

The Welfare Survey: Student Counselling Service Report

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Introduction and Methodology

This academic year one of the main priorities for the elected sabbatical officers of the London School of Economics Students' Union (LSESU) is to improve mental health and wellbeing for students studying at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). As well as running the year-long 'Wellbeing Project' the sabbatical officers commissioned research to look into how students feel that mental health is treated at LSE and to add to the existing body of research on the various support services that LSE provides.

This report is focused solely on responses regarding the Student Counselling Service; the purpose of this report is to provide evidence as to why LSE should increase the financial provision to its Student Counselling Service. This research is not intended to be an academic piece of work; its purpose is to create a body of evidence to start a conversation between students and the School about how to improve mental health and wellbeing for LSE students.

Background

The LSE Student Counselling Service sits within the Student Wellbeing Service; it provides students with individual counselling sessions, group counselling session and self-help materials; it also operates Mental Health Advisers. A recent FOI request from the Students' Union found that the LSE Student Counselling Service currently employs 7 full time counsellors, 2 mental health advisers and saw around 721 students during 2014/15. The response states that the average number of sessions that students receive is 4.8 sessions and that Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is offered.

Nationally, the numbers of students declaring mental health issues and accessing support services has risen drastically over the past few years; data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) found that the number of students declaring a mental health issue has increased 132% from 2008 to 2013.¹ As well as this, Ruth Caleb, Chair of Universities UK's Mental Well-being Working Group has estimated that counselling services are facing an annual rise in demand of approximately 10% (dependent on the institution).² Further research published by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (Hefce) found that institutions felt that the number of students declaring mental health issues and accessing support services has risen. One institution that took part found that demand for mental health advisers had doubled; another had seen an increase in referrals to its counselling service of 54% in 12 months.³

¹ http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/Independentresearch/2015/Understanding,provision,for,students,with,mental,health,problems/HEFCE2015_mh.pdf see pg. 44

² <http://www.bacp.co.uk/media/index.php?newsId=3832>

³ http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/Independentresearch/2015/Understanding,provision,for,students,with,mental,health,problems/HEFCE2015_mh.pdf

LSESU does not have specific data on the numbers of students using the LSE Student Counselling Service and any increases in this. Nevertheless, if these national trends are replicated on an institutional level then this could mean that the support services it provides are under pressure now and in the future.

Methodology

In order to ensure that students were able to speak as openly as possible about their experiences at LSE the Welfare Survey was completely anonymised. There were a range of qualitative and quantitative questions in order to gain as broad a range of views from students as possible.

The survey ran from 11 January 2016 to 8 February 2016 and received a total of 1,100 responses, which is nearly 10% of the student population. The survey was online only and was promoted via LSESU channels, this included:

- Emails to all students;
- Emails to course reps;
- Promotion on the LSESU social media (facebook and twitter);
- Stalls held outside the Saw Swee Hock Student Centre;
- Promotion by Peer Supporters; and
- An advert in the Beaver.

Findings

The findings from the Student Counselling Service section from the 'Welfare Survey' are presented in this paper.

Overall it seems that students generally have a positive experience with the Student Counselling Service, for example the majority of students felt that every aspect of service was helpful. There were also some students who specifically commented that the service had helped them through periods of poor mental health. It should absolutely be recognised that the Student Counselling Service is supporting students.

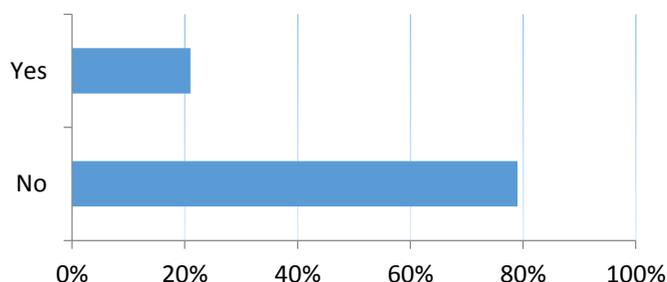
At the same time, at the end of this report there are recommendations as to how LSESU believes that the Student Counselling Service could be improved to further support students. The conclusions drawn are influenced by the research undertaken by Hefce to understand provision for students with mental health issues.⁴ However LSESU believes that these recommendations cannot be implemented without further financial resource being allocated to Student Counselling Service therefore this paper is framed in those terms.

