

**Service Department Review
of the
Student Counselling Service
Trinity College Dublin**

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1 BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

This Service Department Review of the Student Counselling Service (SCS) at Trinity College Dublin (TCD) took place under the normal arrangements for the review of administrative and support areas in Trinity College Dublin and is based on written documentation (listed in the Appendix) and a visit by the Reviewers to TCD on the 2nd and 3rd June 2005.

The Student Counselling Service has grown rapidly from a single post 11 years ago to being an established service which offers a range of support to students and staff of the College. Principal among these services are the counselling and learning support work undertaken by the SCS, but in recent years these have been augmented by a number of specialist projects which have been funded through HEA project grants. These included initiatives relating to peer support, junior freshmen, international students, and non-traditional students.

The review of the SCS took place at a significant juncture in the Service's life for two reasons:

Firstly, Trinity College is itself undergoing a period of rapid change, including:

- An overall reduction in the unit of resource in Irish higher education (similar to that which has taken place in the UK) which has led the College to implement a significant reorganisation of its academic structures and its systems for financial management;
- Changes in the make up of the student population, with planned increases in international, non-traditional and post-graduate students;
- And finally, a current and ongoing review of Student Services at TCD following the appointment of a Dean of Students.

Secondly, a significant portion of the Service's temporary project funding is due to come to an end within a few months, which could place in jeopardy aspects of the Service's work.

For these reasons, the Review took place at a time of considerable change and uncertainty, and this Report therefore comments not only upon the current work of the SCS, but also upon some of the issues and options which face it in the very near future.

2 GOVERNANCE

The framework of governance of the SCS centred on a number of principal links. Firstly, the College Secretary is the line manager of all the Directors of the various student services in the College and holds an overview of all the services. He acts as a key link to the academic and administrative decision-makers in the College. His role has been crucial in obtaining resources and in developing the Counselling Service and other student services in College.

Secondly through the Dean of Students, providing a framework for services to develop naturally rather than driving forward with a specific agenda. This is a relatively new role within the institution and appears to be evolving within the existing culture and ethos of Trinity College.

The composition of Principal Committees, of which Student Services is one, has moved away from 'representative' large committees to smaller decision-making committees of Board. It was noted that there is only one Director of a student service on the Student Services Committee, which is not at present the Director of SCS.

Lastly, through the work of the Student Counselling Service Committee. The Reviewers were not able, in the time they had available, to fully grasp the operations and strategy of this Committee and how it added value to the overall workings of Student Care at Trinity College, and in particular to the ongoing provision of Student Counselling and the particular difficulties that it currently faces.

3 REVIEW OF THE CURRENT WORK OF THE SCS

3.1 Leadership & Management

The Director of the Service has provided strong leadership and direction to the Service over a number of years. To have developed the SCS from a single counsellor to its current well-developed range of professional activities within a comparatively short time speaks of a leadership that is forward looking, responsive to student need, and highly committed.

Other members of TCD staff that the reviewers met consistently spoke with praise and admiration at the leadership of the service, and the way in which the Director had been responsive to their concerns.

The one possible threat in having such a strong lead is that the SCS team and the College may come to rely too heavily on this individual. The reviewers were not in a position to assess whether this is the case at present, but would suggest that leadership and management roles and responsibilities of the service be reviewed by the Director and the institution.

In summary, the Counselling Service appears to have grown under the hand of a strong leader with a definite vision for Student Counselling, based on a model combining counselling and learning support. In looking ahead to the future it will be important for both the SCS and the College to pay attention to the details of management practice and priorities, and to ensure that the management and staff structures are supportive of the new strategic priorities for Trinity College.

3.2 Student Counselling

3.2.1 Staffing

The Counselling Service has well qualified staff: five are qualified psychotherapists, registered with the Irish Council for Psychotherapy, and the other three are counselling psychologists, registered with appropriate professional bodies. They are employed on a variety of full- and part-time, permanent and temporary contracts.

The SCS practice is to employ registered psychotherapists or counselling psychologists, with psychology or social work backgrounds and who have previous work experience in clinical multidisciplinary team settings. This ensures good assessment skills in the Service.

Many counselling services use sessional (i.e. temporary part-time) and contract (i.e. short-term contract) counsellors. In the UK, the Association for University and College Counselling strongly recommends that such staff are engaged for not less than one year because of the need to provide continuity of service and, where necessary, long term support for students. Three staff in the SCS are contract counsellors. These contracts have arisen through successful bids to the HEA for project funds, although the funds for these positions are channelled through the Cista Communis. Nonetheless, the reviewers remain of the view that the temporary nature of this funding is potentially detrimental to the continuity of care that the SCS is able to offer.

The use of professional trainees in the late stages of their training programmes is also fairly standard practice in the UK. The SCS appears to have systems in place to carefully select and supervise their trainees. One Director of a local psychology training programme to whom the Reviewers spoke, and who placed trainee psychologists in the SCS, indicated that he held in very high regard the standard of the placements offered and the support given to trainees working in the SCS.

