

Student Advice Service

Annual

Report

2013-14

Explore your options.

**Student
Advice
Service**

Drop in, email, call...



Cambridge University Students' Union
Old Examination Hall, Free School Lane,
Cambridge, CB2 3RF



The Graduate Union
17 Mill Lane, Cambridge,
CB2 1RX

FOREWORD

WELFARE AND RIGHTS OFFICER – HELEN HOOGEWERF-MCCOMB

After almost 4 years of operation 2013-14 has seen the Student Advice Service shift focus from establishing itself within the welfare structures of the Collegiate University to planning for the organisation's long term strategic development. Benefitting from the Service's highest ever staffing levels, this year's team have been able to dedicate more time and resources to vital non-casework activities which underpin the quality and reach of the Service to Cambridge students. From rebranding to redesigning our training programme; from building a specialist support service for JCRs and MCRs to expanding our social media presence to reach an even greater number of students; this year's team has overseen a number of improvements which we hope will contribute to the Service's ongoing success.

Having volunteered with the Cambridge University Students' Union (CUSU) since the founding of the Student Advice Service, it has been a privilege to spend this year working within the SAS team and helping to lead one of the most vital services offered by Cambridge's student unions.

ADVICE SERVICE MANAGER – LISA DÉRY

In September 2013, I returned to the Student Advice Service from maternity leave to a three day work week. In order to maintain the quality of support available to students accessing the Student Advice Service, the two Unions decided to employ a second Student Advisor for the academic year 2013/14. This increased the staffing levels of the Service from 1 to 1.6 (excluding sabbatical officers).

Employing a second Student Advisor has been an eye opening experience for the Student Advice Service as for the first time since we launched the Service in 2010/11, we have been able to maintain normal working hours whilst still providing quality and reliable support to students. With higher staffing levels, we have further reduced the amount of casework that the sabbatical officers are responsible for, thus allowing them to spend more time on other aspects of the Student Advice Service as well as their other important activities. And finally, with the appointment of a second Student Advisor, I have been able to dedicate more time to the development of the Service. With my full-time return to work in September 2014 and the (still to be confirmed) three year extension to the second Student Advisor role, our goal is to apply for the Advice Quality Standard during the spring of 2015 with the aim of achieving the standard of excellence by the academic year 2015/16.

All in all, 2013/14 has been an exciting year for the Student Advice Service as it has allowed us to examine where we currently stand, develop our vision for the future, and begin our work towards achieving that vision.

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since its establishment in 2010/11, the Student Advice Service has provided support to over 1000 students with a wide range of issues relating to their student experience. By providing free, professional, confidential advice that is independent of the University and Colleges, the Service fills unique and important space within the tripartite support networks of the Collegiate University. In addition, the Service continues to provide a vital professional link for the hundreds of student welfare volunteers operating within the University, providing training resources and one-to-one support which raise the quality of support offered to the student body.

In 2013/14, the Service has supported 233 service users from across the colleges and faculties. While the core work of the Service often deals with academic procedures such as intermission and examination appeals, support is provided for a diverse range of issues covering every aspect of a students' time at the University. With a large proportion of cases including mental health and disability-related issues, the Student Advice Service maintains a particularly close working relationship with the University Counselling Service and Disability Resource Centre, along with the other student services provided within the University.

As the Student Advice Service approaches four years of operation, and with the return of the Advice Service Manager from maternity leave, this year has provided a period of reflection on the successes of previous years and the need for ongoing development within the Service. The team has identified strategic priorities for the Service in the medium and long term and devised a development plan accordingly. While such strategic planning is important within any organization, the annual turnover of the sabbatical teams at CUSU and the Graduate Union magnifies this need for the Service and it is hoped that the planning efforts this year will provide new teams with a clear shared vision in coming years.

One of the major planned developments will be a move towards the Advice Quality Standard (AQS) – the quality mark for the advice sector – within the next two years. This will involve the review and documentation of all internal policies and procedures to provide evidence that they are in line with industry best practice. Were the Service to achieve the AQS, it is hoped that this will provide reassurance to students and partners about the consistently excellent quality of advice and support provided by the Service, as well as recognition of the work of the SAS team in providing this service to the student body.

Underpinning the achievements of the team this year, has been a temporary increase in the staffing levels of the Service from 1 to 1.6 Full Time Employees (2 to 2.6 FTE with planned sabbatical officer time). As caseload in previous years had been sustained by Advice Officers working significantly over-capacity, this extra staff resource has allowed the Service to, for the first time, complete casework within planned hours and to comfortably direct resources to vital non-casework activities. While it has not been possible to secure University funding for a second staff role for the next year, it is hoped that CUSU and the GU will be able to provide resources on a temporary basis to bring staffing levels up to 2 FTE for 2014/15.

