EDITORIAL

In the last edition of JANZSSA, I issued an invitation for papers on matters to do with electronic technologies and the implications for student services. I do appreciate the irony of encouraging discussion of these issues in a medium as stubbornly old-fashioned as a paper journal. From time to time, the idea of changing JANZSSA to an E-Journal has been raised. There are many advantages. The journal would be cheaper; easier to produce; easier to distribute; and there would be no meaningful deadlines. On the other hand, I find (and so do many others, I think) that reading lengthy papers on a screen to be less than ideal. There is still something about the technology of the book format that makes reading easier and more pleasurable. But I am open to persuasion on this. What do readers think about an E-Journal instead of paper format?

I would very much like to continue the debate on electronic delivery of service in the next issue. More papers on this issue are very welcome. I would also like to revisit matters raised by critical incidents. We have had the consequences of the September 11 incident, the Bali bombing, the murder at Monash, and the Iraq situation. How are doing with our response and our processes? How are we looking after the staff most directly involved in responding to critical incidents? Papers on this issue are also very welcome for the next issue.

Meanwhile, in this edition of JANZSSA, we have some challenging, interesting and insightful papers on issues raised by electronic technologies. We also have several papers on other matters of interest – we need not confine the discussion to the virtual world. Reality is also interesting.

Jim Elliott
Editor
JANZSSA
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An Evaluation of an Electronic Case Notes System in the Student Services at the University of Southern Queensland

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ABSTRACT

Adapting to the ever-increasing changes in technology is a daunting challenge, especially for those who are not computer literate. Not only does one have to deal with new concepts and systems, but one also has to be continually learning and adapting to the use of technology in our daily lives. In 2002, the Student Services at the University of Southern Queensland initiated the development of an Electronic Case Notes System for the electronic recording of client records, which was to replace the previous method of hand written client records. Following the implementation of the Electronic Case Notes System it was deemed necessary to evaluate the system by comparing it to the previous hand written system. The staff members of Student Services were asked to complete a brief survey with both Likert type scale items and open-ended items. The results of the evaluation indicated that there were significant benefits to the Electronic Case Notes System.

BACKGROUND DISCUSSION

The recording of client records and session notes provides evidence that the clinician has given due consideration to the client’s issues, to the process of the counselling from the clinicians perspective, and that the clinician has not shown negligence or lack of care while dealing with the client. Most organisations that employ psychologists specify guidelines and regulations regarding the recording of client session notes (Scaife & Pomerantz, 1999). The Australian Psychological Society specify in the Code of Ethics (Section B, No. 2) that members must make and keep adequate records for a minimum of seven years since last client contact.
unless legal requirements specify otherwise (APS, 2002). Despite the definition of ‘adequate’ being open to interpretation by the clinician, it is clear that client records and session notes play an essential role in a psychologist’s professional practice.

Traditionally, client records (including, for example treatment plans, assessment results and progress notes) are recorded using pen-and-paper format. In addition, a client file is often filled with additional information such as drawings, letters, and other progress notes. The multiplicity of records is at best difficult to maintain, and even more difficult to manage (Guilbert, 1995). Recently, there has been a move away from the traditional method of record keeping toward an electronic method of record keeping.

The rapid growth of the computer industry, coupled with the increasing ease of use of commercially available software has facilitated the integration of word-processors and spreadsheets into everyday service delivery. As such, it is now possible for practitioners who are computer literate to not only make use of available programs but also develop their own databases and/or questionnaires (Guilbert, 1995).

The continual improvement of information technology offers tremendous potential advantages for electronic storage of client’s records. Two obvious benefits of computer-based records are increased legibility and access (Powsner, Wyatt, & Wright, 1998). By contrast electronic storage of records results in a loss of adaptability in that paper records can readily accommodate pictures, journal reprints, diagrams and drawings (Powsner et al., 1998). Despite these difficulties, recent studies show that computer technology is a viable alternative to the traditional hand-written notes (Guilbert, 1995).

**ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF ELECTRONIC CASE NOTES**

Potential advantages include simultaneous and remote access, legibility, data safety, confidentiality, integration with other information sources, continuous data processing, and assisted search. Potential disadvantages include increased data searching and dredging, lack of intuitive layout, loss of design control and flexibility, costs of systems, training and maintenance, adverse
response from patients, and reliance on software and hardware (Powsner et al., 1998). For more detailed discussion see Powsner et al. (1998).

The potential advantages of computer-based over paper records outlined above can be specific to certain organizations and services. For example, legibility would be directly beneficial to individual clinicians in a multi-disciplinary service who no longer need to waste precious time deciphering a colleague’s handwriting (Powsner et al., 1998). Access to client’s notes and folders in a multi-disciplinary service is far easier when using electronic record keeping. Other subtle clinical benefits include the ability of computers to separate data display from data entry, recall data in any order, carry out rapid searches, and process data (Powsner et al., 1998). Well-designed computer-based systems can also handle queries that can provide specific data or information regarding any number of variables. Paper records are rarely able to result in similar queries or results of a query (Powsner et al., 1998). Furthermore, with the improvements in technology, hardware, and software, the storage and recording of records in electronic form will become easier and easier, for example the use of voice recognition software for entering data into client records.

Potential disadvantages relate to the costs of computers, software, training and maintenance; loss of adaptability; and a lack of intuitive layout (Powsner et al., 1998). The challenge for designers of electronic case notes systems is to develop a system that allows for the storage of relevant information, while at the same time providing the flexibility for differing users. A distinct advantage of paper records is that it allows each counsellor to use their own style and process in recording notes, whereas an electronic system is rigid and rarely allows the freedom to add pictures, drawings, and scribbles. A further disadvantage of an electronic system is the potential impact that the computer has on client-counsellor relations. The temptation for some counsellors may be to use the computer during sessions, which could reduce the interpersonal contact with the client. In this manner, the desktop computer can become a physical barrier, allowing clinicians to avoid eye contact with patients. Despite these criticisms, it has been shown that consulting-room computers improve clinical rapport and the patient’s confidence in the clinician (Powsner et al., 1998).
The issue of confidentiality of case notes and the storage of these records is of crucial importance (Pomerantz, 1998). In this regard, the electronic storage of records offers both advantages and disadvantages. Confidentiality can no longer be maintained through the more traditional practices such as the difficulty of obtaining adequate paper records, illegibility, or storing paper records in a locked cabinet. By contrast, shared electronic records are potentially available to all to inspect, in a form that is legible and universally comprehensible. The only barrier to accessing these records is through establishing a system of electronic authorisation i.e. use of passwords on a computer, database or network (Griew, Briscoe, Gold, & Groves-Phillips, 1999). Given the current climate of litigation, the profession would be wise to review its approach to confidentiality and note keeping practices (Scaife & Pomerantz, 1999). The electronic record, if stored on a secure computer or database with adequate limited-user access, does offer some advantages over the storage of paper records.

The primary aim of this evaluation was to assess the effectiveness of the Electronic Case Notes (ECN) system recently implemented at the Student Services at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) as compared to the previous system of hand written notes. It was anticipated that the evaluation would reflect similar issues as raised in the above discussion, in addition to allowing for a conclusion to be drawn regarding the effectiveness of the ECN compared to the previous system.

THE ELECTRONIC CASE NOTES SYSTEM

The ECN system was developed by a Psychologist in the Student Services department following an evaluation of commercially available electronic case notes systems. Although the commercially available systems appeared useful, the response from the counselling staff was mixed, as there were aspects of the system that the Student Services staff would be unlikely to use. An alternative solution was to develop an in-house ECN system that was specifically tailored to meet the needs of the USQ Student Services staff and clients.

The platform for the ECN system was the Microsoft Access database software. With basic and intermediate training the developer was able to develop a database that was able to record the
client details and session notes. The initial system required a number of updates and changes, which was managed by testing the system and receiving feedback from staff members. By the end of March 2002 the ECN System was functional and ready for implementation. The change over from the hand written notes to the ECN System was completed over a one-month trial period, after which the ECN was implemented in full with a complete change over to an electronic system.

The database was placed on a secure network server allowing the counsellors and administration staff to have shared access. Counsellors and administration staff members have to log onto their computers with their logon name and password. This process allows them access to the ECN system that is set up on their computer. The ECN system was developed as a split database, in other words the tables that store the data (stored on the server) are separate from the front end of the database that comprises of the data entry forms (stored on the user’s computer).

The ECN system comprises of two major sections: The Intake Form, and the Session Details. The Intake form section was developed to be accessible by both the administration staff and the counsellors, and allows no access to the client session notes. This was done for both privacy and ethical reasons (APS, 2002). The Session Details section was developed specifically to allow access by the counsellors only.

The structure of the client details table (i.e. the Intake Form) in the database was based on the current paper system and the details that were being collected at that stage. Additional details such as email address and mobile number were also included. The structure of the session details forms were also developed according to the system that was in place at the time of development. However, separate forms were created for problem information, developmental history, mental status examination, formulation, diagnosis, and intervention. As the Student Services has not only personal counselling, but also career counselling and international counselling, a necessary component of the ECN was the ability to integrate information collection processes from all three areas. For example, the careers service area used a systems approach to interviewing, whereas the personal counselling service area traditionally used a clinical interviewing process, which meant that it was necessary to incorporate both intake procedures. This was
achieved by creating separate data tables and forms for the careers service area intake.

The main Session Details form, as described above, has links to various sub-forms in addition to the main components that include the client details, drop lists for information regarding the session, and a text box for session notes. This allows the counsellors to open up a client’s file, and enter the relevant details any session notes for that session. The main session details form also has a sub-window that allows the counsellors to see a basic list of previous sessions, including session dates, current counsellor, and service area.

All the data entry forms consist of either a blank data entry space where data, such as a first name, can be entered, or a drop down list that contains previously entered data, such as ‘Faculty’. The form can be navigated by mouse, arrow or tab key for ease of use. The data entry fields have been kept to a minimum and specific to the service, which allows for efficient and fast data entry.

Additional components to the database include links to various reports (for example: client formulations, session notes, monthly session statistics, and annual session statistics), and the ability to write letters of support that are all stored electronically and printed in report format. Specific components have also been developed for certain services. For example, the Disability service requires certain registration forms and special consideration forms to be completed by students.

One of the most beneficial components of the ECN system is the ability to merge collecting statistics with the session notes. Previously, the counsellors completed paper records and statistics separately. These were then hand entered. A system was then developed where the statistics could be entered electronically, which meant no more hand entered statistics, but still meant a dual process of completing notes on paper and then entering statistics on paper. With the advent of the ECN system, it became possible to combine the two processes where certain statistics that would normally be collected every session were now collected in the intake form, and only the statistics regarding the session were entered each session, in the same form as the session notes. Hence, the ECN system not only records session notes, but is also a very useful system for collecting statistics.
DATA COLLECTION

The Student Services staff members (n=14), who use the ECN system, were asked to respond to a web-based survey developed for the purpose of the survey. The survey consisted of both Likert scale type items and open response type items. The following list shows the items of the survey.

Q1. The ECN is more effective than hand-written notes
Q2. The ECN has contributed to more effective use of time
Q2.2 Please comment on how the ECN has contributed to efficient use of time
Q3. The ECN is user-friendly
Q3.2 Please comment on how the ECN has been user-friendly
Q4. The ECN meets requirements of my position
Q4.2 Please comment on how the ECN meets requirements of your position
Q5. The ECN is an effective means of storing client data
Q6. The ECN needs additional components added to it
Q6.2 Please comment on additional components
Q7. Please comment on the overall functioning of the ECN and how you would improve the system

The scores were rated on a scale of one to four, where 1. Strongly Disagree 2. Disagree; 3. Agree; 4. Strongly Agree. On questions one through five, a high score indicates a positive response, whereas on question six a low score represents a positive response. The responses from the survey were stored on an access database on the web server.

