



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH
Student Counselling Service

Annual Report 2023-2024

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The Report

This annual report covers the academic session from August 2023 to July 2024

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This report can be provided in alternative formats on request.

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“Everyone I communicated with/came into contact with at the service was very approachable, professional, and friendly.” Student feedback

A. Summary of the impact of activities from the previous academic year on the student experience and how these contribute to the University’s Strategy.

1. Consolidation of the team, and the management team in particular, has gone well. We have had a turnover in counselling staff but have been recruiting successfully with new counsellors meeting our criteria in terms of qualifications and experience.
2. We have continued to develop the Skills for Life and Learning programme. Attendance increased and an additional workshop was introduced. The programme won the Herald Higher Education Award 2024 for Supporting Student Wellbeing (details below).
3. We monitor demand and capacity on a regular basis (daily, weekly and monthly), Our KPI response times improved, enabling us to offer support closer to the point of need. Further comment on our KPI response times is detailed below.
4. We continue to explore with the Director of Student Wellbeing and NHS Lothian models of pathways to facilitate referral and access into NHS secondary care/Community Mental Health Teams. This is ongoing, but we have seen a considerable improvement in communication from NHS Lothian staff (Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh Psychiatric liaison, Royal Edinburgh Hospital, Intense Home Treatment Team, Thrive and Community Mental Health Teams) as appropriate in relation to student contact, treatment and support.
5. The problems we experienced with the People and Money system have been fewer. There is greater transparency with our budget. We had a mini-restructure of administrative support and appointed a Finance Administrator

from the team to support processing of Purchase Orders and Invoices for the Counselling Service as a whole (Student Counselling, Staff Counselling and the Equally Safe Team). We have, though, experienced problems with staff accessing and recording the completion of mandatory training through the People and Money system.

How we link to the University's Strategy 2030

As a professional counselling service, and an integral part of the University's student wellbeing provision, we reflect the University's Strategy 2030 particularly in our values and people.

Values

- We aim to achieve excellence in all that we do, always being principled, considerate and respectful.
- We are ambitious, bold and act with integrity, always being willing to listen.
- We foster a welcoming community.
- We are a place of transformation and of self-improvement, driven to achieve benefit for individuals, communities, societies and our world.

People

- We continue to welcome and bring together people from a wide range of backgrounds and experience, both close to home and across the globe.
- We encourage and take care of one another. We will provide support in times of difficulty and celebrate every success. We will build relationships that are mutually beneficial and constructive.
- We value the contribution of every individual, regardless of whether they are students, staff or other contributors. We support each other's development and career progress.
- We set an example for others by conducting ourselves with integrity, transparency, honesty and clarity.
- We are open to change to best support the academic mission of the University and ensure we have policies and procedures that are people focused, efficient and effective.

“The student counselling service has helped me work with my issues and I highly recommend it to everyone in university as it is really accessible and straightforward.”

“I would recommend to any other student. The uni's counselling services feel less overwhelming than other services I went to, making one feel less intimidated in seeking help.” Student feedback

B. Measures of Success

Reflection on user engagement and feedback, service use, partnership working and externality.

The Service gathers evaluations and feedback on three activities:

1. We send all students who have had one or more appointments with counselling an online evaluation form.
2. We invite feedback from the online Skills for Life and Learning workshops
3. We get hard copy feedback from the Paws Against Stress/Therapy dogs events we run.