2. MEMBERSHIP OF THE STUDENT ADVICE SERVICE

The Student Advice Service is composed of five Advice Officers of whom two are staff members and three are sabbatical officers. A sabbatical officer's term lasts 12 months and begins and ends in July every year. As such, the Service welcomes three new members to the team every year. To the Service, the sabbatical officers bring their experience as students of the Collegiate University, while staff members bring professional experience, knowledge and institutional memory. These different backgrounds contribute to the overall success and professionalism of the Student Advice Service.

2013-14

- Helen Hoogewerf McComb (CUSU-GU Welfare and Rights Officer)
- Lisa Déry (CUSU-GU Advice Service Manager)
- Rachel Wilson (CUSU-GU Student Advisor)
- Jia Hui Lee (CUSU Education Officer)
- Lauren Steele (CUSU Women's Officer)

2014-15

- Jack Wright (CUSU-GU Welfare and Rights officer)
- Lisa Déry (CUSU-GU Advice Service Manager)
- Rachel Wilson (CUSU-GU Student Advisor)
- Rob Richardson (CUSU Education Officer)
- Amelia Horgan (CUSU Women's Officer)

3. ACTIVITIES

A. CASEWORK ACTIVITIES

CASEWORK DEFINED

Undergraduate and postgraduate students from all 31 colleges as well as students from some of the University's partner institutions, are welcome to make use of the Student Advice Service, from Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm. Students can come to the Service with any issues or problems that they might experience as a student, from questions or concerns about their education or University procedures to a health enquiry or a mental health issue. This means that the Service deals with a large number of issues with a varying degree of involvement. For example, an Advice Officer might simply provide a listening ear to a student followed by a referral to another service, and at other times, they may help a student explore their options and navigate University or College procedures over several meetings, and may attend meetings with a student in their College or the University.

Following the advice sector's framework for defining the types of advice provided, the Service splits cases into three categories - Information, Advice, and Advice with Casework – which are defined as follows:

Information

- Providing general information that is readily available to students (e.g. student clubs and societies etc)
- Signposting/referring a student to another service/person/agency
- Assisting students to find the information that relates to their enquiry i.e. leaflets, website addresses, links to relevant regulations etc

Advice

- All that is included in "Information"
- Conducting our own research to find information that would not be readily available to students (includes contacting third parties anonymously or with consent)
- Exploring options with a student (e.g. discussing in person, by phone or by email the possible options with a student and discussing the pros and cons of each)

Advice with Casework

- All that is included in "Information" and "Advice"
- Discussing options over several meetings/phone calls/email exchanges
- Practical help on submissions (proofreading, drafting etc)
- With their consent, discussing a student's case with a third party (e.g. Tutor, DRC, DoS etc)
- Attending a meeting with a student
- Representing a student at college or University level

Regularly the issues experienced by students using the Service are complex and involve many inter-related issues (for example disability and degrading/intermittent, visa and finances). When the student approaches the Service, they may come with one specific issue, but others may emerge in the course of initial or subsequent meetings. Complex cases may involve many case contacts and hours of work. Many other cases however can be dealt with much more swiftly such as straightforward applications to the Applications Committee or a referral to another service. Some case studies are included as an appendix to this report for those interested in the role of the Service in different case types.

OTHER TYPES OF CASEWORK

The Student Advice Service is geared towards supporting students, and while it continues to assiduously record information about student-users, this year has seen the Service more consistently record information regarding the status of non-standard users, such as past and prospective students, students who are intermitted, students who are off the register, and visiting students.

Furthermore, the Service has begun recording information regarding non-student users thus taking into account the number of parents, relatives or friends of students who get in touch for advice. Though non-student users approach the Service on a regular basis, the goal is always to deal with the student directly, and as such the advice we provide to non-student users is limited and mostly focused on helping the non-student user encourage the student to access the Service themselves.

A service is also provided for JCR/MCR and Peer2Peer volunteers who specifically want advice that relates to their role or to discuss any concerns they may have about a student they are supporting. More detail is provided later in this report (see Links with other Organisations).

MAINTAINING QUALITY STANDARDS

Maintaining a consistently high quality of service is vital to the continued success of the Student Advice Service. With annual turnover of the sabbatical Advice Officers, the effectiveness of induction and quality assurance mechanisms are particularly important to ensure that every member of the team can provide students with the same standard of support. New officers undergo a thorough training period during the summer, including internal and external training, before beginning to undertake casework. Throughout the year, all members of the advice team undergo peer observation, where they are observed by another team member and given constructive feedback on how they might improve their advice-giving skills.