DATA ANALYSIS - QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

Data analysis of the quantitative results was performed by first examining the descriptive statistics (means and modes), followed by a chi-squared analysis. The chi-square test was selected as it is an approximate test of significance for association and the interest focuses on how many subjects fall into different categories (Peers, 1996).
Descriptive Statistics

Analysis of the Mean.

The means of the six items indicate an overall positive response to the ECN system. Visual inspection indicates that question one has the highest mean, indicating that the ECN system is more effective than hand-written notes. The mean for Question two is relatively low, indicating that although the responses overall were positive, that not all individuals believe that the ECN system contributes to an effective use of time. Question six had the least positive response, suggesting that the ECN system does need additional components to make it more effective. Table 1 outlines the descriptive statistics for the quantitative measures.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics Overall

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Variance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>.418</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>.951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>.571</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>.681</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>.264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>.951</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Means Across Service Areas.

Student Services is comprised of three service areas: 1. Personal Counselling; 2. Careers and Welfare; and 3. International Support. As the services use different models of counselling, are required to undertake different tasks and have varying interaction with students, it was hypothesised that there may be differences between service areas. Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics across the service areas.
Table 2

*Means Across Service areas*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SERVICE AREA</th>
<th>Q1</th>
<th>Q2</th>
<th>Q3</th>
<th>Q4</th>
<th>Q5</th>
<th>Q6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Counselling (N=7)</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>1.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Careers and Welfare (N=3)</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Support (N=4)</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>2.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (N=14)</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>2.21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On visual inspection the means of the Personal Counselling service area appear higher than those of the two other service areas on question one through five, and the lowest on question 6, hence indicating that the Personal Counselling service area perceives the ECN generally more effective than hand written notes than the other service areas. The Careers and Welfare service area perceived the greatest need for additions to be made to the ECN.

**Means Across Status.**

The means across staff status were explored due to the separation of the ECN system. As described earlier, the intake form allows access for both the administration staff and the counsellors, whereas the session details allow access only to the counsellors. Hence, the administration staff have access to only one section of the ECN system, whereas the counsellors have greater contact with the ECN system.

The results in Table 3, on visual inspection, indicate that the administration staff, compared to the counsellors, found the ECN system to be more effective than hand written notes as they scored all the questions more positively than the counsellors. In addition, the administration staff required less changes or additions to the system than the counsellors.
Table 3  
**Means Across Status**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STATUS</th>
<th>Q1</th>
<th>Q2</th>
<th>Q3</th>
<th>Q4</th>
<th>Q5</th>
<th>Q6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Counsellors</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>2.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N=10)</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>2.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administratio</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on Staff (N=4)</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>2.21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Analysis of the Mode.**

The means across the service areas and status provides useful information for the Student Service at USQ, but may not be helpful for other services that do not have the different service areas. Accordingly therefore, it was deemed necessary to examine the mode, such that it is possible to draw conclusions regarding the effectiveness of the ECN based on the number of scores rather than the means of the items. Table 4 shows the observed number of results for each question on the score of one through four.

Table 4  
**Descriptive Statistics of the Mode**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Q1 N</th>
<th>Q1 %</th>
<th>Q2 N</th>
<th>Q2 %</th>
<th>Q3 N</th>
<th>Q3 %</th>
<th>Q4 N</th>
<th>Q4 %</th>
<th>Q5 N</th>
<th>Q5 %</th>
<th>Q6 N</th>
<th>Q6 %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>57.1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>35.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>64.3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>57.1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results in Table 4 point toward a number of significant findings. On question one, indicating that the ECN system is more effective than hand-written notes, nine (64%) of the 14 staff members indicated a score of ‘strongly agree’. Eight (57%) of the staff members strongly agreed that the ECN system was user-friendly. Seven (50%) of the staff members strongly agreed that the ECN system was both an effective use of time and meeting the requirements of his/her position.
A summary of these findings is presented in Table 5. As can be seen the most frequent response for question one through four was ‘strongly agree’, and for question five and six was ‘agree’. This clearly indicates that the majority of the staff members at Student Services report, and agree, that the ECN system is a more effective system than the previous hand written notes system.

Table 5
Summary of the Mode

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Q1</th>
<th>Q2</th>
<th>Q3</th>
<th>Q4</th>
<th>Q5</th>
<th>Q6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mode</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chi-Square Analysis.**

Due to the limited size of the sample it was deemed necessary to utilise a non-parametric assessment to determine the significance of the results (Peers, 1996). Accordingly, a chi-square analysis was performed on the data. The data was recoded from the scores of one through to four to a ‘no’ and ‘yes’, where ‘no’ was recoded from the scores of 1 and 2 and where ‘yes’ was recoded from the scores of 3 and 4. This resulted in the scores being either a yes (2) or no (1) for each of the six items.

Table 6 illustrates the number of responses observed for each question when the available response is formatted to be either a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’. Table 7 provides the results of the chi-squared analysis.

Table 6
Summary of Mode on Re-scored Data (N=14)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Q1YN</th>
<th>Q2YN</th>
<th>Q3YN</th>
<th>Q4YN</th>
<th>Q5YN</th>
<th>Q6YN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 7

*Chi-Squared Test Statistics (df=1)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Q1YN</th>
<th>Q2YN</th>
<th>Q3YN</th>
<th>Q4YN</th>
<th>Q6YN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chi-Square</td>
<td>10.286</td>
<td>4.571</td>
<td>7.143</td>
<td>4.571</td>
<td>.286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asymp. Sig.</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.033</td>
<td>.008</td>
<td>.033</td>
<td>.593</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The chi-squared analysis indicates that questions one through to four all show a significant difference between the number of ‘no’ and ‘yes’ responses, all showing a positive response of ‘yes’. Question 5 was not analysed with the chi-squared statistic as all 14 participants indicated a ‘yes’. Question 6 did not indicate a significant difference between the ‘yes’ and ‘no’ responses.

Thirteen (92%) of the 14 staff members scored a ‘yes’ on question one, indicating once again that the ECN system is more effective than hand-written notes. Twelve (85%) of the 14 staff members scored a ‘yes’ on question three, indicating that the ECN system is user-friendly. Eleven (78%) of the 14 staff members scored a ‘yes’ on question two and question four, indicating that the ECN system has contributed to a more effective use of time and meets the requirements of the position. All the staff members (100%) indicated that the ECN system was an effective means of storing data. Six (42%) of the staff members indicated that the ECN system required additional components.

In summary, ninety-two percent of the staff members reported that the ECN system was a more effective system for recording client records than hand written case notes. A significant proportion of the staff members also reported that the ECN system is user-friendly, more effective in use of time, and meets the requirements of their positions. Thereby allowing the conclusion to be drawn, based on the quantitative results, that the ECN system has been a positive addition to the service. It is also clear however, that additions to the ECN system would further contribute to the effectiveness of the system.

### Qualitative Results

The survey included five open-ended items that asked for comments on the Likert type items. Three core themes were identified from...
the responses of the open-ended items. First, the ECN system is a more effective use of time than hand written notes when the user is computer literate and able to type. On the other hand, when the user is not computer-literate the ECN becomes time consuming and difficult to navigate. Second, the legibility of the records contributed to the ECN being more effective than hand written notes. Third, ease of use and user-friendliness of the ECN was partly a function of the manner with which reports and letters could be automatically generated with minimal effort.

Each service area provided quite different feedback, which appeared to be influenced by one factor. Where the ECN system met the needs of the user, the user reported that the ECN system was effective. Hence, the level of the perceived needs being met influences the perception of the effectiveness of the system. Accordingly, the ECN may be either meeting the needs of the service areas differently or not meeting the needs of certain roles within the various service areas. For example, a response from the International service area reported that this service area “required some different way of using the ECN”, which suggests that the role of the user within the service impacts on how the user feels about the effectiveness of the ECN system.

The final comments regarding the ECN system seemed to indicate that the change from hand-written notes to the ECN system is a worthwhile change and seems to be contributing to the more effective use of time. However, as with any change, the difficulty in adapting to new things, specifically technology can be difficult and does take time.

**DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

The results of the online survey by the staff at Student Services to evaluate the effectiveness of the new ECN system indicate that the system is more effective than hand written notes. The quantitative results indicate that the ECN system has contributed to more effective use of time, is user-friendly, that it meets the requirements of the position, and that it is a more effective means of storing client data than hand written notes. Differences in effectiveness of the ECN was found across the service areas, with the Personal Counselling service area perceiving the ECN system as more effective than the other service areas. Thereby suggesting that for
an electronic system to be effective it needs to be adaptable to the needs of the service. The administration staff found the ECN to be both more user-friendly and effective as a case notes system than the counsellors. Although forty-two percent of the staff indicated that the ECN needs additional components, a significant number (92%) of the staff reported that the ECN system is more effective than hand written notes.

The qualitative results indicate a number of core factors that contribute to the perception of the effectiveness of the ECN system. One such factor is legibility of the case notes. The ECN system allows for type written notes that eliminate the factor of illegible handwriting. However, this brings with it the need to be not only computer literate, but also capable on the keyboard. The counsellors who are not computer literate and/or were slow typists reported that the ECN system was not user-friendly, thereby indicating the need for computer literacy training such that users can benefit from an electronic case notes system. Unfortunately there is no quantitative support from the present study on the computer literacy and typing speed factors to provide a cross-reference with the survey results. Future research evaluating electronic case note systems should take into account the effects of computer literacy. The qualitative results also indicated that it is important that the ECN meets the needs of not only the service area but also the needs of the various roles within the service areas. Overall, the qualitative data indicate that the ECN is an improvement on the hand written notes.

To some, the need for computer literacy may seem premature or even unnecessary. However, in today’s climate of advancing technology, it is necessary to not only catch up, but to also keep up to prevent losing the competitive edge as a service provider. Solutions to the computer illiteracy and typing speed difficulties include computer training and speed typing training, in addition to the use of voice recognition software. At the time of the survey, two of the counsellors had just acquired voice recognition software that would allow the counsellors to speak their session notes into the ECN system without having to type the notes. A future survey will be needed to evaluate the true effectiveness of the voice recognition software, however preliminary reports from the two counsellors suggest that the voice recognition software will contribute to the effective use of time and make the ECN a more effective means of recording case notes.
The design of the computerised system for storing electronic records is essential. As evidenced by the above results, if a clinician is unable to navigate successfully through the system, or has difficulty entering data, then the system becomes ineffective. Therefore, features of an electronic system that increase the demand on clinicians’ attention, perception, language or memory processes must be avoided (Powsner et al., 1998). An effective electronic records system should be simple, easy to use and easy to navigate, allow for computer-illiterate users, and allow for efficient and fast recording of case notes.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Given the positive results of this survey, it is recommended that counselling services that operate with paper systems explore options for electronic storage and recording of case notes. This survey and the literature boasts significant advantages to an electronic case notes system, that may contribute to the improvement of the service, both in terms of efficiency and effectiveness on behalf of the counsellors and administration staff.

There are commercially available systems for electronic case notes, with a range of prices and effectiveness. It is recommended that services that are investigating the implementation of electronic note taking explore the range of programs available. Furthermore, the current ECN system at Student Services at USQ demonstrates that an in-house development may be not only feasible, but also more suitable in meeting the requirements of the counsellors and administration staff.