The Reviewers were unclear what portion of the service delivery is undertaken by sessional and trainee staff and potentially have some concern about this. Good practice would dictate that the majority of the counselling is provided by suitably qualified and accredited staff on permanent contracts, while sessional staff may be used to cover staffing gaps and peaks in demand. We would also expect that the portion of service delivery undertaken by trainees is small (in Cambridge, as in a number of other institutions of comparable size, this is limited to 10% of counselling sessions offered).

Overall, current counselling staffing in the SCS is 4.8, giving a student counsellor ratio of approx 3,200: 1. The reviewers understand that the Irish Association for University and College Counselling recommend 2000: 1 ratio as being appropriate. This ratio is also recommended by the equivalent UK body, though it is fair to say that only a few leading institutions do match this figure (UK median = 2900 : 1, while some leading UK universities do better than 2000 : 1). The TCD SCS is therefore currently minimally staffed to offer an adequate service, and if current staff on temporary contracts are not retained or replaced, this would certainly leave the Service unable to offer an adequate or timely service, and possibly vulnerable to criticism.

3.2.2 Clientele

Approximately 4% of the TCD student body seek personal counselling, which is roughly in line with the experience in UK Universities. The average number of sessions attended is just under 4 sessions / client, while the UK average = 4.7 sessions / client. This is not an insignificant difference, and indicates that considerably briefer interventions are being offered in the TCD SCS. To interpret this difference, the Reviewers note that it could imply differing results: that admirably effective brief interventions are being delivered, and/or that students who need longer-term care are unable to be offered this due to insufficient resources in the Service.

3.2.3 Intake systems

The intake systems in use in the SCS are simple and appear to be effective – they ensure both that those students with urgent problems are seen very quickly, and that the majority of clients have a minimum wait before entering ongoing counselling. The use of ‘duty counsellors’ and ‘emergency appointments’ each day appears to work well and be appreciated by users, as well as by those who refer students to the Service. The Reviewers certainly spoke to a number of tutors and others who referred students to the SCS, who appreciated the way in which the Service would ‘bend over backwards’ to see students in urgent need, including at the end of the day and other times when most other College facilities were unavailable e.g. vacations and public holidays. However, it was not clear to the Reviewers whether the Service’s apparent capability to react speedily to urgent referrals was in response to the referrers’ concern and/or to the client’s state of risk or possibly an indication of highly committed staff attempting an ‘impossible task’. Nonetheless, referrers also valued the informal support they received from the SCS, and the written notification they received when a student they had referred had been seen in the Service.

The working aim in the SCS of seeing clients within 2 weeks compares reasonably to the UK, where some services will set aims of seeing clients within three weeks. However, it was not clear to the Reviewers why the Service would not institute a waiting list if they were unable to offer appointments within two weeks. Keeping waiting time short certainly enables services to be more accessible as well as to generally offer briefer interventions, but we wondered whether the Service saw the existence of a waiting list as a kind of ‘systems’ failure, rather than as a management tool.

The reviewers questioned the role of trainees within the initial assessment system. We understand that when clients approach the SCS they opt to be seen by counselling or learning support staff. They may be allocated to trainees working within the Service for this first appointment, though they are informed if this is the case and may request to be seen instead by a fully qualified member of staff. During the first appointment they are required to complete a detailed intake questionnaire which helps to identify those who are at risk for academic or mental health reasons. Trainee staff can call on a fully qualified member of staff during this initial appointment if needed.

3.2.4 On-going counselling

Those users of the Service to whom the Reviewers were able to speak valued the ongoing counselling they received. The majority of the work offered is quite brief, but some students were able to receive extended support, or to return to the Service at a later time to receive further counselling. The average length of interventions undertaken by the Service is typical of that in most UK student counselling services.

On the other hand, the Service’s policy of offering fortnightly sessions is unusual, and the Reviewers are unclear whether this policy is anything other than a pragmatic response to pressure on the Service’s resources. Conventional psychological therapy practice views weekly sessions as valuable and appropriate for many clients, though it is true that UK student counselling services have generally become more flexible about the frequency of sessions in order to fit with individual student’s circumstances and needs.

Of rather greater concern to the Reviewers was the fact that, while the users spoken to had greatly valued the counselling they had received, none had been clear in the early sessions of counselling about the extent of what they were being offered – in fact one student had

assumed that she was engaged in long-term counselling only to be told after a number of sessions that the counselling would have to stop after two further appointments. We would expect any limits to be made clear from the outset so that users could make appropriate use of the time available to them.

Counsellors and other staff within TCD were clear that the Service had been through a difficult time in the spring of 2004, when it had been unable to offer counselling within the desired time frames and had temporarily to put all new students requesting appointments onto a waiting list. However, all felt that the Service had recovered well since then. The reasons for the difficulties were not entirely clear from our discussions, but some contributory factors may have been a slight reduction in staffing levels and the growing seriousness of the problems presented by existing clients.