In addition, each week, all Advice Officers meet for reflective practice – this allows an opportunity to share best practice, discuss challenging cases and explore options together, and reflect on how Advice Officers might improve the level of support provided to individual students. This is coupled with a session for “business-related” items which can be anything from relevant committee updates to activities of the Advice Service for the coming weeks to refreshers on upcoming issues students might experience and bring to the Service e.g. study skills, exam warnings, withholding names from class lists, and exam reviews during the Easter term. The Advice Service Manager leads the team in keeping up-to-date with training and professional standards and may also use this time to update the team or discuss changes to current practice.

The professional development of permanent staff in the Student Advice Service is also vital to its continued quality. To this end, the Service’s Advice Service Manager has received supervision sessions at the Counselling Service, where she receives an opportunity to confidentially reflect on her work. The Student Advisor will also be receiving supervision during the next academic year.

B. TRAINING

ADVICE OFFICERS

To ensure that Advice Officers were able to offer the highest level of support, every Officer involved in providing support to students underwent an extensive programme of training throughout the year (particularly over the summer). Sessions included:

- Introduction to the Student Advice Service
- Core Skills (active listening, confidentiality, boundaries, non-directive advice etc)
- Introduction to Casework
- Casework and Case Recording
- Support in Cambridge (College, University, City, nationally)
- Meeting University and College Service Providers
- Representing Students
- Equality and Diversity (provided by E&D)
- Working with Disabled Students (provided by DRC)
- Managing the Self (provided by Mind)
- Cambridge Rape Crisis

These training sessions were offered by the acting Student Advisor who covered Lisa Déry's maternity leave, the Advice Service Manager, external providers, internal providers, and Advice Officers with relevant experience in particular areas. Our professional Student Advisor has also received training in the following areas:

- Advice UK – Advice Skills three day training
- 2014 Student Minds Conference: Grand Challenges in Student Mental Health

WELFARE AND OTHER JCR/MCR OFFICERS AND PEER2PEER

The Student Advice Service continues to provide resources for the training of the large network of JCR and MCR Officers, ensuring that they have access to adequate support and are able to develop skills in what can often be very demanding part time roles. Training is made available to any officer of an affiliated common room, and to volunteers of other student-led welfare initiatives such as Peer2Peer, Linkline, CUSU Autonomous Campaigns and student societies. Members of the Student Advice Service team offered the following formal training sessions this year:

- Welfare Officer Core Skills
- Student Sexual Health
- Understanding Mental Health
- Reducing the Risk of Student Suicide
- Supporting LGBT+ Students
- Supporting Victims of Sexual Violence
- Planning for Exam Term and Fresher's Week
- Train the Trainer (for Peer2Peer)

Sessions are offered at various times throughout the year, due to the variation in committee handover periods.

C. PUBLICITY AND EVENTS

Publicity remains a priority for the Student Advice Service to ensure that it is reaching as many students as possible – any of whom might benefit from its support. This year saw the Service rebrand and launch a new publicity campaign which aims to communicate with students directly by highlighting specific issues they may wish to discuss with the Student Advice Service - issues such as fitting in, struggling in general, working with a supervisor, and doing badly in exams.

The Service utilises a wide range of publicity routes, from posters and leaflets in colleges and departments, to the student unions' annual and weekly publications and the student press. The Service also has a visible presence at many events throughout the year – such as the CUSU Societies Fair, the Disability Resource Centre Transitional Events, the Graduate Safety Course, the GU Freshers' Week and more.

2013-14 has seen the launch of Student Advice Service Facebook publicity through social media, advertising the Service by linking in with national awareness events such as Mental Health Week and LGBT+ History Month, as well as with more local themes such as preparing for exams. This also provides an opportunity to distribute self-help resources and raise awareness of other relevant support services throughout the year.

D. COLLECTING FEEDBACK

We have undertaken a comprehensive student-user survey. All Student Advice Service users are now invited to provide feedback on their experience of the Service. This is done through a confidential and anonymous on-line survey. This will be an element of future reporting.

4. STATISTICS AND TRENDS

The Student Advice Service records information about each case to help the Service identify trends in student welfare needs, respond efficiently to enquiries and point students to accurate and specific resources. Measures such as the number of cases, user demographics and issue areas act as indicators that shape the Service's future development in terms of the quality and comprehensiveness of the advice it provides to users.

We do not measure the success of the Service by the number of appeals or complaints that our users have had upheld. This is because the Service is committed to providing support to all students, whether they appear to have a strong case or not. The Service's approach to assisting students is to ensure that students feel like they can make their own best decisions given the resources and options available to them. The Service's knowledge and experience with the rules and regulations of the Collegiate University also means that the officers are well-placed to manage expectations as to the possible outcomes of a complaint or appeal procedure.