**CONCLUSION**

The literature suggests that there are both advantages and disadvantages to the implementation of electronic case note systems. The results of the survey of the Student Services staff reflect a similar picture, where there were both positive and negative feedback. The literature suggests that despite the disadvantages, the significant advantages of electronic case notes such as ease of use, efficiency, and legibility of notes, outweigh the disadvantages. The results of the survey indicate that with some
training and education, and some adaptability, the ECN system is a positive contribution to the service and that the staff found the electronic system to be more effective than the previous hand-written notes.

Despite the positive outcome of the survey, it is evident that given the speed of growth of technology and the improvements in both hardware and software components of computers, it is necessary for the continual update and improvement of systems such as the ECN system. Furthermore, the security of electronically stored case notes is an issue that is and will be a continuing debate, needing once again continual update and adaptations.

The final word is - adapt; for services to meet increasing client load while at the same time maintaining effectiveness requires change; one such change is the adaptation to a more efficient and effective means of recording client notes, which implies embracing computer technology and utilising technology to the full in service provision.

REFERENCES


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Interaction between International Students and Local Communities

Can we make it happen, and if we do, what are the outcomes for the students, communities and universities?

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the experiences of international students and volunteers who have participated in the International Student Care Program of The University of Newcastle. The university initiated this program in 1997 to:

- assist international students to have greater interaction with the local community,
- provide additional support for international students,
- promote the university’s internationalisation agenda.

Since it began operation, the program has successfully engaged 450 volunteers from the Newcastle community and assisted over 500 international students. Demand for the program has continued to grow, particularly among students from South East Asia.

In 2001, an evaluation of the program was conducted, utilising Action Research Methodology, to gain a ‘window in time’ view of how key stakeholders experienced the program and to gauge its impact on international students, volunteers from the community of Newcastle and The University. The evaluation was conducted through the following processes:

- Focus groups of selected volunteers
- Questionnaires to international students, volunteers and staff members
• Weighting Grids to volunteers and international students

The results of this evaluation are of interest not only for what they tell about the contribution of this program to key stakeholder groups. The results also reveal a great deal about the needs of international students generally - in relation to the support they require, the cultural experiences they value and the quality of personal relationships they hope to establish with Australians.

When the program was first established, it was envisaged that the benefits of such an initiative would flow primarily to international students and that volunteers would describe any gains for themselves in terms of what they had achieved through assisting the students. What the results of this evaluation show is that volunteers in helping international students, actually made significant gains beyond those delivered to the students.

The final part of this paper explores in detail the ways university staff perceive the program and the impact it has had on the university, the community and their role in interacting with international students.

BACKGROUND TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT CARE PROGRAM – ISSUES CONFRONTING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS.

It has long been acknowledged that many international students experience difficulties when studying at universities in Australia (Barker, Child, Gallois, Jones & Callan 1991; Hay 1972; Sushila Niles 1995; Lakshmana Rao 1976). These difficulties occur in the students’ adjustment to foreign social circumstances and academic situations. A study carried out at the University of Queensland (Barker et al 1991) reported that many Asian students found difficulty in getting to know people in depth and hence found it difficult to create and maintain friendships. The students also perceived that the difficulties they experienced in communicating in the English language affected their ability to study, limiting their participation in tutorials and their capacity to communicate with academic staff. The extent to which poor academic performance can
be ascribed to deficits in English language however is unclear. It may be that academic performance can also be affected by other factors such as limited understanding of Australian learning styles and / or poor analytical skills. However, as a means to assist students with their adjustment, Barker and associates (1991) recommended schemes / programs are developed to link international students with local students or host families. It is suggested that through facilitating the formation of friendships, international students could improve their English skills and gain greater understanding of Australian learning styles.

The International Student Care Program (ISCP) of The University of Newcastle was established as a means of assisting international students to adjust to foreign social circumstances and to maximise their experience of being in Australia by engaging meaningfully with members of the Australian community.

**HISTORY OF THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT CARE PROGRAM AND AIMS OF THE EVALUATION**

The International Student Care Program (ISCP) began in 1997, as a joint venture of the International Office and Family Action Centre, a community development unit within the External Relations Division of The University of Newcastle. The pilot phase of the program extended from July 1997 – August 1998. At the conclusion of the pilot phase, an external evaluation was conducted (Bryce 1998) to investigate what the program had achieved and to attempt to gauge what its potential may be. As a result of this investigation the university committed ongoing funding to the program.

Since 1998, the action research cycle of observation, reflection, planning and implementation has been a regular part of the program’s operation. It has led to significant changes within the program; from the ways volunteers are recruited and trained to the appointment of additional staff.

It was considered, however that a three year cycle be an appropriate time for a thorough investigation of program practice. Thus in February 2001 a new evaluation process began.

The aims of this evaluation were to:
• Gain a ‘window in time’ view of how key stakeholders saw the program.
• Gauge the contribution of the program for international students, The University and volunteers from the local community of Newcastle.
• Identify areas of tension in the program, that when addressed, would lead to program improvement.
• Compare the outcomes of this evaluation with those from 1998.

THE PURPOSE OF THE PROGRAM

The Program aims to:
• Respond to the personal, social and cultural needs of international students;
• Provide support where appropriate through trained volunteers;
• Refer students to appropriate specialised assistance on / off campus (eg. Counsellors, health professionals);
• Network with community agencies and organisations to mobilise their assistance and support;
• Facilitate communication and linkages on and off campus;
• Gather data to be used as a foundation for refining support services for international students.

THE MODEL OF THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT CARE PROGRAM

The ISCP utilises trained volunteers from the local community and domestic students from the university to link with international students on an individual basis. All volunteers who choose to join the program are required to undertake initial training sessions before being linked to an international student. They are also interviewed and assessed by the Program Coordinator for their suitability.

Once the volunteers have completed initial training and have been accepted for the program, they are introduced to an international student. All international students who refer to the program are provided with information about what the program can deliver, and are interviewed by the Coordinator so that they may be linked to the most suitable volunteer. After the student and their volunteer are
introduced they decide how often they will meet and they plan the activities they will undertake together.

The Program Coordinator contacts both parties on a regular basis to ensure that they are satisfied with the contact they are receiving. Social activities are arranged on a regular basis to bring volunteers and international students together. Through the regular contact with students and volunteers, the Coordinator is able to monitor and evaluate the individual links on an ongoing basis. Annually volunteers, students and staff of The University are invited to complete a questionnaire to assist with program evaluation.

PROFILE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN ISCP

The total number of international students involved in the program between January and December 2000 was one hundred and twenty five (125). Of those involved:

- 41.6% were studying at an undergraduate level
- 34.4% were studying at a postgraduate level
- 13.6% were studying English language
- 8% were the spouses of international students
- 2.4% were Study Abroad students.

- Eighty (80%) percent of international students involved with the program were female.

Countries from which the students were drawn:

- 28% from Taiwan
- 15.2% from Korea
- 12% from China
- 8.8% from Thailand
- 6.4% from Japan
- 6.4% from Indonesia
- 4.8% from Hong Kong
- 3.2% from Vietnam
- 2.4% from Philippines
- 2.4% from Laos
- The final 10.4% were drawn from Botswana, Turkey, India, USA, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Denmark, Czech Republic and Iran.
THE EVALUATION

In 2001 an evaluation was undertaken by the Program manager to first generate theory on the purpose and nature of the program and secondly to test that theory with key stakeholders. The outcomes of this evaluation are an enhanced understanding of what constitutes effective practice for International Student Care as implemented by the University of Newcastle.

THEORY GENERATION

Questionnaires were first distributed to thirty (30) randomly selected volunteers and thirty (30) international students. These participants were invited to identify what they considered the main purpose of the program was, their reasons for joining, the benefits they had gained from being involved, what they considered they contributed and what they actually did when participating in the program.

The response rate for volunteers and international students were 50% and 60% respectively.

Of those volunteers who responded, seventy two percent (72%) had been linked to their international student for six months or longer, twenty three percent (23%) had been linked for three – six months and five percent (5%) had been linked for less than three months.

In addition, eight members of staff from across the university were invited to complete questionnaires. The six who responded worked in Student Support Services, The Counselling Service, AusAID Liaison, The Language Centre and The Halls of Residence. The staff questionnaire invited respondents to comment on the impact of the program on the University, the community at large and the experience of international students.
THEORY TESTING

With the enhanced understanding gained through the stakeholder questionnaires, the program manager then set to work with a group of experienced volunteers to develop a tool which stakeholders could use to assess the importance of different aspects of the program in terms of meeting its goals. This tool drew on the categories of action that evolved through the program’s 1998 evaluation (Bryce 1998).

These categories defined the program in action and included:
- Supporting international students
- Acknowledging and responding to the needs of international students
- Expanding the cultural experiences of international students
- Developing relationships
- Contributing to the university’s internationalisation agenda
- Building community
- Networking
- Expanding the cultural experience of volunteers

A check of the relevance of these action categories to the program in 2000 was undertaken by ten volunteers in a focus group session. Statements were then developed which defined the meaning this group gave to each of the action categories. These statements were distributed in a weighting grid to 30 volunteers and 30 international students who were randomly selected for participation. Statements which defined actions that were considered to be crucial to the program’s success were weighted a maximum score of 5 while those of least importance were weighted with the minimum score of 1.

Twenty two (22) volunteers and 7 international students completed the weighting grid. Comments from students who were selected for this task indicated that they found the language difficult. This may account for the lower than expected rate of return.

The results of this theory testing exercise demonstrate those aspects of the program which these key stakeholders considered to be most important to its success.
EVALUATION OUTCOMES

Volunteers’ Perspective
The volunteers identified the main purposes of the program as a means of learning about other cultures; fostering international understanding; providing international students with an understanding of Australian culture; increasing the confidence of international students; providing a link to the wider community; helping with issues and problems; sharing positive experiences and welcoming international students to Australia.

The most common words volunteers utilised to describe their relationships with international students were: ‘sharing, acceptance, learning, fun times, understanding, support, friendship.’

Volunteers identified the following gains for themselves from participating in the program:
- The opportunity to learn about other cultures
- Helping and making a difference to someone’s life
- Gaining greater understanding of what it is to be an international student
- Gaining a new experience
- Meeting someone new
- Building rewarding friendships
- Engaging in meaningful discussions and interactions with someone from another country

Volunteers identified the support they offered international students in terms of, emotional support in times of trouble, resources in times of need (this included transport and accommodation), information and advice, language support, a commitment of their time and their friendship.

Volunteers identified ‘Acknowledging and Responding to the Needs of International Students’ as the most important Category of Action. The following list of statements demonstrate actions which they considered to be crucial in the program’s success.

- Having a Coordinator whom is sensitive and understanding to the needs of international students. (Mean 5.0)
- Dealing with needs on an individual basis. (Mean 4.82)
- Recognising personal boundaries and the necessity to exercise discretion when dealing with difficult issues. (Mean 4.77)
- Linking international students with a volunteer who is willing to befriend them. (Mean 4.73)
- Actively working to minimise racial discrimination in the university and local community. (Mean 4.59)

The Category of Action identified by volunteers to be of least importance was ‘Internationalisation.’

**International Students’ Perspective**

Reasons international students joined the program:

- Thirty five percent (35%) identified their primary motivation for joining the program was to make Australian friends.
- Twenty percent (20%) identified their primary motivation was to learn more about Australian culture and the Australian way of life.
- Twenty percent (20%) identified their primary motivation was to utilise the program as a way of improving their English skills.
- The remaining twenty five percent (25%) joined the program primarily for one of the following reasons,
  - To gain knowledge of the local community
  - For orientation purposes
  - Because they or their spouse were lonely / homesick
  - So that they could feel part of an Australian family
  - As a way of meeting people who shared their professional background.

The most common activities international students identified as the ones they shared with their volunteers included, everyday activities such as eating out, shopping, going to the movies, playing and watching sports and talking.

