accreditation process less of an administrative burden. Individual accreditation can be achieved by completing a course (accredited or not accredited, as long as core areas are covered) in addition to evidencing a minimum amount of client work that has to be accumulated post-training, and evidence of professional standing (assessed through the application process). Increasingly, employers ask for BACP accreditation or eligibility for this, and it can be difficult for counsellors to find
employment without this. For both schemes, courses can achieve accreditation by meeting certain standards of training. Courses generally have to include minimum hours and standards of personal development, theory, ethical awareness and skills development.

Moves towards statutory regulation, which were in fairly advanced stages, were halted after the last general elections. There will now be a voluntary professional register which is due to be implemented soon.

Education of counsellors has traditionally been delivered in a variety of settings. This has led to a proliferation of Counselling courses in HE and FE settings, and also in voluntary sector agencies and private training institutions. In addition, the NHS provides training for employees, predominantly cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT). In recent years, funding restrictions by FEFC have caused a large drop in courses offered in FE settings. Most Counselling courses now appear to be delivered by HE institutions, with some provision by private providers, who increasingly work with universities to accredit courses academically.

Against this backdrop, conversations were held with lecturers teaching Counselling in HE settings, as well as with the current chair of BACP, about issues facing people involved in delivering Counselling and Psychotherapy training and ways in which they felt that the HEA could support them in delivering an excellent student learning experience. They were asked to comment on areas in which they needed support for development, and areas in which they possessed expertise from which the HE community more widely could benefit. The remainder of this report presents the views expressed by the teachers and trainers, through face-to-face interviews, group sessions, emails and telephone calls.

3. Types of Counselling training in participating institutions

Most informants' institutions deliver a suite of Counselling programmes. A typical suite consists of:

- a short introductory/taster course (ranging from a weekend to 10 weeks). These are typically not credit rated;
- a Certificate in Counselling Skills – usually about one year, part-time. This will give a good grounding in listening skills, but is not in itself sufficient to become a counsellor;
- a Diploma in Counselling - professional training phase, usually about two years, part-time;
- a Masters degree level qualification – an additional year part-time, either integrated into a professional qualification or as a stand-alone year.

In some cases, there are both part-time and full-time strands. Some offer ‘escape routes’, or early exit awards, for those who fail to meet standards to become professional counsellors.
Some organisations offer Bachelor level courses in Counselling, also leading to practitioner status, or degrees with a Counselling component (typically Psychology or coaching/mentoring), which would not fulfil current expectations of the training qualified counsellors will have had – they are generally seen as certificate/counselling skills level.

Some institutions also offer post-professional training, such as supervision certificates, day workshops or other post-professional certificates.

4. Challenges and opportunities for Counselling as a profession

A number of challenges and opportunities for Counselling as a profession were identified, and these relate to wider issues of lecturers teaching Counselling in HE, as well as more personal issues:

4.1 Work-life balance and self-care

All university informants commented on the demanding nature of the role of Counselling lecturer. In addition to being an academic, with career development needs in relation to academic issues, there are also expectations that lecturers are practising counsellors. This often means having to manage multiple part-time work roles, carrying risk of overworking. This is not always understood well by HE institutions.

4.2 Students on Counselling courses

Comments were made about the nature of counselling training, in particular issues around liaison and organisation of placements and relationships with students. Students are expected to work with their ‘self’ and emotions. Inevitably they go through a period of personal development and at times this can result in students with demands that exceed those of the typical student.

4.3 The role and status of Counselling within HE

The current climate in HE is unsure and Counselling lecturers are very aware of their vulnerable position as a subject area. Most of the informants worked in Psychology departments and felt that integration offered at least some protection. The increasing emphasis on universities adopting business models for course delivery poses threats to labour intensive courses. BACP accreditation of courses is seen as desirable for marketing and quality control purposes by course teams, but the requirements for staffing levels, staff:student ratios and contact hours can create tension between course teams and senior management.

In addition, similar course titles do not always cover the same content and this may lead to confusion and unfair competitive advantages. More integration of Counselling as a profession into the NHS is seen by some as essential for survival. BACP is currently working on planning for the future workforce, which will lead to better career pathways for the whole of the profession, including attention to career development for counsellors in areas such as management, supervision, and post-qualification training. Although this is a strategy for the whole of the profession, this will of course also impact on those counsellors involved in delivering training in HE. BACP sees the role of HE as vital in ensuring the development and survival of Counselling as a profession.

There are major concerns about the status of the profession. Employability is a significant issue for students. Paid employment is difficult to come by for newly-qualified practitioners and this often means that ex-students have to continue working in voluntary roles. The impact of this on the status of the profession is of concern, as this may devalue it. There are increasing opportunities for counsellors in education, and training providers will need to ensure that the programmes they offer are equipping Counselling students to work in these settings.