The following measures were taken from the time period beginning on 1 July 2013 to 10 June 2014. Noting trends in types of cases or users ensures that the Service is well-equipped with the knowledge and skills, working within the tripartite support system of the College, the University, and the Student Unions, to provide advice to and support students who use our service.

A. NUMBER OF CASES

Throughout 2013/14, the Service saw a total of 233 cases, each of which is classified as Information, Advice, or Advice with Casework, according to industry standards as outlined earlier in this report. The breakdown was as follows:

Type of advice	Number	Percentage
Information	52	22%
Advice	124	53%
Advice with casework	57	25%
Total	233	100%

Table 1 - Case Type Breakdown

B. CLIENT DEMOGRAPHICS

COLLEGE

This year the Student Advice Service has supported students from 29 colleges, with an additional 39 students who chose not to declare their college to the Service. As in previous years, there is significant variation in the numbers coming from different colleges. Such variation can be explained by many factors, including:

- College size
- Normal distribution
- Success of SAS publicity within the College
- Strength of referral links with JCR/MCR, tutorial team and other pastoral support

In addition, these factors can vary significantly year on year – there is, for instance, a well-evidenced trend for the colleges of sabbatical officers to be over-represented due to the strong links maintained between officers and their student body. This distribution should not, therefore, be taken as an analogue for effectiveness or quality of support offered within different colleges.

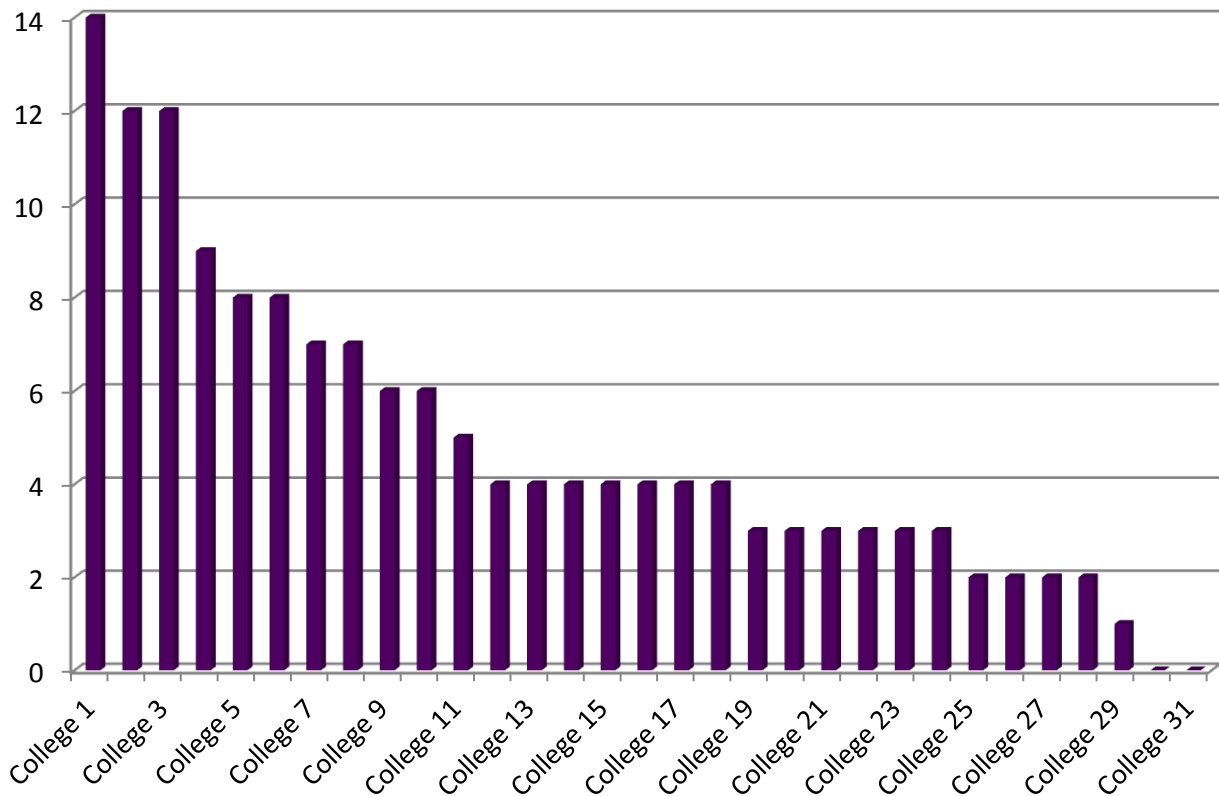


Fig. 1 – Students by college (anonymised)

GENDER

As in previous years, the Service continues to be used disproportionately by female clients. This follows sector trends for lower engagement in pastoral and academic support services by male students.