When international students were asked what their contribution was to the relationship they had with their volunteer, they identified, sharing information about their culture, offering food, teaching their language, gifts and generally sharing good / bad times.

International students identified the attributes of a ‘good buddy’ as people who, were willing to give care and support, demonstrate concern, were friendly, patient and caring, were thoughtful, kind
and knowledgeable. International students identified in particular the importance of having someone to support them in times of trouble or difficulty.

The most common words international students utilised to describe their relationships with their volunteers were ‘care, concern, help, support, advice, sharing, listening and suggesting.’

International students identified the action category ‘Supporting International Students’ and the following defining statements as being the most important.

- Linking international students with people who are able to spend time conversing with them in English. (Mean 4.86)
- Dealing with needs on an individual basis. (Mean 4.43)
- Providing volunteers with relevant information prior to being linked with an international student. (Mean 4.33)
- Linking international students with a volunteer who is willing to befriend them. (Mean 4.29)
- Having a Coordinator whom is sensitive and understanding to the needs of international students. (Mean 4.29)
- Providing volunteers with relevant information, updates, newsletters and social gatherings. (Mean 4.16)

The Category of Action identified by international students to be of least importance was ‘Networking.’

**Staff Perspective**

_The program’s contribution to international students_

Staff identified the program contributed to the experience of international students in the following ways by:

- Providing avenues for international students to meet Australians or members of their own community whom they would not ordinarily meet and to benefit from these exchanges.
- Providing students with experiences beyond the university – support free of bureaucratic and administrative restrictions.
- Linking students with people who were able to offer a level of care beyond that provided by university staff.
- Alleviating the sense of extreme loneliness experienced by some international students.
- Providing the type of experience that many international students had indicated over the years that they were seeking by coming to Australia.
Other contributions to international student care:
- As an invaluable link to the community,
- As a mechanism for assisting in the acculturation process,
- As a way of assisting new students to feel less isolated and more welcome,
- Providing opportunities for English development,
- Promoting a well rounded (not just study) lifestyle,
- Increasing advocacy for international students when problems arise,
- As a mechanism for preventing problems before they escalate.

The Contribution of the International Student Care Program to the University

- Staff identified the ISCP as a means of enhancing the cultural and social experience of many international students. As a result, students tended to require less support from academic and support staff. Contented and socially engaged students placed fewer demands on staff and tended to develop more positive relationships across the university.

- Staff identified a significant decrease in the number of referrals to traditional support services since the implementation of the program. Volunteers were seen to have made a significant contribution to the care of international students.

- Staff identified that the program had encouraged Australian students to look outside their own world within the university and to share their experiences with people they may not normally meet.

- The program provided opportunities for people from the local community to become involved in university activities at a non academic level.

Other contributions:
- As an evaluation tool, demonstrating the experiences of international students,
- As a prevention measure for social and personal problems among international students, making it easier for staff to deal with problems,
- Staff are well placed to pick up on systemic issues that affect international students and to report these back to the university.

The Contribution of the ISCP to the Community of Newcastle

Staff identified that:

- The program provides opportunity for local residents to have contact with international students from various destinations and to learn about cultural and international issues in an interesting way. Contact with international students fosters long lasting international contacts between the community of Newcastle and the rest of the world.

- The program has assisted the community by raising awareness of other cultures and promoting Internationalisation. It has also given community members an opportunity to participate in university activities and to learn more about the university generally.

DISCUSSION

In examining all the information provided by key stakeholder groups, through questionnaires and weighting grids, there were four statements that stand out for comment. These were, the importance of:

- Dealing with needs on an individual basis,
- Linking international students with volunteers who are able to spend time conversing with them in English,
- Linking international students with volunteers who want to become their friends,
- Having a coordinator who is sensitive and understanding to the needs of international students.

Each of these statements provides an important message about the needs of international students seeking support.

These messages are:

- That international students like to be dealt with as individuals, to develop some sort of relationship with those delivering support and to feel that their ‘support person’ has an interest in knowing them as people.
• That international students place a high value on improving their English skills and regard this skill development as an important part of their overall study experience.
• That international students are seeking friends among the Australian community; people who are willing to take the time to get to know them, to spend time with them and to develop a relationship.
• That international students need to feel support staff are approachable and empathetic.

If it is accepted that these statements reflect how international students would like to have their support needs met, then they may create a dilemma for some support staff. The large numbers of international students studying at universities at any one time mitigates most staff being able to deal with students all the time on an individual basis. In addition, staff have boundaries in the relationships they develop with students; boundaries they feel are inappropriate to cross professionally. It is one thing to be approachable, empathetic and sensitive to the needs of international students, but quite another to take the relationship a step further and to move out these boundaries.

In this situation, this study has found that the utilisation of volunteers from the community can be a part solution. Volunteers have the willingness, time and commitment to deliver information and practical support to individual students. They can also spend time involving international students in everyday activities – shopping, cooking etc. and these activities are ones that students identify as being important in terms of getting to know ‘the real Australia’ and in delivering a personal / tailored forms of support.

The utilisation of volunteers is therefore successful on a number of levels; it delivers appropriately the support international students need, and at the same time allows support staff to feel comfortable their own professional boundaries are remaining in tact. The contribution of volunteers is acknowledged by staff when they identify the importance of support that is delivered by people outside the traditional support staff of the university, the ‘wholeness’ of this type of support and the freeing up of boundaries that is enjoyed by volunteers, but not possible for professional staff members.
The ‘type’ of everyday support delivered by volunteers is generally not possible or appropriate, for staff to deliver, yet when this support is delivered by volunteers, staff have identified that referral rates decline and problems seem to be dealt with sooner, before they escalate into major issues. Time saved in assisting with complicated cases, allows paid staff the opportunity to focus on developing more preventative strategies.

In addition, it has been found that the local community, through this program has a better understanding of the challenges international students face, and a greater knowledge of different cultures. This is an educative process and one which is assisting to reduce incidences of harassment and discrimination in the community while bringing about greater tolerance and better information.

The conclusion of this study is therefore that it is possible and indeed desirable, to bring together community volunteers and international students in an attempt to deliver support and foster closer ties between cultures.

REFERENCES


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Counselling Services. Comparative Data and Benchmarking

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is disseminate information that was collected in 2002 across 20 tertiary institution counselling services in Australia. As most readers will be aware attempts to obtain useful comparison data across services is often a fraught exercise. The reasons for this are many but include the fact that it is a time consuming exercise and hard to find a common organizational structure for services, including counselling, across institutions. Counselling also has a range of definitions – for instance, whether it includes career counselling, financial counselling, welfare advice or personal counselling alone. Further, there is a lack of definitive benchmark data against which services can gauge themselves. Readers will be familiar with the pressures from within their institutions which arise from time to time, and inevitably lead to calls for data being placed on the ANZSSA network, so that a service can argue cogently about their existence, the need for more resources or an increase in staffing levels.

It is necessary for counselling services to have benchmark data for a variety of reasons, some of which are:

- professionalism of the service;
- service monitoring & evaluation;
- strategic planning and resource allocation;
- internal & external political reasons;
- budget submissions
The known existing standards relate to ratio of full-time counsellors to population pool and number of clients seen by a counsellor in given time frame. They are as follows:

1. International Association of Counselling Services, which recommends 1 counsellor to 1000/1500 client population pool, plus one administrative person.
2. AVCC sponsored Committee on Best Practice in Tertiary Counselling Services (undertaken by ANZSSA in 1994), which recommends 1 counsellor to 3000 population pool.
3. Australian Psychological Society suggests that a psychologist see no more than 5 clients a day and that number be reduced where new clients are included. The maximum number of clients seen in a week should not exceed 20.

This paper thus presents data on a number of aspects of personal psychological counselling as undertaken in student services sections across 20 different campuses, and compares it to the existing standards or benchmarks.

**METHOD**

In total, 28 surveys were mailed to counselling services at Australian tertiary institutions and responses were received from 20 services. An additional question was placed on the ANZSSA electronic network (Question 14). In this paper individual services are not listed as the data was provided on the understanding that specific campuses would not be identified.

A copy of the survey questionnaire is shown in Appendix A

**RESULTS**

1. Ratio of staff to client population
In a counselling service, the most important resources reside in the staff themselves, hence an important statistic is the ratio of full-time counsellors per head of population on campus. The ratio has a subsequent impact on the number of clients seen and appointment wait times, which are key factors in the accessibility and quality of services.
Of the 20 survey respondents 5 indicated that they did not see university staff as part of their client pool, while the other 15 indicated they did.

The ratio of full-time professional counsellors to numbers in the client population pool averaged 1:4091, ranging from 1:1886 to 1:7982 across the 20 responding institutions. These ratios also need to be considered both within the geographical context of specific campuses and the relevant policies on referral of clients. Campuses which exist outside major metropolitan areas have less referral options, thus making their ratios even more important.

Without identifying specific campuses it can be stated here that the majority of campuses in this survey whose ratios were above the average of 1:4091, were outside major metropolitan areas. Sobering data I think. An additional point needs to be stated, and that is, that the average ratio of 1:4091 exceeds both the IACS and ANZSSA Best Practice standards. In my judgement and experience the ratio of 1:3000 is a good benchmark and where it is exceeded, work starts to spiral into a juggling act of trying to keep wait list times reasonable and staff burnout at a distance.

2. Locum staff
The workload in a university counselling service does not present evenly across the year, nor within academic semesters. All university counselling services face the dilemma of how to meet the needs of clients at times of high demand, whilst not having staff under-utilised at other times. The management dilemma concerns whether to support additional profile positions and bring the ratio of staff to population pool closer to the standards, or, to devote money to locum staff as required.

Of the 20 universities who responded to the survey the following was noted:
4. 5 universities employed no locum staff and their ratios of staff to population pool are amongst the best, typically being 1:3000 or less.
5. 9 universities employed locum staff on an as needed basis, with the need covering staff leave, staff illness or times of high demand.
6. 6 universities employed part-time staff, whose positions were not part of the service profile, but who worked regular hours during semester teaching weeks.

The use of locum staff on an *as needed* basis, is essentially reactive in nature and frequently relies on either earnings being available to fund the strategy or the receptiveness of the institution to pleas for extra money. The hidden aspect is the degree to which the use of locum staff is a strategic decision rather than a reaction to a wait list that has extended beyond the reasonable. The use of locum staff is an issue that counselling managers grapple with each year and should in fact be acknowledged as a strategic benchmark for quality counselling services. In my view we need a statement which supports a strategic decision to provide annual funding for locums during semester teaching weeks, or other identified high demand times, as preferable to a reactive *as needed* basis.

3. Emergency Clients

By the very nature of the work undertaken within a counselling service, the best planned schedules cannot always be adhered to. Emergency clients may include a client in a psychiatric emergency requiring hospitalisation, high risk suicidal clients, dealing with the impact of a critical incident on campus or involving students off campus (ie death or rape), or victim of physical or sexual assault. There are others, but these examples give an indication of what constitutes an emergency.

At times staff also deal with parents of students who have experienced a trauma of some description. Examples of this would include situations where a student is missing or has become the victim of an assault. These situations need immediate response and counselling services are usually the human face of the university at such times. The dilemma faced is how to be flexible in times of crisis and emergency.

All of the 20 universities surveyed, indicated that they set aside daily emergency appointments. A range of strategies for achieving this were noted, thus:

7. 4 keep a drop-in-time of half an hour free daily for anyone to utilise.
8. 4 keep half an hour emergency time free (cannot be booked up until the day and only for deemed emergencies).
9. Reschedule appointments to cope with emergency, which usually means a scheduled client is either postponed or has their time halved.