Please note that percentages used in this report have been rounded to the nearest percentage.

⁴ http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE.2014/Content/Pubs/Independentresearch/2015/Understanding.provision.for.students.with.mental.health.problems/HEFCE2015_mh.pdf

General Information

Have you used the counselling service at LSE?



The Student Counselling Service section of the Welfare Survey attracted a total of 912 responses, which is 83% of the total number of responses received. The proportion of students who had used the service was 21%. Of these students who had used the service; 56% were undergraduates, 32% were postgraduate taught and 12% were postgraduate research.

In the initial stages of the Welfare Survey students were asked a series of 'General Information' questions which included questions on if they were registered with a GP, had experienced a period of poor mental health, if they self-defined as disabled and if they had disclosed a disability to the School. Perhaps unsurprisingly when the responses from students who had accessed the Student Counselling Service were compared to all respondents there were some variations. See the below table.

	All Students	Student Counselling Service Users	-/+ Difference
Are you registered with a GP?			
Yes	78%	91%	13%
No	22%	9%	-13%
Have you experienced a period of poor mental health?			
Yes	46%	79%	33%
No	33%	10%	-23%
Maybe	21%	11%	-10%
Do you self-define as disabled?			
Yes	7%	14%	7%
No	93%	86%	-7%
Have you disclosed a disability to LSE?			
Yes	9%	23%	14%
No	40%	34%	-6%
I don't feel I have a disability	51%	43%	-8%

Analysis

The most disappointing aspect of this section is that whilst 46% of all students state that they felt they had experienced a period of poor mental health, only 21% had accessed the Student Counselling Service. When the students who had used the service were excluded, the percentage of respondents stating that they had experienced a period of poor mental health only reduced to 40%. This highlights a concerning disparity between the number of students who feel they have experienced poor mental health and those that have accessed support at LSE. The reasons why students have chosen not to access the Student Counselling Service is dealt with in a later section.

We compared respondents who had accessed the service and those that had not on issues such as:

- registering with a GP;
- experiencing periods of poor mental health;
- self-defining as disabled; and
- disclosing a disability to the School

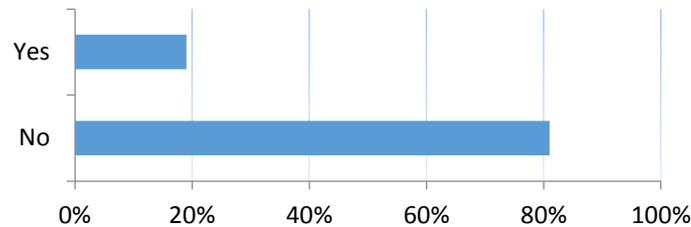
The largest variation between these two groups was that students who had accessed the Student Counselling service were 33% more likely to have experienced a period of poor mental health. It is also unsurprising that students who have accessed the service are more likely to self-define as disabled and to have disclosed this to the institution. It is encouraging that 91% of students who have accessed the Student Counselling Service are registered with a GP.

This shows that the students who are able and willing to access support services generally have more agency over their mental health. It also shows that those students who have disclosed a disability to the university are more likely to be aware of other support services such as the Student Counselling Service and to access them. However, the students who do not access this service still reported experiencing periods of poor mental health, but were much less likely to be registered with a GP (75%); meaning they are less likely to be accessing the support that they need. The Students' Union believes that LSE should be ensuring that any student that experiences a period of poor mental health should feel able to access support.

First Appointment

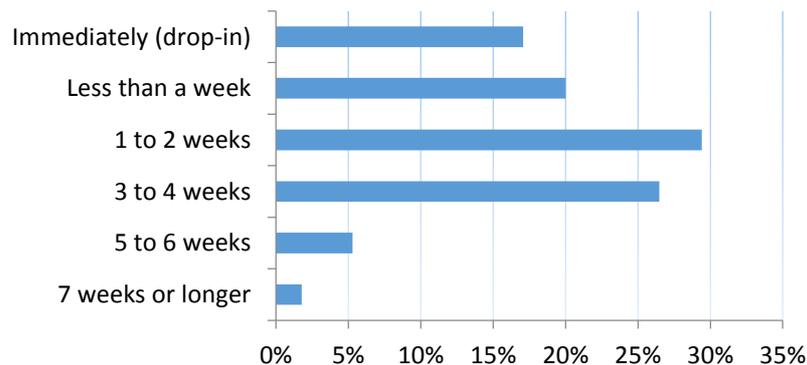
This section seeks students views on the 'First Appointment' they are given when they access the Student Counselling Service and on individual counselling sessions.