3.2.5 Is the core counselling work being overshadowed by the other work of the SCS?

The Reviewers clearly and repeatedly heard considerable appreciation of the Service's counselling work. But from a minority of those interviewed we also heard a worry that the core counselling work risked being overshadowed by the innovative (and equally valued) project work being undertaken by the SCS. While we are informed that the core counselling work of the SCS is protected through being 'ring-fenced' we feel it important that this Review should note the perception of the minority.

3.3 Learning Support and Development

The SCS has developed a range of initiatives designed to provide students with learning support. The evolution of a Learning Support Service (sometimes referred to as the Learning Support and Development Programme) within the SCS (rather than as a separate service) was explained in the documentation (and in meetings with staff) in terms of the high degree of overlap between issues of personal and academic skills development (issues of motivation, for example). This evolution and growth of the service, "*... a dynamic response to student needs and demands, government and College policy, and research findings*" (SAD: 4), now makes up a high proportion of the SCS's work, both with individuals and groups, and in terms of various related projects. Whilst we recognise that responding to student need, and the compatibility of SCS staff expertise with carrying out this work partly explains this growth, it is clear that the enthusiasm and commitment to learning support of the counselling service Director and her staff, and their success in bidding for funds have been significant factors leading this development.

The written evidence presented demonstrates that a well-evaluated service is delivered, providing one-to-one consultations and opportunities to attend workshops on a range of study-related themes. Feedback from students and tutors is predominantly good. The topics and themes covered are broadly similar to the kinds of provision offered in UK universities and, based on available data (JISCmail Learning Development in Higher Education Network, 2005); the numbers of students seen or attending sessions is also largely representative of service levels in HE institutions in the UK. The targeting of provision to those students most likely to require support is an example of good practice in making best use of limited resources.

The stated aim to expand the service to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population is welcomed in the light of evidence that student demand for support outstrips resources available to provide it. This situation is reported in a draft document: *'Review of Current Provision for the Development of Student Learning at TCD'* (O'Connor and Gannon, 2004). This report demonstrates that an attempt has been made to undertake needs analysis, in this case by consulting various services and the heads of academic departments.

A broader and more systematic approach to determining and analysing needs would serve to underpin the aim of expanding learning support; it is recognised, however, that accurately assessing the nature and levels of need is a complex matter and could imply a level of investigation that would in itself be costly and time consuming, taking resources away from provision. The desire to adopt *'internationally recognised professional standards of practice'* is also applauded, in particular those from the CAS Learning Assistance Programme Standards and Guidelines from the American Council for Advancement of Standards in Higher Education.

The College has established a Centre for Academic Practice and Student Learning (CAPSL), in line with a commitment in the TCD Strategic Plan 2003 - 2008. There is some collaboration between this Centre and SCS's Learning Support and Development team, although at present it is not entirely clear how the two entities work together. It appears that the evolution of CAPSL is still underway, as are its relations with the SCS. The SAD refers to *"liaison and integration"* of the services (p.20), and the draft SCS Annual Report 2003 – 2004 states that: *'The Learning Support Service offered by the Student Counselling Service is part of CAPSL ...'* (p. 10). Evidence for this latter statement was not apparent from the other information provided.

The draft document referred to above (O'Connor and Gannon, 2004) reports that the review of provision was prepared for the Learning Development Committee of the CAPSL. This document reviews provision for supporting learning offered by a wide range of services at the college – including the library, Learning Support Service within SCS, the Careers Service, the Trinity Access Programme and the Mature Students' Office, among others. It concludes that: *'...support for student learning does seem to be somewhat fragmented'* (p. 6). This finding was echoed in the comments of various people interviewed by the reviewers and was consistent with the overall impression formed by the reviewers.

From our reading of the documentation provided for the review, and our interviews at TCD, the following positive features deserve attention. The Learning Support and Development Programme:

- responds effectively to student need given that funding to date has been temporary
- is highly appreciated by members of the Tutorial Service: Tutors refer students to it readily, and generally did not feel unhappy with it being within a counselling service
- shows strong evidence of student satisfaction: student evaluation forms are very positive; Student Union and class representatives gave positive feedback
- has established some initiatives to collaborate with academic staff to embed learning skills in ways recognised as good practice in a number of leading Higher Education institutions in Ireland. There is recognition that this area of LSD needs to be further developed across subject disciplines at TCD
- has highly committed, experienced and well-qualified staff
- makes a good contribution to TCD's mission and to its Strategic Plan.