10. Have a counsellor rostered for emergencies and their appointment diary is kept clear for that day (a luxury for services with a better ratio of staff to population pool and those larger services with more professional staff).

11. Have the head of service deal with the emergencies in his/her management time.

In notes accompanying the survey responses, 16 of the universities indicated that despite their strategies for emergencies, they frequently reverted to either extra appointments or the head of service.

**4. Number of Appointments per Client**

One means of ensuring client dependence does not become an issue and that staff time is allocated reasonably, is to monitor on an annual basis the average number of appointments per client. Data collected in this survey indicates that the average number of sessions per year per client varied between 2.5 and 3.8 for 19 of the respondents. The other respondent indicated an average of 6.

While these averages are useful data, all universities indicated that their range stretched much further (ie from 1-20). There will clearly be circumstances where a particular client requires a large number of sessions, however it is useful for services to devise ways of monitoring client usage. Some strategies might include compulsory airing of cases after a given number of sessions at case conferences, or, devising treatment plans within identified number of sessions. For campuses which do not have the community resources for referral, this issue poses a dilemma. There is an ethical issue regarding assistance offered (or not offered) to a client where the campus counselling service is the only realistic option, and without that service the student is unlikely to remain at university and potentially experience an escalation of their problems.

**5. Number of Appointments per Week**

An important means of ensuring staff time is used effectively and that staff are not carrying huge workloads which then impacts on the extent to which they can offer a professional service, is a benchmark regarding the number of clients scheduled in a given
time frame. As noted earlier the Australian Psychological Society suggests that the number of clients seen per day should not exceed 5, and the number seen per week should not exceed 20, with reductions in these numbers where new cases are concerned. That is based on the principle that personal counselling staff should devote a maximum 60-65% of their work time in face-to-face contact with clients.

The survey respondents indicate the following workloads for a full time counsellor:

12. 1 service schedules 25 clients per week including emergencies
13. 8 services schedule 23 clients per week including emergencies
14. 3 services schedule 22 clients per week including emergencies
15. 4 services schedule 21 clients per week including emergencies
16. 3 services schedule 20 clients per week including emergencies
17. 1 service schedules 14 clients per week including emergencies

The number of emergency appointments offered varies however the majority stated that either 2 emergencies (7 services) or 3 emergencies (8 services) were scheduled. Most services are at least attempting to stay close to the standard, even though the schedules reported here are predominantly close to, or above the suggested 20 per week. On a more depressing note, anecdotal data on strategies for dealing with emergency clients suggests that the reality diverges substantially from the standard and stated schedules.

6. Appointment Wait Times

A question regarding the standards used by counselling services to determine what is a reasonable wait time for an appointment, was omitted from the original survey. A request for information was placed on the ANZSSA electronic network and 10 responses were received. The responses indicated:

18. 1 week (7 days) maximum, was the most common response (7 universities)
19. 3 days was given by one university
20. 2 weeks was given by 2 universities
Most universities suggested that they tried to use emergency appointments to see a client the same day if only for 15 minutes, but then a full appointment was scheduled sometime within the next 7 days. For clients who were not eligible to use an emergency appointment, the data presented above is applicable. Where appointment wait times extend past 1 week on a continuing basis some serious matters emerge, namely, questions about the quality of service, increased risk of staff burnout where additional pressures to see more clients exist, diminished staff effectiveness, and risk for those clients in high need categories.

7. HEWL and Organisational Structures

Counselling staff for those surveyed were employed at the following HEWL:

21. 3 were at HEWL 9
22. 14 were at HEWL 8
23. 3 were at HEWL 7

In terms of the head of counselling, 4 services had HEWL 9, while the remaining 16, had HEWL 10.

Three variations of reporting structure were noted from the survey, thus:

24. 16 counselling service heads reported to either Director of Student Services/ Director of Student Affairs/ Director of Client Services.
25. 2 counselling service heads reported to PVC Administrators
26. 2 counselling service heads reported to Academic Registrars

8. Administrative Assistance

Data from this section should be treated with caution as many administrative staff work across a number of services and only a minority work exclusively for counselling services. That means it is difficult to obtain data that is directly comparable. Nonetheless the survey revealed the following:
27. Only 14 of those surveyed responded to this question.
28. Across those 14 institutions there were 42 administrative staff.
29. Of those 42 staff, 4 are employed at HEWL 6, 12 are employed at HEWL 5, 16 are employed at HEWL 4, and 10 are employed at HEWL 3.

9. University Staff as Clients

As indicated previously, 15 of the survey respondents indicated that they saw university staff as clients and only one of those 15 charge staff a fee for service. Those surveyed, indicated that staff comprise between 1-21% of clients, with the average being 9%.

10. Email Counselling

This has been an issue of much discussion amongst the ANZSSA Heads group recently. Of the 20 respondents here, 12 services indicated that they did not use email counselling. Of the remaining 8 who indicated that they did use email counselling, some qualifications were added, thus:

30. 6 noted that it was only used to follow up clients in particular those at risk.
31. 1 noted it was used for external students only.
32. 1 noted it was used to impart factual information only.

There has been considerable discussion regarding email counselling within ANZSSA and issues raised include confidentiality, misuse by pranksters and difficulty with physically contacting someone at risk, especially if a message is left after hours.

11. Budgets and Earnings

The survey question on budget allocations was not addressed by all
respondents and some included salary budgets as well. The three respondents who gave operating budget allocations, were each from larger universities and no meaningful data could be derived.

Eleven of the responding counselling services indicated that they did have annual income earned in excess of university allocations. For nine of these services the incomes varied between $600 and $3,000. Two services engaged in major consultancies and earned between $50,000 and $70,000.

CONCLUSIONS

I believe that there are moves to revisit the Best Practice Guidelines compiled by ANZSSA in 1994 and this is a positive initiative. It seems to me at a time when we are each reporting increases in the number of clients with serious mental health problems, we need to be vigilant and assertive about the well being of our counselling staff.

In putting this paper together I hope that the data will be useful for establishing benchmarks in your services and that it will stimulate discussion within the ANZSSA networks. I have found the International Association of Counselling Service (IACS) accreditation standards document invaluable and last year adapted that document into a James Cook University Charter and Standards document. The JCU Charter and Standards document sets the broad parameters within which our Counselling Service works and identifies important benchmarks. We then have a more detailed Policies and Procedures document which flows on from the Charter, and which was much easier to compile once the Charter and Standards document was in existence.

Perhaps ANZSSA could draw up a Standards document as part of the revision of Best Practice Guidelines. Whatever document ANZSSA does produce I suggest that it needs to cover more than the original best Practice Guidelines from 1994 - that is not criticism of the 1994 working group - I was a member of the group and times have changed. We need to include in our benchmarks, topics such as:
33. the relationship of counselling services to their institution;

34. counselling services’ roles and functions (ie counselling &
therapy, workshops, crisis intervention, development activities,
consultation, referrals, research & teaching, program
evaluation);

35. staffing issues (qualifications, professional development,
workload, HEWL, ratio of FT staff to client population, use of
locums, remuneration, facilities and administrative assistance);

36. work practices (allocation of staff times, client wait times,
strategies for emergencies);

37. ethical standards; and,

38. Counselling service personnel (ie. Manager, Counsellors,
Administrative staff, students on practicum placements) –
including qualifications and experience.

There are undoubtedly other topics and readers will have a range of
views on the degree to which ANZSSA can or should develop such
a lengthy document. From my perspective I suggest it is timely that
we do tackle such a document.
APPENDIX A SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

Please note that in this context “counsellor” refers to a staff member who provides psychological counselling as opposed to welfare assistance or Career or financial counselling for instance.

Question 1.
How many equivalent full time counsellor positions does your service employ?

---------------------------------------------------------------

Question 2.
Do you employ locum counsellors in addition to those included in your answer to question 1?
[circle one] NO YES
If YES, please provide details. ____________________________

---------------------------------------------------------------

Question 3.
Please show the HEWL of counsellors employed

---------------------------------------------------------------

Question 4.
Do you have a policy on the number of clients seen by a counsellor in a week?
[circle one] NO YES
If YES, please provide details _________________

---------------------------------------------------------------
Question 5
What is the average or mean number of appointments per client in a year (last year’s mean would be best if available)?

Question 6
How many students are there at your institution, who are eligible to use your service?

Question 7
How many equivalent full time support/administrative staff does your service employ and what are their HEWLs?

Question 8
i) Is your service available to University staff? NO YES
ii) If YES, do they pay a fee? NO YES
iii) If YES, approximately how many staff are eligible to use the service?
iv) If YES, what percentage of clients seen in a year are staff?

Question 9
Do you offer any services on email? NO YES
If YES, please provide details

Question 10.
How does your service provide access for clients who are urgent or in an emergency?
Question 11.
If you are willing it would be helpful to know what budget allocation you receive, that is non-salary. $__________

Question 12
Approximately how much income [if any] does your service generate in a year?

Question 13
What is the title and HEWL of your Head of Service?
What position does the Head of Service report to?

Question 14
What do you consider as a reasonable appointment wait time?
Talking about computers and online experiences in counselling sessions.

Andrew Fitzpatrick
Victoria University of Technology

ABSTRACT

As they struggle to keep up with technical aspects of information and communication technologies (ICTs), many tertiary student counsellors may overlook or feel unqualified to consider the significance of psycho-social aspects of ICTs in the lives of students they see for counselling. In this article the importance of the emerging fields of cyberpsychology and cybersociology in relation to tertiary student counselling practice is explored. It is argued that talking about computers and online experiences in counselling sessions may enhance the face-to-face counselling process. A number of references are supplied to aid the further exploration of this topic.

In a therapy session a few years ago, a patient asked me what my opinion was of Internet relationships. My first reaction was that I had no opinion, and even less of an idea why the patient had asked the question. Invoking the time-honoured, and in this case somewhat uninspired, therapeutic strategy of answering with a question, I asked the patient if he thought I ought to have an opinion. With an incredulous sigh and a brow furrowed with disapproval, the patient responded, ‘Of course you should have an opinion. Do you live in the same world I do?’ (Civin, 2000, ‘Preface’, Male, Female, Email.)

… gains achieved in the virtual world can lead to improvements in the physical world. (Gonchar & Adams, 2000: p. 590)
What world(s) do you live in? Tertiary student counsellors, like the students and staff at their respective universities and TAFE institutes, increasingly rely heavily on information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as e-mail and the Internet in their work, study and personal lives. What psycho-social issues arise from this development, and how do they affect our lives and those of our clients? Are counsellors talking about computers and online experiences in face-to-face counselling sessions with students? Such issues and questions can easily be overlooked or remain unexplored by counsellors in the race to keep up with new electronic appointment and records systems, the latest version of Microsoft Word or PowerPoint and the like.