Have you had an individual first appointment with a counsellor?



In total 19% of respondents stated that they had received an individual first appointment with the service. As the total number of students who stated they had accessed the Student Counselling Service was 21%, this indicates that students are most likely to interact with the individual appointment system.

How long did you have to wait for your first appointment?

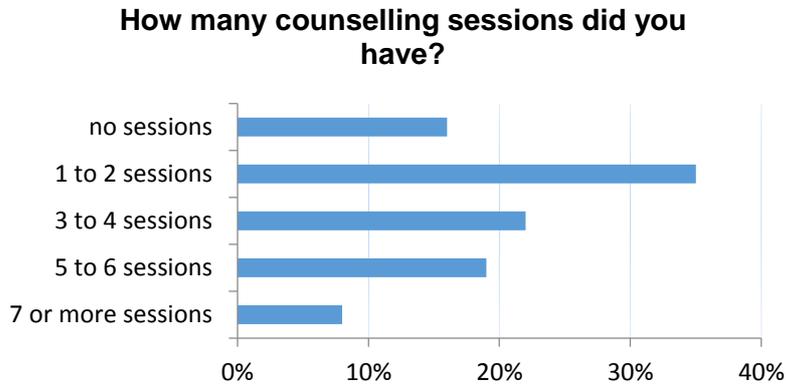


In terms of how long students had to wait for their first appointment; it is encouraging that 66% of students did not have to wait longer than two weeks. That 17% of students were able to see someone immediately, and that 29% of students only had to wait between one to two weeks. However, it is the view of LSESU that no student should have to wait longer than two weeks or ten working days for an appointment for any LSE support service.

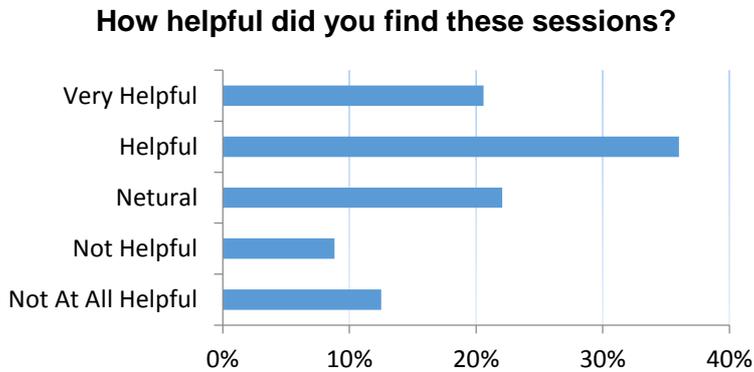
Finally, students were then asked how many further sessions they received, of the students that received a first appointment 81% were recommended further counselling sessions. Of the 31 students that were not offered counselling sessions, three students received group counselling, 7 saw a Mental Health Adviser and 8 used the self-help materials.

Sessions

The students that were offered further counselling sessions were then asked how many sessions they actually received.



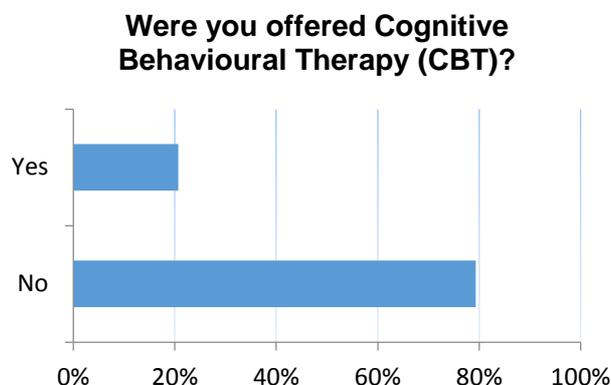
Although it is promising that 49% of students received more than two sessions, this still equates to 35% of students who received two or less. It should be noted that there will be some students who for various reasons chose not to proceed with any sessions or chose to not complete all the sessions allocated to them. Nevertheless considering that in a recent FOI response on the support services for students, the School stated that on average students receive 4.8 sessions, these findings are in contradiction to students' perceptions..