We would also wish to draw attention to the following areas for consideration:

- It is a fundamental concern that the contracts of the Learning Support staff are all based on temporary funding and are coming to an end in the near future. The potential to lose the accumulated experience of existing staff is a serious risk. The uncertainty about funding, the future of individual posts and of aspects of the service in general, is having serious repercussions within the team; causing feelings of stress, insecurity and doubts about how the service is valued by the College. It is also causing difficulties in planning future provision for Learning Support work.
- The service is currently delivered by staff with a largely psychological training, although it is noted that some staff also have qualifications in education and IT. This emphasis is understandable given its development from within the SCS. The reviewers would encourage continued future involvement of staff with more broadly pedagogical/academic practices approaches in the work of supporting and embedding learning development at TCD would be of great benefit in enhancing effectiveness – particularly in meeting needs of students in areas such as academic writing.
- The relationship of the Learning Support and Development service with the CAPSL remains rather unclear. There is a need to clarify this relationship to ensure that the strategic and day-to-day responsibilities associated with planning and delivering support for learning at TCD are undertaken as coherently and effectively as possible.
- The argument that locating Learning Support within the SCS helps to ‘normalise’ the counselling service (SAD p.90) was recognised by the reviewers, but not seen as an over-riding reason for maintaining the existing arrangements, which have evolved largely through circumstance, rather than by explicit planning of the service at an institutional level.
- Referral to the counselling service for help in developing skills for academic learning could also give rise to unease or misunderstanding on the part of some students. There is also some inconsistency in the names used for learning development services at TCD (e.g. Learning Support, LSD, Learning Support and Development Programme), which could give rise to confusion.
- The level of collaboration with academic staff, and links to the schools in embedding skills for learning are as yet at an early stage. The Review of Current Provision for the Development of Student Learning (2004) describes some of the work already undertaken in this area, and refers to the Generic Skills Integration Project (‘GENSIP’) materials. In interviews with some TCD staff, these materials were described as being of an excellent standard. The Reviewers understand that ongoing funding for GENSIP has faced difficulties but have noted that some materials are available on the web.

3.4 Projects

A considerable proportion of the SCS’s activities and provision over the last five years has come from projects funded through short-term grants from the Irish Higher Education

Authority (HEA). There is a high degree of uncertainty over the future of these projects since the direct funding mechanism from its Strategic Initiatives has now ended. Although HEA funding for objectives such as supporting student retention will continue as part of TCD's core grant, "... *it is unclear if funding to College will be comparable to the existing budget. It is also unclear how College will distribute this funding going forward*" (SAD, p.33). Six of the service's sixteen staff are centrally involved in project work, of whom five are on contracts which are due to end during the current year.

3.4.1 Junior Freshman Programme

This represents a group of projects and initiatives designed to support the personal and academic transition, integration and success of first year students, and has been funded from the HEA Strategic Initiatives (Retention Strand). The work "... *arose from the awareness that first year students were at the greatest risk of dropping out from College*" (SAD p.15). These activities have been coordinated by a 'Junior Freshman Officer' post, currently coming to an end.

Evaluation of the JFP work has been informal rather than systematic but the information provided suggests a high degree of satisfaction on the part of both student users and partners in other HE institutions. The development of web-based seminars and an 'orientation' website are examples of innovative practice in the use of C&IT. The considerable interest shown by other institutions, within and outside of Ireland, indicate the importance of the development of support mechanisms to address the needs of new students. Some statistical information and a summary of evaluations about use of the web seminar and the orientation site are given in the draft annual report for the SCS 2003 – 2004, and although it is not possible to extrapolate from this to judge accurately the impact of these initiatives on retention rates, our impression is of highly valued and useful work in this field which directly serves the needs of the wider College.

That TCD should provide some of the leading ideas, and share resources (e.g. the online materials) in this area, is a contribution to its mission to disseminate knowledge and expertise both within Ireland and internationally. The reviewers are of the opinion that it would be beneficial to retain and consolidate the orientation, email support, IT training and study-skills web-seminar activities of the JFP officer (including the collaboration with other institutions) within a Learning Support and Development team. It was unclear to the reviewers how the 'dedicated counselling hours to first year students' fit under the auspices of this programme.

3.4.2 Peer support

This project, in operation for the last five years and funded from the HEA Strategic Initiatives (Retention Strand), "... *evolved from research which indicated that students' first and preferred source of help is their peers.*" (SAD, p4). Peer supporters are trained in counselling skills and given regular supervision. Applications by students to join the scheme have been consistently higher than the number of places available. The evidence available indicates that this is a very well utilised and highly valued scheme. The skills gained by student supporters are especially well appreciated and are reported as making a significant positive contribution to other aspects of their lives such as in communication, study skills and personal relationships.

Considerable thought and outline planning has been undertaken in proposing a three-year programme of consolidation and development for the various aspects of the peer support project, based upon the appointment of a Peer Support Coordinator. There is considerable overlap between the personal, academic and informational functions of the services offered by the peer support project. Given this breadth of approach, and the focus on use of counselling skills, it would seem appropriate to retain peer support within the counselling service – although collaboration with and involvement of Learning Support and Development, and other Student Services staff in the training of supporters should be maintained. The existing involvement of SCS in training and consultation with the students’ ‘Niteline’ service could also be consolidated within this remit.

3.4.3 Mental Health Initiative

This project seeks to promote students’ mental health and to minimise the risk of suicide. It was developed within the SCS as a response to an increase in the numbers of seriously distressed students using the counselling service, and in cases of attempted suicide, especially by young males (both of which are trends mirrored in higher education in the UK and elsewhere in Europe). Funding has previously been received through various sources including the Department of Education and Science; the Department of Health; and the European Social Fund; but this is due to end soon.