Generation ‘Y’, the current cohort of younger tertiary students, have a close relationship to computer technology. Consider the following statistics from the American Pew Internet Project Report (15/9/2002) ‘The Internet Goes to College: How Students are Living in the Future with Today's Technology':

Today's college students were born at the time the PC was introduced to the public. They are less aware of a 'pre-Internet' world than they are of one in which the Net is central to their communication. Surveys of college students conducted for this report found that one-fifth (20%) reported that they began using computers between the ages of 5 and 8 and by the time they were 16 to 18 years old all of them had begun using computers. About half (49%) first began using the Internet at college, and half (47%) first began using it before entering college. The great majority (85%) of college students own their own computer, and two-thirds (66%) use at least two email addresses. (emphasis added; http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/toc.asp?Report=71 accessed 18/2/03)

The report highlights that ICTs are as important to students for social communication as they are for educational purposes. As the authors of the report speculate, what are the effects of such widespread use of ICTs and has the Internet and e-mail helped improve social connectedness for students? As a tertiary student counsellor reading the report, I can help but wonder: What are the implications for tertiary student counselling practice?
Often when counsellors do talk about computer technology outside of the counselling relationship it tends to be about operational issues such as ‘how do I use auto-text?’ or to apologetically inform others that they are ‘not very computer literate’. Indeed computer literacy once commonly referred to one’s ability do things such as use software products or program a computer, now in our interactions with ICTs it encompasses activities such as hyper-reading and weblogging - see Note 1 (for a discussion of digital or ‘silicon’ literacies, see Snyder, 2002). If you were reading this article online, for example, you might have the option to explore a range of selected hyperlinks, or e-mail the author with comments. Further to this description, I would argue that for tertiary student counsellors computer literacy now also covers having some knowledge of cyberpsychology or cybersociology (see Note 2; and see also Fitzpatrick, 2003).

Gonchar and Adams (2000) have written that:

> Computer technology, once regarded as the domain of technical wizards, is now recognised as a significant factor in all environments. Subsequently, personal relationships are impacted by computer technology, making it necessary for social work educators and practitioners to stay versed in the influences of computer technology on human development. (p. 587)

This point is relevant to a broad range of practitioners in the helping professions beyond social workers; it is also likely that few practicing tertiary student counsellors have specific training in this area. Morris (2002), co-author of Online and Personal: The reality of Internet Relationships (2001), also states that, ‘It is important for therapists to become informed about the Internet as it is likely that more and more people will present with problems associated with its misuse’ (p. 47). Morris cites relationship issues associated with the Internet as the most ‘common presenting Internet problem’ for those that seek counselling.

In an article on ‘Internet addiction’ for an online Student Affairs e-journal, Young (see Note 3, 2001) suggested that:

> If you're a counselor, learn all you can about the Internet and what students do there. Talk to students about their
online activities, ask them questions about what they get out of it, go online yourself to see what chat rooms and interactive online games look like in action. During intake interviews with students reporting depression or anxiety, make sure you inquire about their Internet habits.

I think this is a good suggestion but it was embedded in an article on problematic Internet use, and therefore did not expand upon other more positive aspects of discussing the Internet in face-to-face counselling sessions. It can be helpful to keep in mind Civin’s (2000) basic premise that cyber-relationships and the Internet in general can be either facilitative, debilitating or in some cases neutral.

Turkle (see Note 4; cited in Hanlon, 2001), a fervent critic of ‘Internet addiction’, describes those who ‘make the most of life on the screen’ in terms of approaching it, ‘… in a spirit of self-reflection, seeking to learn about their desires and connections. Online people have an opportunity to rework old conflicts, seek new solutions, and play with unexplored or unexpressed aspects of the self’ (p. 568). This can be especially true for adolescents, although not strictly limited to, and Turkle invokes the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson’s concept of an adolescent psychosocial moratorium and its importance to identity development. Online people behave in ways that may be quite different to their face-to-face experiences, with gender swapping and frankness in relation to sexuality being two oft cited examples. I believe that counsellors working with students face-to-face can help to facilitate the kind of self-reflection about life online that Turkle suggests.

Online life can involve either acting out or the possibility of working through issues, and experiences on the Internet can be important developmentally. Of importance here is the idea of cyberspace as potential or transitional space in the psychoanalytic sense, of an online life that may be therapeutic or self-reparative (see Civin 1999 & 2000, Turkle 1995). Suler (2000) refers to the integration principle of ‘offline and online living’, and provides the following examples: telling online companions about one's offline life, telling offline companions about one's online life, meeting online companions face-to-face, meeting offline companions online, bringing online behaviour offline and bringing offline behaviour online.
In assessing a student’s circumstances, it may be beneficial to ask: What role does the Internet or ICTs play in the student’s life? In relation to a student’s ‘online life’ and ‘real life’, what are the parallels and the asymmetries? Has the student ever reflected on these similarities and differences? As well as assessing problematic Internet use, what strengths can be identified? Knowledge of a student’s Internet use can provide important information in assessing their level of functioning, and can also be used to inform work undertaken with them and to maximise positive outcomes. For this reason, Gonchar and Adams (2000) advocate for the inclusion of ‘Internet use’ in the person-in-environment approach to social work assessments, providing case material to support their argument.

An important implication for student counselling practice then is simply to routinely explore with students their Internet use and online experiences (not just for those reporting depression and anxiety, poor academic performance), and of course for some students this might not lead very far at all. I often find that students who spend considerable time online for study or entertainment purposes may never have seriously considered using the Internet for other purposes such as finding health and well-being information or for self-help and support. Issues around ICTs, cyber-relationships and Internet use may also be spontaneously raised in face-to-face counselling sessions by students. Examples include: cyber-affairs, experiences of loss of Internet friendships, online conflict (‘flaming’), the dilemma of meeting a cyber-partner face-to-face, online learning issues, Internet use that negatively impacts upon work, study, finances or family life.

At a time when professional associations and Heads of Counselling services are debating practical and ethical issues around the use of ICTs such as e-mail counselling and online counselling, tertiary student counsellors should not shy away from talking about computers and online experiences in their face-to-face counselling sessions. To do so might involve closing the door on a significant part of a student’s life experience or their unfolding narrative. Should your interest in cyberpsychology or cybersociology be roused from this article, the following websites (see Table 1) and reference list will provide some pathways to help with the further exploration of these topics. Alternatively see what turns up using an Internet search engine or your campus library print or electronic journal and database collection.
(Acknowledgement: Thanks to Dr Darko Hajzler for feedback.)

**Table 1. Cyberpsychology and Cybersociology Internet Sites**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Azy Barak’s References Related to the Internet &amp; Mental Health</th>
<th>includes up-to-date references in the following categories: Net Behaviour &amp; Usage; Net Addiction, Pathological Use, &amp; Suicide; Internet-Assisted Therapy &amp; Counselling; Online Support Groups &amp; Self-Help; Online Testing &amp; Assessment; The Internet &amp; Sexuality; The Internet &amp; Career Behaviour; Online Learning; Internet Social Research Methodology; Other Articles; Books. <a href="http://construct.haifa.ac.il/~azy/refindx.htm">http://construct.haifa.ac.il/~azy/refindx.htm</a></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Behavior Online</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://www.behavior.net/">http://www.behavior.net/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Catalyst: Computers in Psychology</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://www.victoriapoint.com/catalyst.htm">http://www.victoriapoint.com/catalyst.htm</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CyberPsychology and Behavior</strong> journal (may be available in print or electronically at campus libraries).</td>
<td><a href="http://www.liebertpub.com/CPB/default1.asp">http://www.liebertpub.com/CPB/default1.asp</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cyberpsychology at Nottingham Trent University</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://ess.ntu.ac.uk/miller/cyberpsych/">http://ess.ntu.ac.uk/miller/cyberpsych/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cybersociology Magazine</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://www.cybersociology.com/">http://www.cybersociology.com/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>International Society for Mental Health Online</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://www.ismho.org/">http://www.ismho.org/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>John Suler’s The Psychology of Cyberspace</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://www.rider.edu/users/suler/psycyber/psycyber.html">http://www.rider.edu/users/suler/psycyber/psycyber.html</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Journal of Technology in Counseling</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://jtc.colstate.edu/">http://jtc.colstate.edu/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pew Research Centre – The Internet and American Life project</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://www.pewinternet.org/">http://www.pewinternet.org/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Storm King’s The Psychology of Virtual Communities</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://webpages.charter.net/stormking/">http://webpages.charter.net/stormking/</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES


Note 1: Hyper-reading: reading hyperlinked texts on the computer screen. Weblogging: web + log, a kind of online publicly available personal diary. For a list of Australian weblogs or blogs, see...
http://www.anthonyjhicks.com/aussieblogs/ (Thanks to Peter Carnell for this reference, and other information on blogging).

**Note 2:** By cyberpsychology and cybersociology I am broadly referring to: psycho-social aspects of interacting with ICTs, the influence of computer technology on our behaviour and thinking (eg. students and e-learning), computer-mediated communication, online relationship issues, the ‘digital divide’, characteristics of online communities, the use of ICTs in the helping professions (eg. online therapy programs, e-mail counselling), clinical disorders such as ‘Internet Addiction’ or ‘Munchausen by Internet’, contributions from disciplines such as Education, Psychology, Social Work or Sociology on digital culture or ‘life in the electronic age’ etc.

**Note 3:** Kimberly Young is director of the Centre for Online Addiction and a staunch advocate of ‘Internet addiction’ as a clinical entity. See Young (1998) *Caught in the net : how to recognize the signs of Internet addiction--and a winning strategy for recovery*, J. Wiley, New York. Also website: http://www.netaddiction.com/

**Note 4:** Sherry Turkle’s homepage includes an extensive list of her publications and some online articles:
http://web.mit.edu/sturkle/www/
For a recent article by Turkle entitled ‘Whither Psychoanalysis in a Computer Culture?’, the 2002 Freud Lecture at The Sigmund Freud Society Vienna, see:
http://www.kurzweilai.net/meme/frame.html?main=/articles/art0529.html
For an online video/webcast of this lecture:

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Can You Really Counsel Online? The experience of Kids Help Line

Kath Ellerman-Bull
Director of Counselling Services
Kids Help Line, Brisbane, Qld

In JANZSSA Number 19 (April 2002), Cathy Stone provided some powerful examples of using Narrative Therapy though the medium of email with university student clients who were unable or unwilling to attend for face-to-face sessions. Her account of these sessions shows that good work can be done through the use of email either as an adjunct to follow a previously established therapeutic relationship or as a way for clients who are tender about face-to-face contact to work through identified issues in a thoughtful and reflective way.

Kids Help Line (KHL) has established email counselling service for children and young people and is now also offering web counselling in real time. In this paper, I will be tracing the development of those services, drawing on Australia’s first national survey of tele-, web and email counselling services and reflecting on the learnings about counselling on-line that we have gained from offering these modalities to our client group at KHL.

Kids Help Line is a free national 24 hour telephone counselling service for 5 to 18 year olds established in 1991 and operating for 11 years from a single site in Brisbane. KHL provides services 365 days per year and 24 hours per day.

KHL has 110, paid, highly trained counselors who are selected on the basis of qualifications in psychology, social work or similar backgrounds. Individual supervision is provided by on-the-job clinical practice correction and debriefing supported by individual counsellor development plans and staff performance appraisal.
The service is supported by a significant research & data collection, and is funded by Boystown lotteries and substantial corporate, government and community support.

Kids Helpline exists to assist children and young people to develop strategies and skills that enable them to more effectively manage their own lives. The principal values in counselling at Kids Help Line are empowerment and child-centred practice. Empowerment involves assisting each caller to clarify their concerns, formulate options and strategies for positive change and to understand the consequences of particular course of action. Callers are encouraged to believe in themselves and to recognize their personal strengths.

In the provision of services, operational principles include:

• No gate keeping
• Gender choice of counsellors
• Clients may call back & speak to same counsellor
• Feedback is encouraged
• Counsellors are trained and supervised on their responsibilities for confidentiality and duty of care.

KHL developed a Website in 1995. One effect of that was that KHL received emails from children around the world. Feedback from kids was that they wanted to communicate through email and to have access to real time text and shared visual materials (phone & web)

Feedback from counselors was that there was a future for choice of counselling modality – text or phoneIn response, the organisation set the objective:

*To use online technologies to provide a professional, quality counselling service for children and young people.*

Issues that arose from this objective which had to be addressed included:

• Standards of supervision
• Complaint management
• Policy and procedures for the use of these modalities
• Security of data
• Training of counsellors to use these media
• Knowledge development through action research
• Data collection and dissemination
• Legal issues

The issues of privacy and confidentiality over the ‘net continue to be problematic. KHL has attempted to deal with this through providing disclaimers in language that children can understand on the website.