All students	Number	Percentage
Female	93	48%
Male	67	35%
Undisclosed	32	17%
Total	192	100%

Table 2 – Students by Gender

CLIENT STATUS

As mentioned earlier in the report, different types of clients access the Service – current students, non-standard students, and non-students. Non-standard students who access the Service include past and prospective students, students who are intermitted, students who are off the register, and visiting students. Non-student users include relatives and friends of students, as well as college or University staff who approach the service about a specific student issue. The Service also provides specialised advice to JCR/MCR Officers and Peer2Peer Supporters who can use the Service to discuss their role or any concerns they may have about a student in their community.

Client status	Number	Percentage
Current student	163	70%
Off the register	4	2%
Intermitted student	12	5%
Past Student	12	5%
Visiting student	1	0%
Prospective Student	17	7%
JCR/MCR Officer	4	2%
Relative of a student	4	2%
Other person known to student but not relative	1	0%
College or university staff	1	0%
Unknown	14	6%
Total	233	100%

Table 3 – Client Status

COURSE TYPE

This year, the Service has supported undergraduate students from 34 courses and graduate students from 45 courses. 56% of those using the Service whose course type is known were undergraduates, compared to 55% within the general student population.

Course Type	Number	Percentage
Undergraduate	96	50%
PhD	47	24%
MPhil	21	11%
Other Graduate	8	4%
Not Applicable	9	5%
Unknown	11	6%
Total	192	100%