The initiative has resulted in the organisation of a recent national symposium (2004) on mental health, and the production of a resource manual on Suicide prevention. This has also been made available to other institutions nationally and internationally. An outline plan to further develop the initiative using online resources has been developed, making use of student-focused and self-help approaches, including collaborative work with the Students’ Union. Links are also established with a College Mental Health Working Party, the School of Occupational Therapy and the Student Disability Service. The reviewers see this as a very worthwhile initiative which could respond effectively to need, and which should be supported within the SCS. It is recommended that all relevant health and support services at Trinity are consulted and involved in its further development.

3.4.4 International student project

Work is being undertaken in response to the projected increase in international students at TCD from the current level of 12% to 20% of the overall student population, to identify and prepare for appropriate counselling initiatives to meet the unique needs of such students. This project aims to raise awareness of cultural differences and their implications in providing counselling services.

The SCS has consistently found that a greater proportion of international students than home students make use of their Service. As the College intends to grow this section of the TCD student population, senior management will need to consider the support implications in order to ensure the success of this strategy.

It was not clear to the Reviewers the extent to which there was an institutional focus, such as an International Student Office, for all international students. This is increasingly the case in UK Universities - such provision can assist in integrating the range of services required by international students, as well as providing another possible referral point for counselling.

3.4.5 Research Project on Counselling for Non-Traditional Students

In its SAD, the SCS reports that the College plans to “... *increase the percentage of non-traditional and international students to 35% of the overall student population*”, and that this will “... *have a huge impact on the level of demand for counselling and learning support from students*” (SAD, p.15). Given that other higher education institutions have similar aims, the SCS at Trinity is collaborating with two other Irish universities in undertaking research into the counselling and associated staffing and training needs for five specific groups of such non-traditional students, with the aim of producing ‘best practice guidelines’ for working with mature and disadvantaged students, those with disabilities, those from the travelling and refugee communities. A further six months funding from the HEA has been granted.

Many of the comments in the previous section apply equally to this project. The College will need to provide good support to the growing non-traditional student population for this strategy to work. It is widely recognised in the UK that such students do require additional and focused support in order to avoid rising drop-out rates.

3.5 Feedback from student users of the SCS

The reviewers met individually with a range of service users – clients of the counselling service, peer supporters, students who had attended learning support sessions and staff using SCS in its advisory capacity.

In the main the comments of users were very positive, giving testimony to the value and efficacy of the Service.

These students had been well aware of the existence of the SCS through the regular emails widely circulated in College concerning the Learning Support workshops on offer, and had been able to find out more through the Service’s website. Some students explained that they had been referred to the service by a tutor and wanted to express a high level of satisfaction with the support they had received. One student commented that more choice of workshops on academic skills sessions throughout the year would be useful, but added that she would prefer these to be delivered as part of her course rather than as separate ‘generic’ events.

Counselling clients felt that they had established good rapport with their counsellor, though one who had been seen by a trainee counsellor had subsequently asked not to see a trainee, which was then arranged. Some users felt that they had received all they needed from the Service, while others felt they ‘could have done with more’.

Several of the users seen were unclear in the early stages of counselling the extent of what was on offer, and at least one was disappointed to be told in mid-counselling that it would have to end after a further two sessions. Giving greater clarity to students from the outset concerning what the SCS could offer would be both helpful and therapeutically important.

Clients generally welcomed the fact that the Service was in a discreet part of the College, and were not in the main perturbed by having to climb three flights of stairs to access the Service. However, we met one user who is a wheelchair user, meeting this client in the Health Service Meeting Room. This client, while well attuned to the realities of being a wheelchair user, was appreciative of the special arrangements made by the SCS staff to arrange an accessible

venue, but disappointed that it was necessary to go to this trouble. Moreover, while accepting the goodwill of all concerned, in the opinion of the reviewer who met this client, the room that was available was far from suitable as a venue for counselling.

Two staff members commented favourably to the Reviewers on the advice and information received from the SCS learning support in relation to areas related to study skills.

3.6 SCS team culture and professional working relations

The staff employed within the SCS work closely as a team, and all SCS staff that we spoke to valued this collaborative team culture. Although staff had different specialist areas of work and were employed on different grades, all appeared to feel part of one enterprise. This was evidenced by regular team meetings which all attended, and by joint training events; the administrative staff were included in both the above and valued this inclusive way of working.

Despite the fact that a significant portion of those employed were working on time-limited contracts, many of which were coming to an end within a few months, there was a remarkable commitment to the Service; the overall sense was of a highly committed team who believed in the value of work they were doing, and of a hope that funding would be found to continue their contracts. However, we would not want to underplay the stress that these working conditions placed on those staff who did not know whether they would still be employed in a few months' time.

The only other example of the tension within team relations that the reviewers became aware of related to reporting arrangements and grading of a counselling position.