All our evaluations are anonymised, with general feedback given via our published Annual Reports [student-counselling-annual-reports](#) and FOI FAQ page [student-counselling FOI FAQs](#)

2023-24 Service Evaluation results based on 29% return rate

Student feedback on their experience of contact with the Service. Students found the Service

- Informative – 95%
- Approachable – 98.5%
- Responsive – 97%
- Accessible – 94%

Experience of waiting times for service

Waiting time experienced	Too short	Just right	Too long
From self-referral to initial appointment	1%	70%	21%
From initial appointment to counselling	nil	59%	33%

“I was struggling a lot to the point where I was having trouble going through my daily life. I am thankful for this service since they made me feel heard and that they helped me set boundaries with the people who were causing me hurt. The counsellors I met with were the best, and they really knew how to talk to people and help them even if they came from different cultures - something that I really appreciated.”
Student feedback

The online evaluation includes the **Clinical Impact on Academic Outcomes (CIAO)** responses:

To what extent would you say that counselling...	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Helped you stay at university?	68%	74%	77%	73%
Helped you do better in your academic work?	87%	64%	69%	70%
Improved your overall experience of university?	92%	77%	84%	86%
Helped you develop skills that might be useful in obtaining future employment?	89%	81%	84%	87%

CIAO responses vary annually based on individual student concerns.

“It is definitely a really worthwhile service and I'm glad that I was able to use it as I really benefitted from it.” Student Feedback

Skills for Life and Learning evaluation summary

- 94% overall satisfaction rate
- Top three benefits gained from the workshops: 'new ideas', 'improved knowledge and understanding' and 'refreshment of existing skills and knowledge'.

Some student quotes on the workshops:

'Well-structured session; providing enough space for attendees to fully reflect themselves and respond; useful links offered for further reflection'

'One of the most thought-provoking and interactive sessions I've attended anywhere'

'The exchange with the others – knowing that we're all in the same boat'

'Talking in the chat box with everyone. It felt safe because you didn't have to show your face or speak. It was good hearing others' struggles because I felt not so alone'

'Friendly, accepting and empathetic approach, non-judgemental atmosphere'

'I liked the opportunity to share in the chat, I find this much, much better than breakout rooms. I especially like that a resource pack was shared afterwards'

Paws Against Stress/Therapet events evaluation

As a consequence of building issues in the Chaplaincy we held two events at Kings Buildings, with 91 students attending the sessions in total.

- 98% felt strongly or very strongly it acted as a useful break from study
- 100% would do again
- 100% would recommend it
- 93% felt less stress after the event
- Best thing about it was interaction with dogs (41%), followed by interaction with dog+handler (19%)

Reflecting on evaluation and feedback, students clearly express a range of satisfaction and positive outcomes from their experience of the Service. Where dissatisfaction continues to be expressed is on (a) response times and the length of wait for services (though our response times have improved over the past year) and (b) the number of sessions available through the brief therapy model of delivery. There is no 'one size fits all' number of sessions, and within the context of brief therapy sessions are arranged on the basis of assessed need. Over the year 30% of students had over four counselling sessions. There is a strong evidence base for positive outcomes through brief therapy, and as the University is a Higher Education Provider, not a Mental Health Provider, our services are aimed at supporting students through their programmes of study. We are not attempting to replace or make up for shortfalls of NHS services.