Students were then asked how helpful they found these sessions; with 57% of students stating that they found their counselling sessions either 'Helpful' or 'Very Helpful'. From the comments left by students for this question, generally it seems that whether a student finds their counselling sessions helpful or not depends very much on the individual relationship with the counsellor. Given this, LSESU believes that students should be able to change their counsellor if they reasonably feel that the relationship between them and the counsellor is not effective.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

LSESU is aware that the Student Counselling Service can also offer students CBT. This is a useful tool for the service, therefore the Students' Union sought to find out how much this was actually utilised.



Disappointingly, only 21% of students who received individual counselling sessions were offered CBT. When asked if they would like to have been offered this, 40% of students stated 'Yes', with a further 42% stating 'Maybe'. From the comments left by students, it seems that the reason they did not want to be offered it or did not know, was due to not knowing what CBT is. There were also a small proportion of students who stated they did not feel that CBT would benefit them.

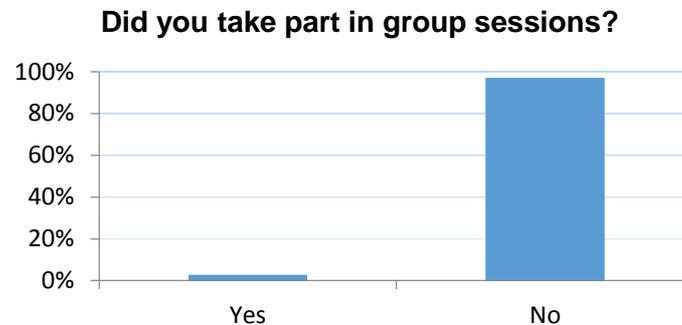
Analysis

For students receiving an individual appointment it is encouraging that nearly two thirds of students did not have to wait longer than two weeks, and that only 21% of students felt negatively as to whether the service was helpful. It was disappointing that the majority of students were receiving only 1 or 2 counselling sessions; this could perhaps go some way to explain why such low numbers of students were being offered CBT as a series of sessions would have to be undertaken for this.

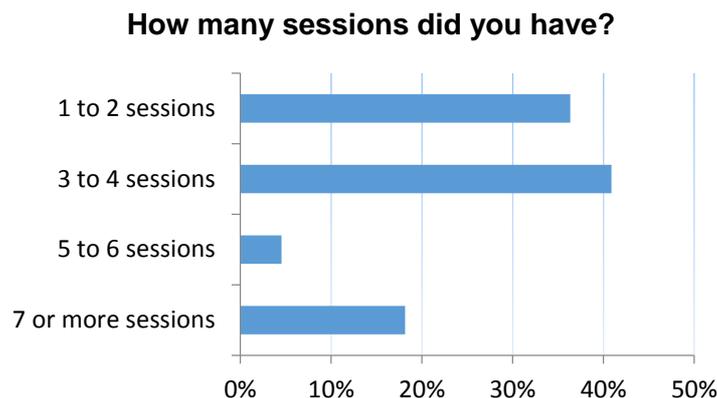
Ultimately, the Students' Union believes that no student should have to wait longer than 10 working days to access the service, and that students should be offered as many sessions as possible. Whilst the Student Counselling Service should not seek to replace the NHS as a longer term service, it should recognise the complex needs of its students and try to be more flexible. As well as this it should utilise its CBT capabilities more. Talking therapies are just one form of therapy and not suitable for everyone; the larger the number of therapies that the service is able to provide its students the wider range of students it will be able to support.

Group Sessions

Another service that the Student Counselling Service offers students are group counselling sessions.



Only 3% of respondents stated that they had taken part in a group counselling session; this is a much lower proportion of students than those accessing individual counselling sessions. Interestingly, it seems that students do not have to wait as long for group counselling session with only 17% of students stating that they had to wait over two weeks.