We understand that this matter has been taken up with the Human Relations Department at TCD, and is not strictly within the remit of the Review team. However, we wondered about the extent to which this might indicate underlying organisational stress within the Service.

It was also clear that the administrative support, and IT needs, were at times severely stretched and that to some extent this pressure was being absorbed within the existing culture and ethos of the Service.

3.7 Relationship with other Student Services at TCD

The reviewers met representatives of other Student Services, specifically from the Careers Advisory Service, College Health Service, Chaplaincy, and Student Disability Service; we also met the Junior Dean. All were complimentary of the work of the SCS in relation to student care, in particular commenting that the Service would respond very quickly and 'beyond the call of duty' to urgent situations, arranging to see students wherever this was necessary. These College staff were aware that the SCS had been through a particularly difficult time in the spring of 2004, when waiting times for counselling had grown, but all felt that the Service had recovered its position in the current academic year.

Most such Student Services staff valued the full range of work undertaken by the SCS, and felt that the Learning Support and outreach work (peer support, junior freshman, international

student, and non-traditional student projects) were of considerable importance to the work and mission of the College. The Service was seen as professional and acting in partnership with these other Student Services and College tutors. The only hesitance expressed by some of these staff was that the core counselling work might be being overshadowed as the wider range of the Services' work had developed.

However, the view that the contribution of the Service's work was not fully appreciated by the College was repeatedly expressed, and summed up by one participant who wanted the College leadership to know that: "What the SCS does is fundamental to the work of the College and to the well-being of the (College) community".

While the work of the SCS with students was greatly valued, the working relationships between the staff of the SCS and other student services was not as close or as clear as we might have expected. In particular, there appeared to be an observable distance in the senior professional relationships between the SCS and its nearest neighbour, the Student Health Service. The medical staff the reviewers met, or had discussions with, described the SCS as professional, but felt insufficiently informed when the SCS made changes to its policies or practice, and somewhat concerned over how trainee counsellors were used. There was also a desire expressed for the Service to focus on its core counselling mission, and to be more open to contemporary models of shorter term psychological therapies (such as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy).

Although the Reviewers understand that the SCS and Medical Centre became separate entities following a College review in 1997, the Reviewers felt that there would be a benefit in both services working to improve communications and a collaborative working alliance. The Reviewers are of the opinion that close working relationships between the counselling and medical services are important to ensure good care of students who have mental health problems as well as minimising professional rivalries. Closer integration of counselling and health is particularly important for the development of key initiatives such as a Mental Health Strategy and Policy.

4 KEY ISSUES AND RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS

1. The SCS is creative, productive and does a substantial amount of demonstrably effective work, contributing well to TCD's needs and agenda. It is clearly valued by users, tutors and pastoral staff.
2. It is under-resourced and currently subject to a very high level of financial uncertainty. It would be surprising if this did not impact, in some respects, on the work of the Service. There appeared to be a consensus amongst those TCD staff that the Review team met that the Service's contribution to TCD had been historically underestimated by TCD Senior Management.
3. The SCS showed evident signs of strain, which appeared to be a result of financial, personal and task-related pressures – in structural terms this might be thought of in terms of 'cracks' appearing.

4. There are unresolved and ongoing issues, as detailed in various parts of the report above, which derive from the somewhat fragmentary structure of provision for support services in TCD, and in particular from the lack of clarity over the responsibility for, location and organisation of learning development and study skills initiatives.
5. There are a number of resource and infrastructure issues that need addressing. In summary, these include:
 - Administration – inadequate cover to meet peak demand
 - Opening hours – are they set at appropriate times to meet demand?
 - Discreet location, but the entrance and stairwell decor are not inviting
 - Good counselling rooms, but no space for group sessions or for team meetings
 - Disabled access
 - IT equipment and software needs review

5 REVIEW OF THE STRATEGIC AIMS OF THE SCS

The strategic aims contained within the SAD are ambitious and detailed. Conversations with the Director indicate that they are, at least in part, speculative and, as such, uncosted. It is certainly true that the Service has developed very rapidly over the last 10 years, and within this context the stated aims for the future seem more understandable. However, while there is certainly still scope for developing and deepening the range of work conducted by the Service, the Reviewers recognise that the unit of resource at TCD (and other universities) is currently declining and that the College will need to make difficult decisions about priorities. In the light of these realities, we would hope that the SCS can still make some more modest steps forward in the coming years, but they are unlikely to be as ambitious as outlined in the SAD.

For this reason we have not commented in detail on the given aims.

Within the 13 objectives (and in excess of 200 aims) there is a wealth of good initiatives and ideas that could be addressed, however it is felt that a clear overall strategy needs to be in place first, before setting a smaller number, possibly 5-6, of new objectives. These could be distilled from the existing list.

It would be important nonetheless; for those concerned in SCS and other relevant services, to agree with TCD senior management clear and unambiguous strategies for the future of Student Services in the College, and the Counselling and Teaching and Learning sections within it, to which the objectives would relate. It will also be important for the Objectives to be achievable, both in terms of resources and funding, otherwise there is a risk that they become unmanageable.