Table 4 - Students by course type

YEAR OF STUDY

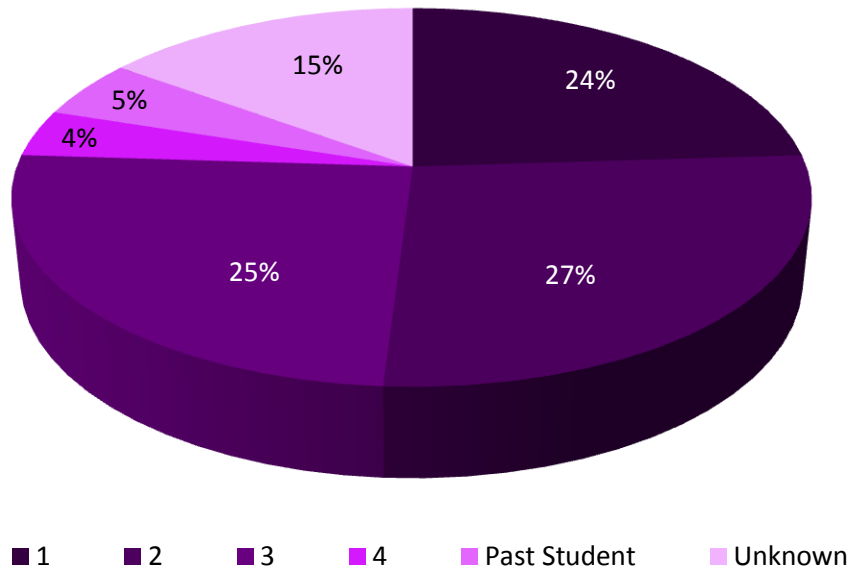


Fig. 2a – Undergraduate year of study

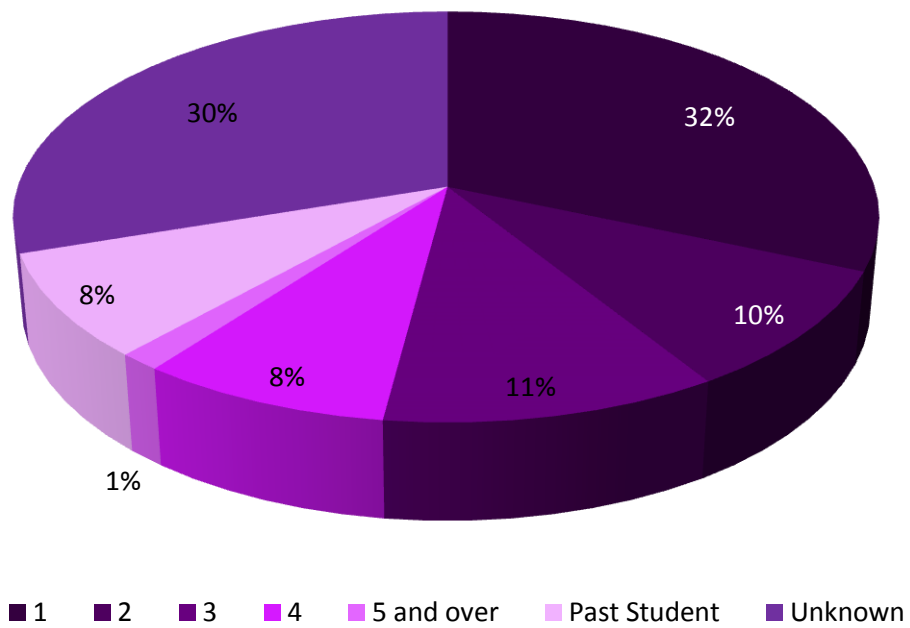


Fig. 2b – Graduate year of study

C. TYPES OF ISSUES

The Service has seen students who have experienced a broad range of issues this year. This has been reflected in the three types of advice we provide: information, advice, and advice with casework. The most common issues recorded during this period were:

- Mental Health – 22%
- Intermitting – 14%
- General Wellbeing – 12%
- Exam appeals – 11%
- Exam Failure – 11%
- Disability – 9%
- Harassment – 8%

It should be noted that a single case may include multiple intersecting issues, such as mental health and intermission.

Graduate and undergraduate users of the Service exhibit different issue profiles. For undergraduate students, key issues relate to health – in particular mental health - and examination procedures and appeals. Graduate students often approach the Service with a broader range of issues, such as financial or accommodation concerns or issues relating to family life. Mental health and examination failure/appeals are significant issues for graduates as well, and graduates are significantly more likely to approach the Service about a student complaint than undergraduates. Undergraduates are responsible for the majority of cases concerning difficulty with college, whilst graduate students are more likely to bring concerns about a relationship breakdown with their supervisor.

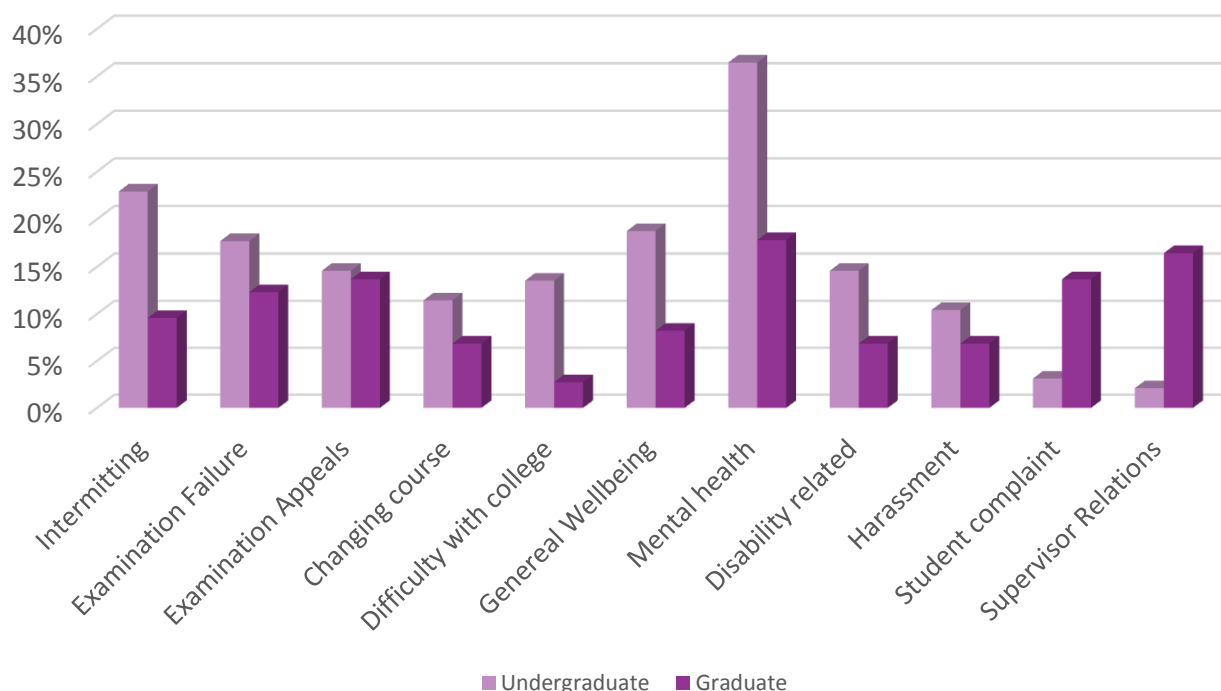


Fig. 3 Key issues by student type

5. LINKS WITH OTHER ORGANISATIONS

A. WORDS FROM OUR PARTNERS

CUSU - PARENT ORGANISATION

CUSU is extremely pleased with the work of the Student Advice Service this year in the well-regarded, professional advice and support it has provided to a wide range of Cambridge students. The Service plays a crucial role in developing pastoral support for students across the Collegiate University and consistently impacts their day to day educational experience positively.