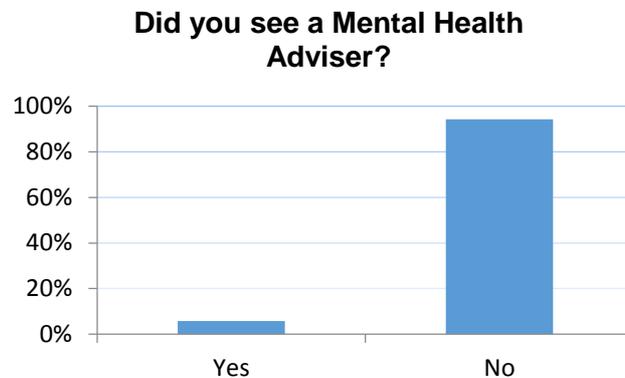


It seems that students receiving group counselling sessions are most likely to receive 3 or 4 sessions and least likely to receive 5 or 6 sessions; this is not a marked difference between those receiving individual counselling. Interestingly, when asked how helpful students found their group sessions it was found that students were 4% less likely to think that the group sessions were either 'Very Helpful' or 'Helpful', but were also 8% less likely to think their sessions were either 'Not Helpful' or 'Not At All Helpful'.

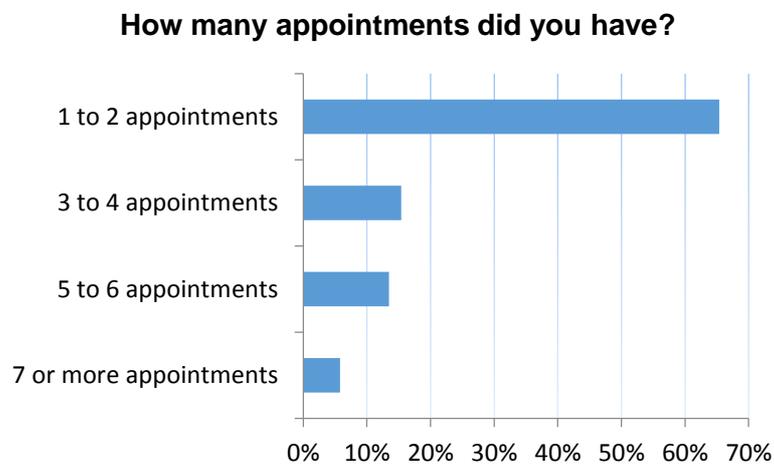
Overall, it seems that group sessions are not that widely used by students and that students are more neutral about how helpful they found them than individual sessions.

Mental Health Advisers

The Mental Health Adviser service differs from an individual counselling session as it does not focus on talking therapies but coping strategies. It can also provide support for students with longer term mental health issues.

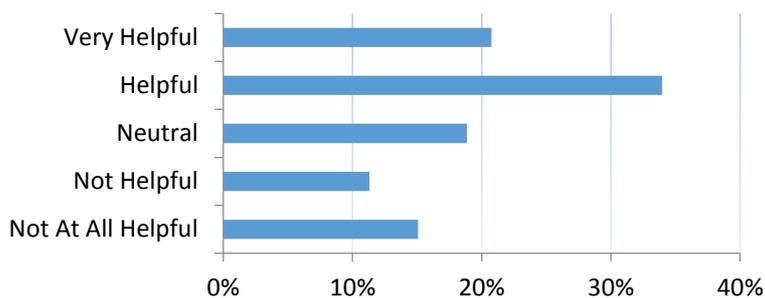


With only 6% of respondents stating that they had seen a Mental Health Adviser this equates to a very small proportion of students, although it should be noted that this is more students than had taken part in group counselling sessions. Of those students seeing an adviser 67% stated they had received an appointment in two weeks or under, with 19% stating they had seen an adviser in less than a week.



The vast majority of students (665) received only one or two sessions, with only 19% of students receiving 5 or more. This results in substantially fewer students receiving more than two appointments than either individual appointments or group sessions. This is concerning, as the purpose of Mental Health Advisers is to support students with longer term mental health issues who are logically therefore likely to need more sessions.

How helpful were these appointments?