C. Analysis of service use

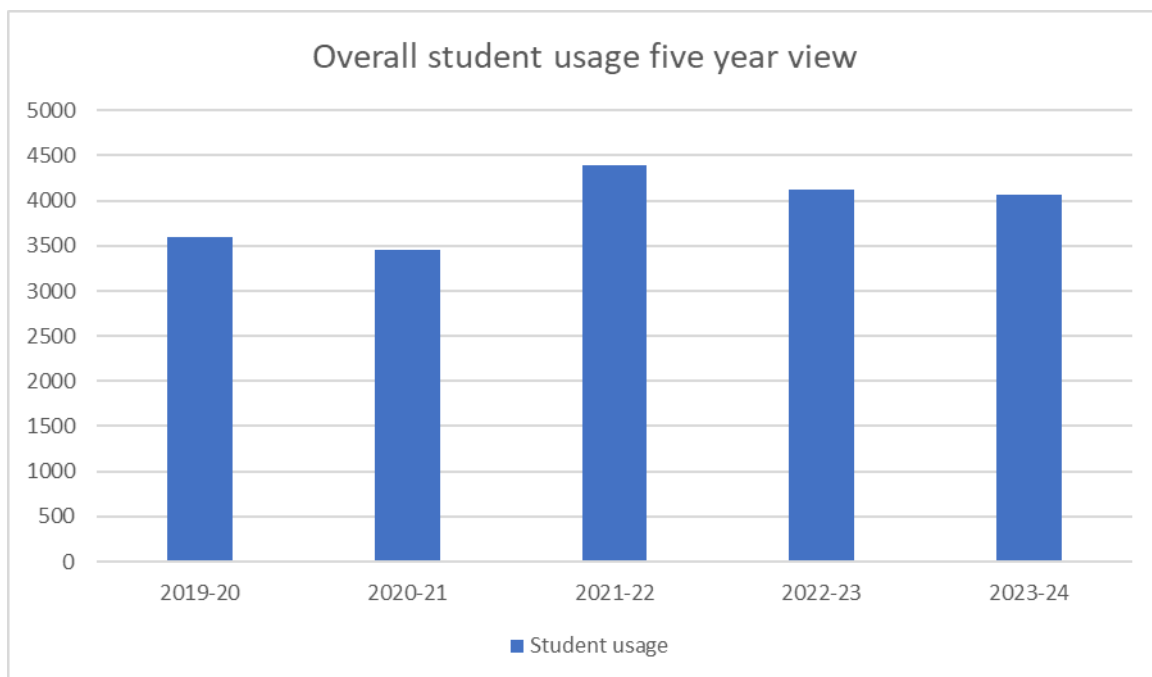
Students accessing the service:

Students accessing the service:

1. There were 3533 New referrals (down 2.3% on 2022-23)
2. 171 Students attended Same Day Appointments
3. There were 487 attendances at SLL workshops (10% increase)
4. 87 students were seen by the Student Mental Health Coordinator
5. 91 students attended two Paws Against Stress events at Kings Buildings.
6. The profile of student users of the Service remains consistent with previous years (2022-23 in brackets):
 - male 25%/female 75% (no change)
 - UG 61% (61%) PGT 26% (27%) PGR 13% (12%)
 - UK 47% (48%) International 53% (52%)

International students using the Student Counselling Service were from 110 different nationalities.

As reported last year, there were two groups who were underrepresented: male students and Chinese students. The reflection on the challenges for male students was commented on in last year's report and has not changed. We are however closing the gap with Chinese students, who formed 17% of our referrals out of 18.7% in the University population.



"I'm infinitely grateful to my counsellor- she was so welcoming and friendly, and gave me space to talk about things I'd never been able to talk about before. I feel better equipped to get better now." Student feedback

Students presented with a range of issues, but with no significant changes in the proportion of the most common issues:

2023/24	Anxiety 28.5%	Depression 13%	Academic 8%	Loss 8%	Relationships 9%	Self and Identity 8.5%
2022/23	Anxiety 29%	Depression 15%	Academic 9%	Abuse 6%	Relationships 8%	Self and Identity 8%
2021/22	Anxiety 33%	Depression 16%	Academic 8%	Abuse 8%	Relationships 7%	Self and Identity 7%
2020/21	Anxiety 31%	Depression 20%	Academic 17%	Abuse 5%	Relationships 6%	Self and Identity 10%

Key Performance Indicator – Response Times

Referral to Assessment	2023-24	2022-23	2021-22	Assessment to Counselling	2023-24	2022-23	2021-22
1 week	65%	64%	53%	1 week	33%	28%	31%
2 weeks	15%	22%	10%	2 weeks	23%	24%	20%
3 weeks	12%	9%	5%	3 weeks	13%	23%	7%
4 weeks	6%	3%	5%	4 weeks	9%	9%	6%
4+ weeks	2%	2%	27%	4+ weeks	24%	26%	36%

These figures show steady improvement, as a result of demand and our capacity to respond. What these statistics do not show is that for the past year the longest wait for an offer of a counselling appointment we quoted was six weeks (during semester 2), which is a significant reduction over the previous two years.