The recent provision of Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) benchmarks for teaching and learning in Counselling and Psychotherapy (available from http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Subject-benchmark-statement-counselling-psychotherapy.aspx) marks a welcome formal recognition of Counselling and Psychotherapy training within the HE sector. Both BACP and the HEA have been involved in the consultation. BACP is keen to engage with the HEA further and to involve the Department of Health in discussions about Counselling training.

4.4 Organisational issues

Several issues were raised consistently by participating Counselling teachers and trainers, and these will now be outlined.

The role of senior management

In terms of their own organisation, all informants commented that getting the senior management of their organisation on board and understanding the needs of Counselling training was vital for the survival of courses. ‘Pure’ business models focussing on full costing were seen as a threat too as they impact directly on staffing resources.
Fees
Some informants commented that the increase in fees for undergraduate courses could impact negatively on Counselling training. Some training is delivered at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, which could create greater financial difficulties for those without degrees to access Counselling training, while those doing postgraduate routes would be less affected. At one university, undergraduate and postgraduate levels are co-taught, and the university has undertaken, for this year, to charge the undergraduate students similar amounts to the postgraduate students. The full impact of increased undergraduate tuition fees cannot yet be predicted.

College-based HE
A lecturer delivering HE-level Counselling in an FE setting described the difficulties arising from the low profile of Counselling courses and the difficulties involved in integrating HE students in an FE environment. In addition, the FE institution did not allow sufficient time for preparation of teaching at HE level. Her link colleague in HE also described difficulties in raising the bar for students in this environment to ensure that they are meeting HE standards.

Aspects of practice benefiting from research and/or development work
It was acknowledged that much research and development work remains to be done in Counselling. Some informants expressed a strong interest in being involved in active research or were already in the process of planning this.

It appears that much Counselling training is delivered according to tradition, but there is some doubt whether the current prevalent teaching practice would stand up to scrutiny. In any event, there is a desire for building evidence-based teaching in HE and Counselling pedagogy is seen as a useful and under-researched area.

Some of the main areas for further or initial research identified were:
- does Counselling training actually work (effectiveness, pedagogical principles, rationale)?
- evaluation of personal development groups (accommodation of individual rates of development, modes of delivery, level of structure);
- evaluation of methods of teaching Counselling skills (peer feedback development, using actors to portray clients as opposed to practising on peers);
- evaluation of the usefulness of personal therapy for students (this is a course requirement for most students);
- how can students best be helped to develop ethical awareness?
- how can other skills be embedded in the curriculum (link to employability, literacy, using technology)?
- to what extent does skills practice prepare for the reality of practice?
- longitudinal study to investigate what happens to students when they qualify.
4.5 Aspects of teaching deemed excellent and ideas about dissemination
Informants agreed that personal contact was an area of excellence. The quality of the relationship between students and lecturers was seen as key for successful Counselling training. The blend of experiential and more theoretical learning was also identified as good practice. Students are helped to make their subject ‘real’ and because of the placement element of professional-level training they were felt to be generally better prepared for the workplace than the average student.

Well-developed peer feedback mechanisms and diversity in the staff team were also seen as areas of excellence frequently found within Counselling education.

Ideas about dissemination were less well developed. Counselling lecturers do not always have access to professional conferences unless they are research active, and a role for HEA in developing dissemination of good practice would be welcomed.

4.6 Overlaps between teaching methods in Counselling and other disciplines
Natural links were seen with coaching and mentoring, Psychology (especially developmental and clinical Psychology) and allied health professions. Colleagues at one institution had recently had a discussion with a colleague delivering clinical Psychology training, and had been struck by the similarities in teaching methods.

One colleague commented that many of the teaching strategies used in Counselling training could be transferred easily into mainstream undergraduate Psychology teaching. This applies to, for example, mini-lectures, discussion of journal articles, the use of audio-visual material and different modes of teaching, including, for example, intensive delivery over a shorter period of time interspersed with periods of self-directed study.

The same colleague discussed the use of innovative teaching methods, such as the use of actors in portraying clients. Traditionally, Counselling students practise their skills on each other in peer groups, and then spend time in a counselling placement working with ‘real clients’. While this traditional model allows students to pace their learning, using actors would bring an element of the unknown to the skills teaching that might enhance students’ learning.