It seems that students were more likely to feel strongly about whether their Mental Health Adviser had been helpful than students receiving individual counselling or group sessions, with fewer students stating 'Neutral'. Students were less likely to feel that advisers had been 'Very Helpful' or 'Helpful' in total than individual sessions, but were more likely to feel that they had been 'Very Helpful' than either group or individual sessions. Students were also more likely to state that Mental Health Advisers had not been helpful compared to those attending individual or group counselling sessions.

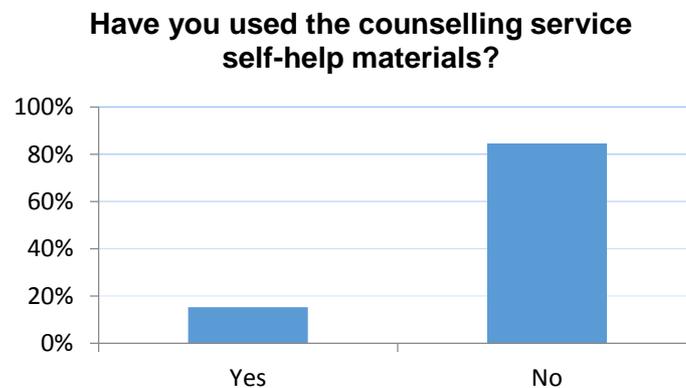
Analysis

It is disappointing that only 6% of students had seen a Mental Health Adviser, although there will be finite number of student who require this service these levels are particularly low. Therefore the School should work harder to ensure that students are aware of Mental Health Advisers and how they differ from counselling. It is also extremely discouraging that students were more likely to view how helpful their Mental Health Adviser was more negatively than students receiving individual counselling. This could be due to the fact that students are in much larger numbers receiving only 1 or 2 sessions.

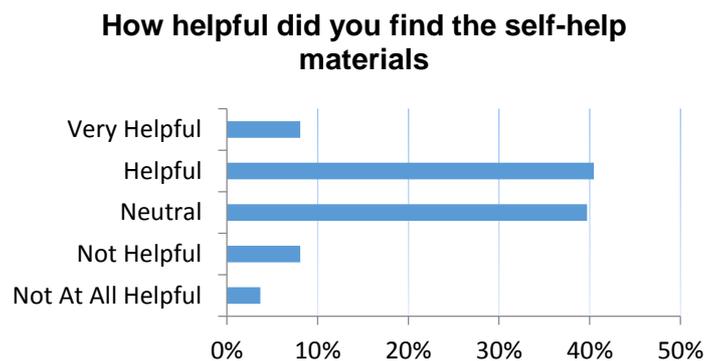
Ultimately LSE needs to work out the balance of provision between individual counselling and its Mental Health Advisers and set out to how the two services can support each other. For example, more students are approaching university support services and often they can present themselves with increasingly complex mental health issues. Sometimes talking therapies such as the counselling is not what the student needs and therefore Mental Health Advisers who can support the student through coping strategies (for example) is more appropriate. However, this cannot be achieved if the student is receiving such low numbers of appointments; therefore the School needs to set out quite clearly what the purpose of Mental Health Advisers are and ensure that students are getting as many appointments as possible.

Self-Help Materials

The self-help materials are an important resource for students; in particular for those that may not feel comfortable approaching a counsellor it means they have access to resources to help themselves.



In total 15% of students had accessed the online self-help materials making this the second most used service, nevertheless this is still quite a low proportion of students.