Students continue to make good use of the digital supports available:

Togetherall (online mental health peer support platform) reported 566 new student registrations

SilverCloud (online Cognitive Behavioural Therapy modules) reported 382 student users

Counselling Outcomes

Severity Rating	Pre-Counselling (recorded at initial appointment)	Post-Counselling (recorded at last counselling session)
Mild – ranges from normal issues of living to issues having a negative but limited impact	3%	40%
Moderate - experiencing anxiety and distress, affecting one or more areas of functioning significantly.	70%	55%
Severe - severe anxiety and distress affecting all areas of functioning; limited coping; may self-harm; acting out; hopelessness; overwhelmed; suicidal thoughts/intent.	27%	5%

Over the course of the year there was an 8% increase in the number of students presenting in the most severe/risk categories (402 students). These students are seen urgently. Although we are not a crisis service, we do work with students experiencing mental health crises.

"I definitely recommend the counselling service to others, as it gave me a space to talk and process what I was going through, and that was immensely helpful."
Student feedback

Partnership working: with Schools, Colleges and other services

Our primary role in collaborating with Schools and Colleges is in responding to student referrals, often prompted or encouraged by School staff. Our secondary role is through offering advice and consultation to staff in relation to escalation of concerns about students, which is delivered by our clinical management team (Director and Assistant Directors) and the Student Mental Health Coordinator (mental health nurse) through individual consultations, case conferences and Support for Study panels.

Over the course of the year we (a) contributed to the training of new Student Advisers (b) spoke to Wellbeing Advisers at the Student Wellbeing Service Away Day (c) spoke to staff at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital and Intense Home Treatment Team and the University GP practice and (d) collaborated with Student Advisers, Wellbeing Advisers and the new Student Wellbeing Service as a whole, in sharing appropriate information and providing joined up support for students on a case-by-case basis.

We maintain our link with the Vet School, who fund the delivery of counselling one afternoon per week at the Easter Bush campus.

In collaboration with colleagues in the Disability and Learning Support Service we facilitated the Student Mental Health training aimed at academic and student support staff.

Sharon Wagner, Assistant Director, provided non managerial supervision/reflective practice support to staff of the Chaplaincy.

Our collaboration with Problem Shared continued over 2023-24. This resource (offering online counselling augmenting our provision) has been used by 212 students to date, with 98 using this in 2023-24. We aimed this additional resource during semester two primarily at final year undergraduates. All students are assessed by Student Counselling Staff, and Problem Shared work with students who are not at risk and are resident in the UK. Of all students who are suitable for Problem Shared, and were offered the referral to their service, 66% of students prefer to wait longer for support from the Student Counselling Service.

The Director contributed to the development of the University's Suicide Safer Strategy, and is also a member of Universities Scotland mental health group, and the Scottish Governments Student Mental health working group.

The Director meets regularly, three times per week, with the Director of Student Wellbeing, and the Heads of DLSS, Student Wellbeing Service, Chaplaincy, the Senior Policy Adviser and the Head of Residence Life as required, to share information on our services and to coordinate our support for students presenting with escalated concerns.

We work closely with colleagues in the Equally Safe Team, and provide the team with administration support.

Dr Jenny Leeder, Assistant Director, continues to deliver training on breaking bad news to patients to the students on the BSc Oral Health Sciences programme in Edinburgh Dental Institute.

Collaboration on the ReDD project

Between October and June, Assistant Directors Jenny Leeder and Neil Hargreaves collaborated with colleagues from Oxford University and Digital Skills in Information Services, on a pilot project delivering a workshop on Reducing Digital Distraction (ReDD). Smartphones, computers, and other digital devices are essential for university students and staff. But many struggle to use their devices without paying a heavy price in the form of digital distraction disrupting work focus, sleep, or social connection. The ReDD workshop is a 90-minute coaching intervention that empowers people to control their digital device use. It helps participants to: i) articulate their challenges and goals around digital device use, ii) apply relevant digital focus tools to achieve their goals.