This year's report highlights the main issues among our students which have been raised with the Advice Service and which it has been in a unique and best-placed position to deal with.

CUSU and the Student Advice Service look forward to continuing collaborative work with others across the Collegiate University to further enhance and develop best practice.

Flick Osborn (CUSU President 2013-14)

GU - PARENT ORGANISATION

Graduate students in Cambridge need the type of independent and accessible support provided by the Student Advice Service, and that is why those of us in the Graduate Union are so pleased to see the Advice Service going from strength to strength. 2013-14 has been an important year for the Advice Service, and also for the Graduate Union.

Developments at other UK universities illustrate why the type of independent service provided by the SAS is so important, and I would hope that all readers of this Annual Report take comfort from the work that is underway within the Service. For this to continue, we all need to make sure that appropriate resources are provided to the Service, to sustain its current workload, and growing importance in working with other service providers in supporting all students across Cambridge.

Richard Jones (GU President 2013-14)

UNIVERSITY COUNSELLING SERVICE – FELLOW SERVICE PROVIDER

The Student Advice Service plays a crucial part in the provision of support for students in the Collegiate University. It offers independent information and advice and can represent students at University or College level if necessary.

The service provided by the Student Advice Service is different from the work of the Counselling Service – both are necessary as they are complementary services.

The Counselling Service and the Student Advice Centre work closely together, and referrals are made in both directions between the two services.

Collaboration between our services is particularly important since many of the issues that bring students to the Student Advice Service are related to mental health as shown in this annual report.

Géraldine Dufour (Head of University Counselling Service)

B. CUSU AND THE GRADUATE UNION

The Student Advice Service is provided by CUSU and the Graduate Union. Both organisations provide casework space and financial and staff resources that allow for the Service's continued operation. The Student Advice Service remains one of the key services provided to members by either Union and as such is central to their strategic development.

C. OTHER STUDENT SERVICES

Working effectively with other University services is key to the way the Student Advice Service operates, and the team works closely with other services throughout the year, whether in making or receiving referrals, seeking advice and information, or working alongside various support services when supporting a student through a difficulty.

The Service prides itself on its expertise in what services are available to Cambridge students. The team's knowledge of the services on offer to students in the Collegiate University, locally and nationally, allows us to see students with any issue. Advice Officers recognise the limits of what they are able to offer a student, and as such we are experts at signposting and referrals. Cases often involve discussing multiple referral options with the student to help them identify what might be most appropriate for them. To support this aspect of the Service, every summer, the Student Advice Service team meets other key service-providers in the Collegiate University such as the Counselling Service, Mental Health Advisors, Disability Resource Centre, College Nurses, Careers Service, Childcare Office, International Students Team, Accommodation Service, Language Centre, Student Registry and the Board of Graduate Studies.

D. APPLICATIONS COMMITTEE

The Student Advice Service is very pleased to be attending Applications Committee meetings on a termly basis. These meetings have allowed Advice Officers to discuss with the committee members some of the challenges that students face when navigating the University procedures as well as some of the challenges that the Service faces in advising students. The team has also been given the opportunity to provide feedback to the committee as to what areas could be further clarified/improved to help students gain a better understanding of the processes, and the Service is grateful that several small changes have been made as a result of this.

E. COLLEGES

This year, the Student Advice Service has been particularly keen to further develop and cement its relationship with the Colleges. The Service will be contributing to the Tutor training programme in October 2014, and it is hoped that this will help to continue to build relationships with College Tutorial teams, and raise awareness of the Service amongst tutorial teams. To further this aim, it is planned to create an information leaflet for tutors outlining its role and instances where it might be appropriate for a tutor to refer a student to the Service.

Furthermore, the Advice Service Manager has been preparing a second round of visits to every college to meet with the Senior Tutor and their Tutorial team. The first round of visits was in 2011/12, and the Advice Service Manager was warmly welcomed by 24 colleges. As with the first round of visits, it is felt that this will be successful both in building relationships and finding out more about specific support systems and services available in each College. This allows Advice Officers to more effectively support students, especially in terms of helping them access the support that is available to them in their College. The Service is also keen to maintain links with other college services, attending meetings of the College Nurses and College Counsellors during the year.