The Reviewers note that the College is in the process of developing a Student Services strategy and hope that this process will shortly enable the SCS to refine its own goals to fit within the overall plan.

With regard to Strategic Objective 3, and that part of Chapter 8 of the SAD dealing with the learning support and development functions of TCS, the Reviewers are of the view that this is a worthwhile plan but is subject to a number of questions, as indicated above, over the best location and organisational arrangements for delivery of these services. Before such aims can be realistically planned, fuller debate over SCS's role in relation to CAPSL and learning support provision needs to be undertaken at an institutional level. It is nonetheless evident to the reviewers that existing initiatives in these areas are of good quality, are reasonably effective and well evaluated, such that the future involvement of existing staff and approaches to learning development should certainly be maintained in whatever structure may emerge from such a debate.

6 ISSUES NEEDING TO BE ADDRESSED & RECOMMENDATIONS

In considering the issues for the future development of the SCS, the Reviewers have taken as a starting point the needs of the College and the student body, rather than simply the current position of the Service.

6.1 What do TCD students and the College need?

It is important that the student community has access to both modern, dependable counselling and learning development provision, working to contemporary ethical standards and good practice. This needs to be matched by the institution having in place an affordable service that is consistent with the aims of the TCD Strategic Plan 2003-2008. If asked, students may well want Counselling and Learning Support to be made more readily available but there would be real cost issues associated with this, which in the current economic climate, TCD is unlikely to be able to meet.

As has been noted earlier in this Report there was a widespread view that student support was, and should continue to be, an important and integral part of TCD life – the 'Trinity Experience' – and that the Counselling Service was a leading and respected provider in this area. What seemed to be ascribed high value, above most other considerations, was ready access to the notion of the professional, skilled helper, who could support both staff and students when needed. It is this tradition – what might be thought of as human capital – that is valuable to the institution and also offers staff in the Service a meaningful role to play. The Review team felt from their discussions, that the Student Counselling Service staff had stretched their available resources to the limit, and funding issues aside, had little useful room left for manoeuvre.

6.2 Suggested options for the future

The Review team note that to do nothing will quickly imply losing a significant portion of the work that the Service has developed, and which meets the needs of the College (particularly in the context of the College's Strategic Aims for 2003-08). We feel that the loss of staff, specialist expertise and goodwill this would involve would be not be in the interest of the College, even in the current financial climate. To avoid this will involve a rapid response by the senior management.

The challenge facing TCD is to make available a service that builds on the extensive know-how and competences of the existing staff in the Student Counselling Service yet meets

current and future requirements of students, in a climate where students are increasingly being seen as consumers, and where, as learners, students are increasingly required to develop self-awareness and take responsibility for this. It will also be important to pay close attention to the cultural norms and prevailing values within TCD and to ensure that any changes to the existing system are compatible with these. Failure to do so could result in a programme of change that may appear attractive but would lack the institutional commitment to implement.

With this in mind the Reviewers propose two distinct possibilities which TCD should consider:

6.2.1 Retain the current organisation, but change the name of the Service and secure adequate and reliable funding

The Review team felt that a minimum requirement would be to ‘mainstream’ as much of the current funding as could be afforded. The advantages were that that it maintained a model of support that is popular amongst the majority of users, but to be viable, would need to seriously address the issue of funding. The existing framework of temporary funding is not consistent with long term commitment to the development of services in order to meet student and institutional needs. However this change is recognised as requiring a shift in both policy and practice within TCD, and would require the institution to establish a baseline level of funding for all student support (including counselling) out of direct budget.

If this model were to be adopted we would strongly suggest a change of name to more precisely reflect the range of services that the centre actually offers, e.g. ‘Student Counselling and Learning Development Centre’.

The disadvantage of this model is that it would continue a form of practice that has developed to meet historical needs and was felt to be too heavily dependent on the existing personnel. The Review team was not fully convinced that continuation of this joint approach towards counselling and learning support would necessarily meet the challenges of the future, as detailed in the TCD Strategy 2003-2008 and the Counselling Service objectives. However, a change of name and a move to secure funding, may offer TCD a first step towards a more substantial, but gradual, evolution of student support services.

6.2.2 Separate Counselling and Learning Support into two separate units, with the Learning Support being re-located, and managed, within the scope of CAPSL

This is an attractive option in a number of respects, but as in the first option, would require the issue of direct funding to be fully addressed and resolved. Counselling and Learning Support do not *a priori* have to be co-located even though the Reviewers accept that there is evidence to suggest that there can be substantial synergies between the two sets of activities.

Separating out Counselling from Learning Support might allow a more integrated relationship between Student Counselling and Student Health to develop, in order to meet the growing concerns surrounding student mental health. The establishment of a stand-alone Counselling Service would also be closer to the traditional model of support that is available in most UK Universities at the present time.