Seven workshops (three by University of Edinburgh staff) were delivered to 80 participants.

Four other UK Universities took part in the pilot, with Edinburgh having the largest number of workshops delivered and participants. Across the pilot as a whole, participants overwhelmingly found the workshop's elements 'highly' or 'moderately useful' and said that the workshop provided strategies that would be good solutions to their challenges. In addition, 96% would 'recommend the workshop to a friend'.

These results are very encouraging for the next phase of the project, which involves other student services staff within the University of Edinburgh being trained to deliver the workshop over a wider group of students and staff.

Externality

BACP Accreditation

Since 2006, the Service has had Accredited Service status awarded by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. The BACP Service Accreditation Scheme provides status and validation for the accredited service, and provides robust evidence of service quality and professionalism. BACP accreditation demonstrates that an organisation offers an ethical and professional counselling service for clients, staff, volunteers and stakeholders. In addition, accredited services are bound by the BACP Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions. All BACP Accredited Services have demonstrated a high quality of service delivery, meeting benchmark standards that are maintained by annual monitoring and reporting. The Service successfully met all criteria for our BACP Accredited Service Annual Rolling review.

The University of Edinburgh is one of 12 UK Universities whose counselling services are accredited by the BACP (the only one in Scotland), and we are one of only two counselling services of any kind in Scotland to be accredited by the BACP.

The Service takes part in the activities of Heads of University Counselling Services (HUCS) and HUCS Scotland. The Director is also a member of the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors (AUCCCD), and is able to benchmark service activities with similar services in North American universities and internationally. The Director also co-facilitated meetings in the Health and Wellbeing Centre with representatives from Student Support at Queensland University of Technology, Emmanuel College at the University of Queensland, and hosted a visit from the Director of Counselling from Pace University, New York.

Herald Higher Education Award for Supporting Student Wellbeing

In May the Service's Skills for Life and Learning programme was awarded a prestigious Herald Higher Education Award for Supporting Student Wellbeing, which The Herald team described as a remarkable achievement and a testament to our dedication, hard work, and excellence within the sector and to the wider Scottish Higher Education establishment. In making the award the panel of judges commented: "The rate of growth for this innovative project is remarkable, and although it still services a minority of students overall, the type of support on offer, and the interest from outside the UK, made this scheme from the University of Edinburgh stand out."

This is the second Herald HE Award the Service has won in five years, having won the award for Partnership in 2019 for the introduction of the Feeling Good App.

D. Staff development activity

Staff received input on Togetherall, updating the team and exploring the usage demographic, user feedback and developments on the platform, to fully inform them of the benefits of Togetherall as a source for referral, also outlining the research project between Togetherall and the University on the evidence base for Togetherall as an effective online peer support network. Staff also had a presentation from Dr Alasdair Dobbin, founder of the Foundation for Positive Psychology, on the evidence base for and benefits of the Feeling Good App as it developed out of a background in performance/sports psychology.

All staff completed the University's mandatory online training packages. Two administrative staff undertook introductory training in BSL.

E. Opportunities and Enhancements

Reflection on service, changes, new ways of working and efficiencies.

What has worked well:

- As reported above our KPI Response times improved; having the necessary resources to keep waiting times to a minimum, including have some of our sessional counsellor team working over the spring vacation and into the summer months, resulted in us starting the new academic year with effectively no waiting list.
- Skills for Life and Learning: as noted we increased participation, and introduced a new workshop entitled "When The Problem Is Bigger Than Me". This explores the context we live in affecting our mental health. At times individual struggles are related to something much bigger – a pandemic, a cost-of-living crisis, power imbalances in society, global instability, climate uncertainty. These can be overwhelming and make it hard to see a way to cope. This workshop is a chance to look at these questions together for students to generate their personal ideas about ways forward. On average we offer three different workshops (out of 15 titles) each week of semester time.