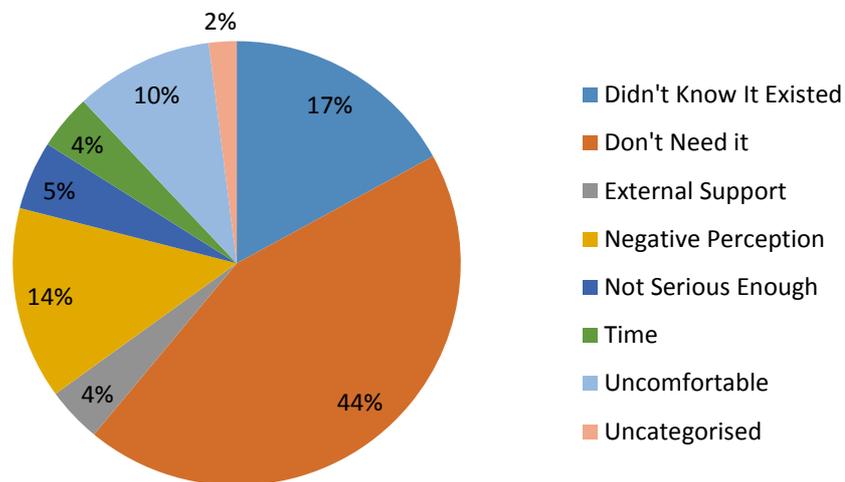
It is promising that 40% of students stated that they thought the self-help materials were helpful, nevertheless 40% of students also felt neutrally about this. Interestingly when compared with other services the Student Counselling Service provides, students were less likely to be negative about the self-help materials and less likely to think they were 'Very Helpful'. However, students were more likely to think the self-help materials were helpful and substantially more likely to state 'Neutral'.

Analysis

Although the self-help materials are used by more students than Mental Health Advisers and group counselling sessions, it seems that students are less likely to access these online materials than they are to request an individual appointment. As well as this it seems students are quite ambivalent as to how helpful they find the materials, this could be that there is no individual involvement and therefore by their very nature cannot provide additional support and therefore do not have an overtly positive or negative impact on students.

Non-Users

The students who stated they had not used the Student Counselling Service were then asked 'Why Not' in the form of an open text comment, from the 448 comments given these have been categorised (as shown in the below table).



The top three reasons cited by students were that they didn't need the service, that they didn't know it existed, and that they had a negative perception of the counselling service. While it is encouraging that such a low proportion of students (17%) stated that they were not aware of the service, this should be read with caution. As well as this 44% (the largest group) simply stated that they did not feel they required it.

Nevertheless it is worrying that in total 29% of respondents stated that they had not used the counselling service because they either felt uncomfortable approaching them, due to negative perceptions or that they did not feel their mental health issue was serious enough. The comments left by students highlight that there is a real issue in terms of students seeing the counselling service as being inaccessible.

Below are a selection of the comments:

I have not felt the need to use this yet. I think there are limited spaces and other students might benefit from this more than I would."

"I have attempted to register but after a week of sending in my form I haven't heard back. Being alone in London having recently been diagnosed with an eating disorder and anxiety I need support. This was explicit in my application form. Yet I have not had any correspondence. Essentially, I've attempted to use the service but it has not been helpful."

"Know it's overstretched and not much help"

"I've never felt the need to, and have been wary of going to them due to them having a bad reputation"

I feel that it's unapproachable and that it somehow would make my general worries more real and I worry about them overreacting, and I worry about the information possibly getting back to my department

"I'm not sure if this service is suitable for me"

"Because, I don't feel as though I struggle bad enough to ask them for help. It would also take a while, I imagine, and when I need help then I need it right there and then."

"Because i feel as though the services have been presented in a way which accomodates those with known and diagnosed issues. What if i just want to talk to someone about issues that may be perceived less serious, if i feel down and just need a chat."

"Because I feel embarrassed to"

"To use these services you need to know you have wellbeing/mental health issues. How are you meant to know if you have these issues?"

"A friend had a poor experience with the Service. Limited hours, lack of time to deal with student requests in depth and poor service leadership are three common issues."

"I don't think my problems are serious enough to be taking up counselling slots when I personally know people who are struggling with much more and can't get a slot themselves"

"Because of the stigma. I was unaware of it. And it is booked to the full, when needed."

"They didn't have any time for me at the moment"

"Could not get an appointment. Waiting list was very long and did not want to wait to see someone."

Analysis

On the face of it, it seems particularly positive that student awareness of the Student Counselling Service seems to be relatively high. This could mean that students are generally aware of the Student Counselling Service and are able to access the support they need when they need it, however in practice this may not be the case. In retrospect the Welfare Survey should have asked students specifically as to if they were aware of the counselling service as from the results presented it is not possible to gain a definitive view as to student awareness.

Therefore, whilst only 17% of students stated overtly that they had not used the counselling service due to a lack of awareness, it should not be assumed from this that there are high levels of student awareness. The Student Counselling Service should always be striving for all students to be aware of their existence and this is not something that they should become complacent about.