Learning Support might also then be allowed to develop as a more distinctive discipline, more deliberately aligned with the academic aspects of teaching and learning. Re-location and re-focussing into the activities of CAPSL would not preclude close working and integration with the activities of Counselling, but it is believed that this could be encouraged and maintained with active support from the Dean of Student, the Director of CAPSL and the Student Services Committee.

However, the Reviewers are concerned that such a move could jeopardise current good practice unless there is a proper accessible base for the LS team and that attention is paid to setting the job grades of any transferred posts at a level that accurately reflects their contribution to the institution. These two factors are seen as critical success factors for this second option, and without commitment to them there is a serious risk that existing staff, expertise and goodwill will be lost to the College.

7 CONCLUSIONS

The SCS is more than a counselling service; the current name is misleading and possibly even unhelpful to its future development.

The Review team faced a dilemma: how to reconcile what appeared to be potentially competing interests – how best to define a way forward for a Centre that had grown in order to meet institutional needs, yet appeared mis-named in terms of its range of work?

Conventional thinking about the location of Student Counselling in equivalent third level institutions in the UK and USA would be that choices should be centred on two themes. First that of the central importance of student support and wellbeing, and second, that of the importance of providing an integrated range of student support services. With the latter idea of integration, this can take place at a number of levels – institutional, physical and ‘in-the-mind’. Equally, views on the best ways to embed development and support for academic and study skills fall into two main schools: firstly that such work should take the form of a support service to students, located within a ‘student services’ type of structure; and secondly that it should be integrated within educational and academic practice development in a manner similar to that envisaged in the description of the proposed CAPSL in the TCD Strategic Plan 2003 – 2008 document.

We were left in no doubt that the Student Counselling Service was well integrated into the TCD community, that this integration had been the result of a number of factors, most notably that of the human endeavour of professional, creative and committed staff. However the financial frameworks and support mechanisms which had facilitated this integration were changing and unless managed sensitively could put at risk some of the ‘in-the-mind’ value that the SCS contributes to TCD students and staff.

In proposing two possibilities, the review team will hopefully encourage TCD to take decisions about its future requirements for student services in general. Neither of the options is without some measure of risk; however we feel that this risk can be offset by the potential advantages of creating a service that maintains good practice whilst being managed and organised in ways that meet the future needs of Trinity College.

Despite some concerns, the Reviewers are confident that the College has a strong and well-run cluster of services within the SCS. However, the Service is at a turning point and its future depends on financial and structural factors. To retain the current core strengths and allow these to develop in the future, the College will require some financial courage and clearer student services and academic practice structures. Inaction will lead to the loss of an asset offering excellence in its services and practices in many of its areas (as befits Trinity College's leading position in Higher Education). Effective action to clarify and better establish the existing work undertaken by SCS will, however, serve to underpin the College's strategic aims.

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October 2005

APPENDIX - Documents available to Reviewers

Submitted to Reviewers prior to Review

- ⇒ Service Review: Self-Assessment Document, TCD Student Counselling Service, May/2005 (with corrected versions of pp 23, 32a, and 155)
- ⇒ Overview of the TCD Senior Administrative Officers Organisational Chart
- ⇒ Overview of the TCD College Officers Organisational Chart
- ⇒ Overview of the TCD Committee Structure
- ⇒ Trinity College Dublin Strategic Plan 2003-2008: Summary
- ⇒ Institutional Quality Review of the University of Dublin, Trinity College. European University Association Reviewers' Report, Nov/2004
- ⇒ Review of National Policies for Education: Review of Higher Education in Ireland. EDU/EC(2004)14, 13/9/2004
- ⇒ Guidelines for Departments undertaking Service Department Reviews, & Guidelines for External Reviewers undertaking Service Department Reviews.

Requested by Reviewers, or submitted during Review visit, 2&3/6/2005

- ⇒ TCD Student Counselling Service Annual Report 2003-2004 (Draft)
- ⇒ Printed copy of PowerPoint presentation on the work of the TCD Student Counselling Service. (Presentation made by SCS staff to Reviewers on 2/6/2005)
- ⇒ Copy of TCD SCS Client Intake Questionnaire
- ⇒ Additional statistics relating to Average number of Counselling Sessions offered in Student Counselling Service in 2004-05, with comparative figures from 2001/02 and 2003/04
- ⇒ Review of Current Provision for the Development of Student Learning at TCD (draft), March 2004, Learning Development Committee of CAPSL
- ⇒ Response to the National Plan to achieve equity of access to Higher Education in Ireland, Steering Committee for the Joint Trinity College Dublin, University College Cork and Athlone Institute of Technology Research Project into the counselling needs of non-traditional students. Submitted Sept. 2004
- ⇒ Estimate for 2005 of Income & Expenditure associated with the TCD Student Service Charge
- ⇒ Trinity College Salary Scales at 01/07/2004
- ⇒ Trinity Access Programmes. Print of web pages on TAP: www.tcd.ie/Trinity_Access/index.php
- ⇒ The Mental Health Initiative: A resource manual for mental health promotion and suicide prevention in third level institutions. Trinity College Dublin and Northern Area Health Board, 2003