- Same Day Appointments: for 45% of students, attending these shorter appointments met their needs and they did not need additional appointments, with 55% going on to self-refer to the Service.
- The ReDD project discussed above.

Our top priorities are as follows:

- Maintaining our overall staffing levels to maintain our KPI response times.
- Develop Skills for Life and Learning further, extending the range of workshops offered. The programme is both a form of outreach, and is both preventative and complementary to counselling, and can be a way for some students to experience the counselling team before they refer.
- Next step with the Pilot of ReDD (see above) with the potential for this to reach a different and extended cohort of students, through training and collaboration with other departments (e.g. Student Wellbeing Service, Disability and Learning Support Service, Careers Service, Library Staff).

“It was a very safe and comfortable space to share all my thoughts. The Counsellor was very patient and empathetic.”

“My counsellor was amazing! This experience was more helpful than I could have imagined.”

Student feedback

F. Risk Analysis

The most significant risk to achieving service core activities remains the potential for demand to exceed our capacity and resource to meet the demand. If Service core activities are not achieved then ultimately the risks for both users and the University are:

- risk to students’ safety
- risk of students’ deteriorating mental health
- risk to students’ academic failure/retention
- risk of diminishing the student experience and student satisfaction
- consequent reputational, compliance and financial risk to the University.

We anticipate 2024-25 will be particularly challenging as we face the need to make significant budget savings, like all other services within the University Secretary’s Group, in light of the financial pressures on the University as a whole. There are very limited savings to be made that will not have a direct impact on students’ experience.

The ongoing challenge for the Service remains the same: to respond to the demand, particularly for individual counselling, that continues to put pressure on resources, and to offer interventions that are evidence based, meet students’ needs, and that students are willing to engage with. We welcome efforts aimed at reducing stigma, encourage help seeking and promote awareness of mental health issues. However, these initiatives can only be successful if resources are sufficient to meet the demand for services.

G. Student Support Services Quality Assurance Annual Review

Peer Review comments and commendations

“It is great to see the progress which has been made by the service, from the development of a proactive programme for students which won the Herald Higher Education Award 2024 for Supporting Student Wellbeing, improved KPI response time, enhanced collaboration with NHS Lothian and fewer issues related to People and Money.”

“The links to the University’s Strategy 2030 illustrates how the service contributes to this core University strategy.”

“It was reassuring that most of the statistics presented from recent years are fairly stable with various improvements, e.g. including longest wait times, with the exception of the engagement of male students pro rata to the University population. The rise of 8% of students presenting in the most severe/risk categories is worrying.”

“It is clear that the service is fully integrated with the Schools, Colleges and Central Student Services across the University, from attendance at case conferences, Support for Study panels, the Continuous Personal Development of professional services staff involved in the new Student Support Model and, with colleagues in the Disability and Learning Support Service, the Student Mental Health for academic and student support staff. They are also, from an external perspective, enhancing their collaboration with NHS Lothian.”

“This collaborative approach has also been developed internally at a senior level through regular meetings (three per week) with other service leads involved in supporting our students.”

“Collaboration with another four universities through the ReDD project, also shows the service’s willingness to work externally to ensure that the University is involved in future developments in the sector.”

“The service’s accreditation by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), one of 12 UK universities and one of two in Scotland, to have such accreditation. The Director of the Service is also involved in national and international networks which enables benchmarking with comparator services. These activities enable staff professional staff development and comparison with other institutions.”

“The service should take great pride in their Skills for Life and Learning programme being awarded the Herald Higher Education Award for Supporting Student Wellbeing in May 2024. In making the award, the judges states that “the type of support on offer, and the interest from outside the UK, made this scheme from the University of Edinburgh stand out.”

“As highlighted in the report, as the service’s main delivery relies on human resources, the main challenge in the next twelve months will be making budget cuts while minimising ‘direct impact on students’ experience’, and the risk to students”