It is a cause for concern that 29% of students who would not approach the counselling service stated that this was due to feeling negative or uncomfortable about the service or that they felt that their issues were not serious enough; in particular students stated that they felt the service is under resourced and always busy. From the comments, it appears that the perception of the counselling service not being accessible has come from either students approaching the service and it not meeting their expectations or due to hearing that it has not met the expectations of their peers. This very much seems as though this is translating into a real barrier for students in accessing the service.

It is not the view of the Students' Union that the counselling service is in some way giving out a poor service to students but rather that perhaps due to a lack of resources it is not able to meet their expectations. On this basis, it is the view of LSESU that the School should review the provision of resource allocated to the counselling service with a view to significantly increasing its capacity. As well as this the School should run an awareness raising campaign that also aims to address these views of the service and remove this barrier by fostering a more positive view of the experiences of the students who use it.

Conclusion

The Welfare Survey sought to find out from students whether they feel that LSE sufficiently supports their mental health and wellbeing. It also sought to give a brief overview of their experiences and perceptions of the support services available to them. LSESU received an overwhelming 1,100 responses to this.

This interim report is specifically aimed at the Student Counselling Service and is only one part of the Welfare Survey. LSESU believes that as the Student Counselling Service is one of the most important support services for students that this warranted a more in depth report. This report is not intended to be a comprehensive review of the service, but rather to build a picture as to where LSE could concentrate its efforts and resources to better support its students mental health and wellbeing.

The results were highly interesting; firstly the survey found that whilst 46% students stated they had experienced a period of poor mental health, only 21% of students had accessed the service. This is concerning as it could suggest that there is a proportion of students at LSE that may require support but do not access it. It also found that most students accessing the service receive individual counselling and students are least likely to receive group counselling sessions. This could go some way to develop a picture about how students interact with the services on offer and where to prioritise resources. It was disappointing that the majority of students only received one or two sessions of individual counselling and even more disappointing that the vast majority of students only received one or two sessions with a Mental Health Adviser. This could go some way to explain why students were most likely to state that Mental Health Advisers had not been helpful. Students were also most likely to state that the individual counselling sessions had been helpful, with students feeling most neutral about self-help materials.

Most worryingly when it came to asking students why they had not used the service, it seemed that whilst there will be a proportion of students who do not feel they need it, there was still a reasonable proportion of students who felt that the 'reputation' of the Student Counselling Service was a barrier. The reasons for this generally seemed to stem from either students receiving or being told about negative experiences, or perceiving the service to be under resourced. There could be a multitude of reasons for this negative view of the service by students, but this is clearly something the School needs to address.

The results of this Student Counselling Service section of the Welfare Survey have resulted in a number of recommendations which the Students' Union believes should be implemented. We look forward to working in partnership with the School to implement these recommendations.

Recommendations

The results of the Welfare Survey, Student Counselling Service section have highlighted various ways in which LSE should improve its service and are contained in the following recommendations. The overarching priority of these recommendations is that LSE should increase the financial resource of the service.

LSE Should:

1. Undertake a full review of the Student Counselling Service with a view to substantially investing financially in it and that any review conducted by the School should include this report and student representation from the Students' Union.
2. Investigate current usage and division of funding between the different internal Student Counselling Services to determine how provisions between these best serves students
3. Investigate why students who see counsellors and Mental Health Advisers are receiving such low numbers of sessions.
4. Investigate why CBT is not being offered to students.
5. Identify peak periods of student usage of the service, for example during exam periods, with a view to employing sessional staff during any pressure points.
6. Integrate all Disability and Wellbeing Services and its administration into one physical space, which is easy to access and provides a suitable level of privacy creating a 'Student Services Hub'.
7. Undertake an awareness raising campaign including a focus on positive messages about the Student Counselling Service.
8. Ensure students are able to change counsellor or Mental Health Adviser if the relationship is reasonably not working and inform students of this when they access the service.
9. Ensure no student has to wait longer than 10 working days for an appointment
10. Increase the number of full time counsellors.
11. Increase the number of Mental Health Advisers.
12. Increase the number of sessions students are receiving.

Published: March 2016

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