4.7 Career development
There was considerable interest from participants in HEA collaboration around continuing professional development (CPD) for university teaching professionals. In a cash-strapped educational sector, it is important that CPD provision is low cost. There are, however, additional and sometimes hidden costs to staff development time. Counselling training is labour intensive, staff are sometimes highly specialised and cover cannot always be arranged easily, particularly when staffing levels are at the bare minimum. It is sometimes difficult to release staff and ensure they are able to use the time freed up for training without having to make up for this afterwards. Work-life balance issues and requirements to be practitioners as well as academics may make time as important a factor as cost.

It is therefore important that CPD and career development opportunities for Counselling academics are specifically for Counselling academics, relevant to working in universities, low cost or free, and easily applied to teaching practice.

The areas indicated as priority areas gained considerable agreement. They fall into these main groupings:

Research methods teaching
Although this is starting to change, historically research methods training is a weak area in the academic counselling community, as many came into teaching via practice. In addition, not all lecturers in this area are psychologists, and many do not have any research methods background. There is a great need to up-skill Counselling tutors to become competent and enthusiastic researchers who can inspire a future generation of students to take up research themselves. This is an area in which BACP has invested time and effort over the last few years, resulting in a resource pack for lecturers (http://wam.bacp.co.uk/wam/Search.exe?DETAIL=13066) but many would benefit from principled training in both qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

Working with students
There are many CPD opportunities available for counsellors, but a dearth specifically for lecturers in this field. Issues relating to working with student diversity are seen as important. This includes disability issues in training such as having to work with note-takers and confidentiality, reasonable adjustments and the interface with placements, dealing with student complaints, intermitting students who are finishing placement hours, and fitness to practise issues. These are all issues that universities have policies and procedures for, and yet in Counselling training there are often additional considerations that need to be made due to the nature of the training.

Lecturer development
Working in diverse teams staffed by people who may have additional employment outside of the organisation leads to challenges. There is a need for CPD that addresses this and works with lecturers to get the best out of and enhance the diversity of the team. Informants agree that there is often very little time or opportunity for reflection and sharing of good
practice and this too is an area that may benefit from further assistance. One informant summarised it as ‘all the stuff the [formal teaching qualifications run by universities] does not give you’.

4.8 Issues facing the academic community that might benefit from HEA support

Several main themes arose when discussing areas in which respondents felt that HEA support would be welcome. Firstly, it was felt that HEA could provide input to the process of having Counselling recognised as an academic subject in its own right. Secondly, recognition for the professionalism and status of Counselling lecturers in HE would be much welcomed. Finally, there needs to be much more recognition of the labour intensive nature of training students to become counsellors, without this necessarily only being seen in terms of costs.

4.9 Evidence-based practice in Counselling learning and teaching

Several colleagues who were interviewed for this study have active involvement in research and are planning further projects. In general, opportunities for Counselling lecturers to carry out research in Counselling learning and teaching are still limited. This is not helped by the fact that in some universities, Counselling staff are seen as less qualified than psychologists, and may be on teaching-only or lower grade contracts.

One informant plans to work on a development of practice toolkit (in terms of pedagogy) and is interested in the use of actors and humour in teaching.

Another is preparing a research grant application to examine trainees’ experiences of on-line clinical supervision and is looking to organise a one-day event to explore best practice in relation to culturally-sensitive counselling in multi-faith Britain.

Another is supervising a PhD student who is working on research in the area of boundaries in Counselling, a major element of learning about Counselling.

5. Conclusion

There is considerable agreement among those who took part in this scoping exercise about some of the issues facing practitioners delivering Counselling teaching and learning in HE:

- Counselling in HE is seen as relatively vulnerable due to the labour-intensive nature of the course and the uncertainty in HE in general;
- HEA support is very much welcomed and several informants have expressed an interest in being involved in further collaborations with HEA. A special interest group or working party seems like a viable prospect;
- BACP, as a professional organisation representing a large proportion of counsellors and Counselling training accreditation in the United Kingdom, is also keen to enter into dialogue with HEA about how Counselling learning and teaching, and staff development to sustain and expand on current qualities, can be developed;
- HEA support for CPD opportunities for Counselling trainers is welcomed;
- there is significant need for evaluation work of several aspects of Counselling training.

There currently is little research in this area and a number of good ideas. Insufficient research methods training, workload issues, managing multiple roles and other developmental needs that have to be prioritised, tend to get in the way of this research being carried out. HEA support and development grants may help remove some of these obstacles.

6. Contributors

Contributors were from a variety of UK universities and one college-based higher education provider, from diverse geographical locations, working within a variety of theoretical frameworks, and from a selection of mission groups. The BACP was also involved in this consultation.

The United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) was regrettably unavailable to participate.

The HEA is very grateful for the insight provided by all those participants who took time to contribute to this report.
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