We have used the National Board of Certified Counsellors ethical standards for Internet counseling as a base for practice. However, our approach to counseling children is culturally different from practice standards in the US in that we identify the child as our client and do not require consent by a parent or guardian where the client is a minor. This is a legal requirement in USA.

These standards also presuppose that internet counseling is an adjunct to face-to-face work, and require the internet counselor to collaborate with the client to locate a local professional “who can provide local assistance, including crisis intervention, if needed.” This, of course, presupposes a conventional long-term relationship with the client, a luxury not available to a service such as KHL where most callers use the service for brief interventions.

Legal advice was sought in setting up the service, though that advice has been modified by the Privacy Act that places constraints on our service provision that we are in the process of working through.

A central issue for KHL is Child Centred Practice and child centred language. Getting the legal formalities right in that regard is very problematic and a great deal of effort and continued review is taking place. What is the child-centred language for “waiver of rights to privacy under the Act”? KHL has developed policy & procedures outlining counsellor obligations and client rights in internet counselling. Details of these are available on the KHL Website (www.kidshelp.com.au)

Privacy issues are mitigated because KHL provides a service that is anonymous and confidential. Clients do not give identifying information, except in duty of care cases. Further, counsellors caution clients against giving identifying information. Student
services counsellors would have a different environment in that clients have to prove their student status to receive service. Student Services, therefore, would have to consider the implications of the Privacy legislation.

KHL developed specialist software that requires no software download. It will work with any computer, or any browser and will not leave a ‘footprint’, so that if a child has sought counselling there is no evidence left on the home computer. The software will behave as if the client is in a queue to avoid having to constantly call in to find a vacancy. The software provides counsellor management information, that is, call centre data.

People who are interested in viewing the setout and operation of the web counselling service can make contact through the website.

Issues that have arisen for KHL counsellors working in these modalities include:

- Transferability of skills- are we really working with the same processes but in another mode, or does the different mode require different skills?
- Telephone, web and email – what are the practical differences?
- Duty of care issues, how can we provide a professional level of duty of care when using these modalities?
- Moving from one modality to another
- Evaluation of the effectiveness and outcomes of web- and email-counselling.

**SERVICE DEMAND 2001**

In 2001, we carried out no marketing of the web and email service; it was spread completely by word of mouth. Nonetheless, the usage continued to grow with a 35% increase over year 2000. The comparative figures were:
Medium | Interactions
--- | ---
Telephone | 410,000
Website hits | 110,400
Web-counselling | 2,905
Email counselling | 3,244

100% of emails were dealt with, 50% of web connections were responded to. The average duration of a web connection was 43 minutes (telephone counselling calls average 17 minutes).

10 – 14 year olds make up 28% of online clients, but the vast majority, 72% are in the 15 –18 year age range.

Contrary to popular assumptions, the gender balance for on-line is even more skewed towards females than is phone work. The belief was that boys would welcome the anonymity of on-line. They don’t appear to do so. On-line usage was 84% females, 16% males (males made up 28% of phone clients.). Rural and remote clients are using on-line access; 17% of users are from rural and remote locations.

Comparison of Telephone and Online Problem Types.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Presenting problem</th>
<th>Telephone Counselling Clients</th>
<th>Online Counselling Clients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eating behaviours</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual orientation</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grief</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Image</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Abuse</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicide</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
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2001 full year data analysis. Source: KHL Research and Advocacy Unit

As can be seen from the above Table, young people using email and web counselling present more frequently with more serious problems than those who call the telephone counselling services. Online clients report more mental health concerns, higher levels of
indications of serious suicide risk, more frequent and serious self-harm reports, eating disorders, sexual orientation issues and sexual assaults.

The nature of the counselling relationship online, based on what clients have said, is that clients feel a greater sense of control, anonymity, trust in KHL and are removed from being judged. This results in ‘taboo’ subjects more readily being disclosed.

Outcomes for clients:

• 13% contract to reconnect (web or phone).
• 7% referred to specific agencies
• 1% crisis intervention
• 14% given non-specific referrals to doctor, school teacher, guidance officer, etc.

Referrals for telephone users are managed for clients in crisis by establishing a three-way call between the client, the counsellor and the referral agency. Clients are kept on line whilst details are arranged, either for appointment, or in extreme cases, for direct and immediate contact. Clients in crisis on-line are much more problematic to deal with.

Clients report that they find value in on-line contact with KHL. They report experiencing

• A sense of safety, anonymity and control.
• Control of emotions – having a perceived freedom to operate across the range of emotional communication, from explosive outbursts to calm and reflective without a sense of being judged or inhibited by the presence of another person.
• Using text provides clients with permission to share without saying out loud.

On-line contact allows children and young people to use the words on screen as a way of objectifying their feelings and experiences-‘facing it’. It is the experience of KHL counsellors that this aids greater cognitive processing – that is, the experience of writing on-screen is more like writing a journal or diary and allows an opportunity to reflect on behaviours and feelings as well as exposing them to comment and question by the counsellor.
Clients are offered a choice to and are encouraged to move to phone at any stage, particularly in crisis situations.

A value in on-line contact for some of the KHL staff is that it places greater power into the hands of the young client and redresses to some extent the dominance of the counsellor. This plays to the central themes in KHL work, which are Child Centred Practice and Empowerment.

The experience of counselling online for counsellors include:

- Sessions online are usually longer & more intense than tele-counselling calls.
- The text basis of online work makes the process of counselling more visible to the client.
- Both client and counsellor can scroll back and review, allowing the counsellor greater awareness and thoughtfulness about responses.
- Silence – is the client being thoughtful or processing information, or just losing interest? There are no cues, and a greater sense of physical distance.
- Punctuation & layout considerations – to what extent is the client following perceived conventions for chat rooms or email, or does the punctuation and lay-out reflect states of mind or feelings? Are we asking for greater sophistication in language, vocabulary and perception in a medium devoid of the usual non-verbal cues, than our young clients can be reasonably expected to manage?

The basis of KHL training is the eight micro-counselling skills, and these are applicable to any counselling modality. However, counsellors have to adapt and develop skills for these new modalities. The task for KHL has been the development of training and supervision applicable to these modalities.

One young counsellor reflected on her experience in building rapport with young clients:

"It took me 12 months to write in a way that built rapport. When I first started, I was so professional that the kids would email me back and ask, ‘Are you a computer or a person?’"

Reinterpreting counselling theories and frameworks in the absence of voice or body language is the major task facing KHL and other
agencies using these modalities. I suspect that we are a long way from any sort of assurance about the efficacy of our interventions online. The evidence-based outcome research simply has not been carried out. (Urbis Keys Young, 2002)

Counsellors miss laughing out loud with the client, ‘lol’ is not the same. Typing in ‘mmm?’ ‘and?…’, ‘uhuh’ or ‘yes?’ is not the same as using minimal encouragers during the client’s statements or thinking time.

- Online clients tend to engage and disclose serious issues more quickly.
- Rapport – the client is in control of the relationship that exists with the counsellor, which is the reverse of what is common in face-to-face counselling.
- Reverse usual order of counselling process, working from a statement of the problem, then attempting to do data gathering and rapport building to work towards an effective outcome.
- Pace and tone – the only thing the counsellor has to work with is the words on the page, and how they look on the page. The counsellor has to deduce from these minimal cues data about the client’s emotional state, for later verbal confirmation.
- Gathering information – speed of data gathering has to be balanced against the development of rapport
- Assessment of risk – prepare client, fewer questions, quickly and early.
- Reflecting feelings – few cues, use of punctuation .....I guess....it sounds like....(you seem so sad)...

The following transcript of a web-counselling session gives some indication of these issues:

Counsellor: I noticed earlier that you see just giving up and failing as an option for yourself..... It sounds like you give yourself a real hard time??!!

Client: yeah, guess so
I should have never been born

Counsellor: Nick, you seem to be in a really self-critical …and low space today, mate ....

Client: guess so, sorry
Counsellor: I want to check a few things with you ....and don't apologise, please. I'm just trying to figure out what's happening for you .... is it cool if I ask you some questions?

Client: ok

SELECTIE AND TRAINING OF WEB/EMAIL COUNSELLORS

New web and email counsellors are selected from experienced tele-counsellors who show an interest in these modalities. There is a selection process and training. The training consists of readings, role playing email and web counselling, discussions with their clinical supervisors and 100 hours of supervised practice with every piece of work being scrutinised. KHL is in the process of designing an email and web training module which will cover:

- The difference between web-based and traditional counselling (Childress 1998) (Sampson, J.P., Koliodinsky, R.W. & Greeno, B.P. 1997)
- Using technology in counselling practice (Murphy and Mitchell 1998)
- Text-based counselling skills (Powell 1998) (Barak 1999)
- Development of a ‘voice’ on-line
- Client/counsellor protocols (King and Moreggi 1998)
- Duty of care issues
- Ethics (Bloom 1998), (NBCC 1999), (American Psychological Association 1997)

Web and email counsellors have group supervision led by a clinical supervisor. These two-hour sessions also include problem solving, administrative and procedural issues as well as case studies and sharing counselling issues and dilemmas.

Debriefing web and email counsellors is essential. Web and email transcripts can be very vivid in description of traumatic experiences. The counsellor has less control in these modalities, so suicide and cutting episode descriptions may finish with the client simply disconnecting or not responding, leaving the counsellor hanging emotionally without closure, feeling guilty that there might have been something they did not do or think of that might have

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made a difference, they might have misinterpreted, been too confrontative or insensitive.

Debriefing is essential to allow the counsellor to explore these feelings, to review the transcript and to reassure themselves that they have acted professionally, in the absence of facial expression, voice tone or other emotional cues from the client. In this work, the prevention of vicarious traumatisation, staff burnout and post traumatic stress is an important consideration.

DUTY OF CARE ISSUES

Counsellors are obliged to take action where there is a serious risk of harm to self or others. Online clients raise serious issues. Amongst these are mental health crises, suicide, child abuse, neglect and sexual assault and eating disorders. Issues such as these occur in up to 40% of all web calls. It can be difficult to assess the risk and protective factors in a client’s situation, the counsellor has to assess risks ‘out of context’, without contextual information. Interestingly, this is not an issue of concern for clients, in fact some clients express seeing this as a bonus (Urbis Keys Young 2002). However it is an area of concern for counsellors and supervisors in terms of duty of care, protocol with emergency services etc.

The lack of visual and verbal cues, contextual information about the client such as gender, age, geographic location, ethnic background, creates challenges for the counsellor to understand the nature and extent of the issues and provide appropriate counselling strategies, information and referrals couched in age- and developmentally appropriate language.

Handling duty of care issues, when dealing with clients on web or email, is problematic. On the telephone, the counsellor may be able to ‘hold’ the client in place and provide support for the client whilst local support is identified and mobilised. The client can be brought to disclose their location to assist in this task, or if unwilling to do so, can be psychologically supported to the point where trust is gained.

When using the net modalities, a ‘call for help’ email may lie in the in-box for hours before it is read the following morning. Clients
may well expect that emails will be read and responded to more quickly when they disclose threats to self or to others. We have implemented an automatic email response for all first time contacts with the service which confirms the website information that if the email is of a crisis or emergency nature, they should contact one of a series of generic referrals, including KHL telephone, as their email may not be read for 24 hours.

Police can sometimes identify the source of emails using an Australian IP number, but this requires cooperation from the police, a willingness on their part to assess the matter as serious enough to tie up police resources, and to persuade the ISP to reveal data usually considered confidential. Whilst telephone crisis calls are responded to as a matter of routine, the Police Services are ambivalent about their response to crisis emails. We have made representations on this matter which are being taken to the Police Commissioners’ Conference. The tracing of emails is extremely expensive and can take up to two days to identify the person. It is not possible to trace callers through international servers such as Yahoo.

Whilst web- and email counselling have their place, it is ill-fitted for dealing with crises. The distance that exists between client and counsellor, which has been commented on elsewhere as an advantage for clients who have difficulty in dealing face to face or on the telephone with intimate or distressing issues, acts against the interest of the client in crisis.

The KHL position, however, is that young people use these modalities, even in the absence of any marketing of the KHL services. Our philosophy, of working with the kids where they are at, means that we have to adapt to their needs, not try to force them down paths which meet our needs.

WEB AND EMAIL COUNSELLING SERVICES SURVEY

The Urbis Keys Young survey was commissioned by the Department of Health and Aging to provide an overview of how Tele-Counselling and web and email counselling are used and managed, their role within the Australian health delivery sector, issues arising from using new and developing technologies and the economic and resource implications needing consideration.
Kids Help Line hosted a survey on its website to seek feedback from young people who had used the web and email counselling service. Up to date 45 responses have been received. A total of 50% reported that they had understood what the counsellor had written. 62% reported that the counsellor had been helpful. The main reasons for satisfaction with the service were the counsellor’s manner, receiving a timely response and the simple fact that the service is available.

In the words of a user of these services:

Thank you very much. I appreciate all of your counsellors’ efforts. I might just live through year 12 without killing myself!!! This is the best thing in the world, having someone to talk to, you don’t have to talk face-to-face or over the phone!!! It does help so many people! It’s saved me for sure!!!

LESSONS FOR STUDENT SERVICES

From a Student Services perspective, these issues would be considerably easier to deal with. The clientele are more sophisticated users of both language and technology and they tend to have more identifying information.

Urbis, Keys & Young (2002) found that the users of web and email counselling services nationally and internationally were children and young people, students, older people in rural areas, people who felt lonely and isolated, those that could not afford conventional services, executives and career-minded people.

People who would not access these services included those with low education and literacy levels, low computer skills or lack of access to computers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people with limited English skills, living in rural and regional areas. Children had limited access to computers and lack of privacy, since parents and schools may monitor Internet usage at home and school respectively.

This suggests that there would be considerable uptake for these services if offered in a university setting, though the equity and social justice issues would again be apparent.
ADVANTAGES OF WEB AND EMAIL COUNSELLING AS REPORTED BY URBIS & KEYS (2002)

- The main advantage was accessibility for people with a disability and those living in remote areas, including 24 hour access.
- The counselling process using these mediums gave both the counsellor and client to reflect on their thoughts before responding as well as the opportunity to be more removed and anonymous.
- Writing is good therapy in itself, as the users have to think through the problems in order to describe them in the text.
- Reduction in self-censorship, that can enable the user to gain confidence and feel more able to move into other forms of counselling.

COSTS OF WEB AND EMAIL COUNSELLING

The Urbis Keys Young survey attempted to quantify the costs of telephone and on-line counselling services. They took the costs of running the service, imputed costs of donated benefits (such as those provided to KHL and Lifeline by Optus or Telstra respectively) and divided that amount by the number of average length calls. This estimating process is still in draft form, and there is no agreement amongst service providers about the outcomes, but it is clear, whatever way that service provision is costed out, that the indications are that it is not a cheap alternative.

Around 80% of both web and email counselling clients had used the KHL service at least three times; 25% more than 10 times. If the cost of an average web-counselling session (average time 43 minutes) is in the vicinity of $80 - $100, then 10 sessions costs $800+ and 15 sessions cost $1200 to $1500. (Source: KHL estimates)

The suggestion that web and email services provide a method of reducing costs is clearly not supported even by these preliminary and tentative figures.
In summary, I suspect many student service personnel are faced with the same issues as KHL. Whilst I was the Director of Student Services at USQ, the counselling and career service received many emails from external students and off shore students. Interestingly, the on-campus international students often preferred to use the email services. However, I have found the supervision issues and training of counsellors at KHL very challenging in that, whilst we are working through these issues, we are developing a knowledge and skill base which could be very applicable to University student services who are involved in the flexible delivery of education.

REFERENCES


National Board for Certified Counsellors (1999) “Standards for Ethical Pracice of Web Counselling” nbcc@nbcc.org


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GUIDELINES FOR SUBMISSION OF ARTICLES

All articles should be submitted on 3.5 inch floppy disk plus one paper copy. Alternatively, articles may be submitted as an e-mail attachment. The disk should be formatted for Microsoft Word (Windows 2000). However, other commonly used word processing formats may be readable. Contributors will be contacted if there are difficulties in reading disks submitted. Any queries regarding submission format should be directed to the editor. Any diagrams and tables included in the text must be no larger than 21 x 13 cms. Articles longer than 6,000 words may be returned to authors to be shortened. Note: Submission should include a brief abstract.

Articles may include comment and debate on current issues, reports of student services in practice, policy matters, research projects, reviews of relevant books. The guiding editorial policy is that articles are of interest to student service staff, and are of a high standard. Layout should conform to the rules set out in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association.

Refereed Articles: Authors who wish to submit an item to be published as a refereed article should include a written note to that effect. Three paper copies should be submitted. Contributors should observe a deadline three months earlier than the date noted below for other articles.

The next issue will appear in October 2003. Deadline for submission of non-refereed articles is July 31 2003.

Contributions should be sent to:

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<td>Email <a href="mailto:j.elliott@curtin.edu.au">j.elliott@curtin.edu.au</a></td>
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<td>Email <a href="mailto:m.mckavanagh@cqu.edu.au">m.mckavanagh@cqu.edu.au</a></td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Convenor South Australia</strong></th>
<th><strong>Convenor Southern New South Wales / Australian Capital Territory</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms Sue Barnard</td>
<td>Ms Rachel Tyson</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student Counselling</td>
<td>Student Services – Psychologist/Counselling</td>
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<tr>
<td>Counselling Centre</td>
<td>Canberra Institute of Technology/Reid Campus</td>
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<tr>
<td>University of Adelaide</td>
<td>PO Box 826</td>
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<tr>
<td>ADELAIDE SA 5005</td>
<td>CANBERRA ACT 2601</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phone 08 8303 5663</td>
<td>Phone 02 6207 3292</td>
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<tr>
<td>Email <a href="mailto:susan.barnard@adelaide.edu.au">susan.barnard@adelaide.edu.au</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Convenor Victoria / Tasmania</td>
<td>Campus Nurses Professional Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vacant</td>
<td>Ms Tricia Wylde</td>
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<td>University of Western Australia</td>
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<td>35 Stirling Hwy</td>
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<td>Nedlands WA 6009</td>
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<td>Ph 9380 2118</td>
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<td><a href="mailto:pwylde@admin.uwa.edu.au">pwylde@admin.uwa.edu.au</a></td>
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<tr>
<th>Student Financial Advisers Network (SFAN)</th>
<th>TAFE Student Services Network (TAFESSNET)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Vacant</td>
<td>Ms Tonya Arnold</td>
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<td>Student Support Services</td>
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<td>Holmesglen Institute</td>
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<td>488 South Road</td>
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<td>MOORABBIN VIC 3189</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Phone 03 9209 5705</td>
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<td>Fax 03 9209 5899</td>
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<td><a href="mailto:tonyaa@homesglen.vic.edu.au">tonyaa@homesglen.vic.edu.au</a></td>
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<tr>
<th>Equity Interest Group</th>
<th>Heads of Services Group (HOS)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Vacant</td>
<td>Dr Paul Clements</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Curtin University of Technology</td>
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<td></td>
<td>GPO Box U1987</td>
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<td></td>
<td>PERTH WA 6001</td>
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<td>Phone 08 9266 2663</td>
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<td>Fax 08 9266 3052</td>
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<td><a href="mailto:p.clements@curtin.edu.au">p.clements@curtin.edu.au</a></td>
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For further information please visit the ANZSSA Home Page at: [http://www.anzssa.org](http://www.anzssa.org)
INFORMATION ABOUT ANZSSA

The Australia New Zealand Student Services Association is the professional association for all people working to support students in post-secondary education in Australia and New Zealand.

As an umbrella organisation for a wide range of professional workers, ANZSSA is uniquely placed to provide professional development activities which will deepen understanding of the principles and philosophies of student support and provide a venue for training in best practice in the profession of student support.

This is done through meetings, seminars, workshops and conferences where experienced practitioners present in their areas of expertise.

These meetings provide the basis for peer support amongst staff across institutions. This occurs informally and more formally through professional interest groups.

More information on ANZSSA can be found on the web site: www.anzssa.org

Aims of ANZSSA Inc

The basic aims of ANZSSA are:

- to foster and promote support amongst students and staff.
- to facilitate the general well-being of the institutional community in universities and other post-secondary institutions
- to sponsor the professional development of members through regular conferences and organise close professional contact between members.
- to promote research
- to support and promote the interests of all those engaged in these activities.

Professional Development Activities

A Biennial Conference is the major ANZSSA meeting. It is a significant and substantial conference which attracts numerous
international participants as well as delegates from the Australian States and New Zealand.

**Regional and State meetings** are the main ANZSSA events between biennial conferences. Regional activities range from informal workshops to visiting speakers and, in some cases, regular three day conferences.

**Bulletin Board** located at www.anzssa.org provides opportunities for members to share information and seek assistance with programs and issues. Recent issues include use of case notes, critical incident policy and procedures, financial advising of students and peer counselling programs.

**Publications**

**JANZSSA**, the Journal of ANZSSA, is published and distributed to members twice per year. Members are encouraged to contribute a variety of material: scholarly articles, information communications, comments, book reviews, and items of interest to the general membership can all be accommodated.

**ANZSSA News** is a quarterly newsletter which contains informative articles, news and views relevant to people working in student services.

ANZSSA is on the web at: **Http://www.anzssa.org**

**Membership**

The majority of individual members work directly with post-secondary students in various aspects of student development and welfare. This includes:

- Campus Nurses and Medical Officers
- Careers Advisers
- Chaplains
- Child Care Workers
- Counsellors
- Equity Officers
- Financial Advisers
- Housing Officers
- Indigenous Student Support Staff
- International Student Advisors
- Residential College Staff
- Social Workers
- Sport and Recreation Staff, and
- Welfare Workers

Another equally important group includes those with related interests, such as:
- College staff
- Student Officers, and
- Teachers and Administrators such as Sub-Deans

Students with an interest in student welfare and development make up a third important section of the membership.

**Membership Fees:**

Full Member $90.00*
Institutional Membership (per member)
2-4 members $70.00* each
5+ members $50.00* each
Student $40.00*
Overseas $110.00*
Sponsoring $145.00*
Journal only $45.00

*included membership of up to 3 special interest groups...

**Institutional membership**

Institutional membership of ANZSSA is available under the following conditions:

1. Institutional members must be staff of the same institution (but may not necessarily be working on the same campus or in the same department)
2. Institutional members must be named at the time of joining; Institutional membership is not transferable. Additional Institutional members may be added during the year.
3. Institutional members have the same status within ANZSSA as individual members.
4. A single institution may take out multiple Institutional memberships.

Membership queries should be directed to:

Ms Kerry Fischbein
Counselling Service
Canberra Institute of Technology
GPO Box 826
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Phone: 02 6207 3130
Fax: 02 6207 3189
Email: kerry.fischbein@cit.act.edu.au