To enable further partnership between the Student Advice Service and college support systems, the Service plans to create a feedback mechanism for Tutors, nurses and other relevant staff who have interacted with the Service, to be trialled in 2014/15. While the Service's priority will always be to responsibly meet the needs of students, it is hoped that this will give the team a greater insight into our relationships with the Colleges and ways that they might be strengthened to improve the overall service provided to students.

F. NATIONAL ADVICE COMMUNITY

The Student Advice Service remains a member of Advice UK (the UK's largest support network for free, independent advice centres), which allows the Service access to their training and resources, as well as their professional liability insurance. All Advice Officers received training when they started in their roles as Advice Officers in July 2013, and additionally Rachel Wilson, the Student Advisor, has attended training sessions offered by Advice UK this year, including the three day 'Advice Skills' course, which has been very useful. The Service also has renewed its membership to AMOSSHE (the Association of Managers of Student Services in Higher Education) and RAWs (Research and Welfare Staff in Student Unions), and has benefitted from the access to training, resources and advice that membership of these organisations afford.

The Service continued to build up working relationships with other Student Advice Services locally and nationally, including Anglia Ruskin University, Oxford University, and the University of the Arts London. In 2014/15, the team hopes to visit the Student Advice Service Centres at the Universities of East Anglia and Durham.

G. STUDENT-LED WELFARE INITIATIVES

Strong peer support networks are a feature of the collegiate community and something which the Student Advice Service plays a vital role in supporting. In turn, volunteers in these networks are a vital source of referrals and awareness-raising for the Service.

This year the Service continued to provide resources for training JCR and MCR committee members with support-related roles, as well as to Peer2Peer volunteers and other welfare-related initiatives. In bringing together professional support staff and student representatives who have typically worked within one or more of these schemes, the Service is uniquely placed to provide training tailored to the needs of these volunteer groups. By helping student volunteers to develop a set of 'core skills' for student support, such as active listening, signposting/referrals, establishing boundaries and maintaining confidentiality, the Service helps to improve the quality of support provided to students and reduce the incidence of student volunteers acting inappropriately in their roles. These core skills are supplemented by issue-based training on specific topics such as mental health, disability or sexual violence, which improve students' awareness and improve confidence in dealing with more difficult issues that they might be approached with. Additional training can be provided on request, for example in the case of a student death.

The Service further supports these networks by providing a confidential source of advice and support for volunteers who are worried about a particular student or situation. Issues such as students experiencing suicidal thoughts, eating disorders or self-harm are common as the Service supports officers in deciding when it may or may not be appropriate to breach confidentiality. This year, this support offering has been formalised into a separate but parallel service to that offered to the general student population. The separate service allows the Advice Team to be slightly more directive, for example in setting clear boundaries about the volunteer's role and advising when situations are inappropriate for them to be dealing with.

6. SERVICE DEVELOPMENT

A. ADVICE QUALITY STANDARD

Since the Student Advice Service's first year of activity, a key aspiration has been to obtain the Advice Quality Standard (AQS). The AQS is "primarily an organisational standard, designed to ensure that advice organisations are well run and provide good client care. The AQS gives assurance regarding quality of advice. Key requirements include training, supervisions and file review."

Having examined where the Service currently stands, and established what further development is required in order to obtain the AQS, it was found that the Service's existing procedures and internal policy are already in-line with AQS standards. The Service is now working towards creating additional processes and procedures that will allow the organisation's quality of work to be evidenced to the AQS, as required for the Service's assessments. This work further contributes to the Service's commitment to ensure that all students receive excellent support and advice.

B. DROP-IN SESSIONS

The Service continuously seeks to improve upon the services offered to students. 2013-14 has seen the launch of bi-weekly drop-in sessions (Tuesdays and Thursdays, 12-2pm at the Graduate Union, year round) which give students the opportunity to drop in for a short 20 minute slot which can be followed up by a longer appointment if need be. This was motivated, in part, by a wish to complement the Counselling Service's one-off consultations where students sometimes have questions about College or University rules and regulations.

C. STAFFING STRUCTURE

In 2013/14, the Advice Service Manager returned from maternity leave to a three day work week. In order to be able to continue to provide the same level of support to students, a second professional Student Advisor was temporarily employed, thus bringing the staffing level of the Service from 1 to 1.6 Student Advisors (excluding sabbatical officers).

The second Student Advisor also assists the Advice Service Manager in the day-to-day management of the Advice Service, thus allowing the Advice Service Manager to focus on the development of the Service. For the first time since its creation, all Advice Officers, both sabbatical officers and staff members, are able to manage their caseload within the number of hours they are contracted to contribute to the Student Advice Service. With the Advice Service Manager returning to a five day week from September 2014, the hope is to bring the staffing level to 2 FTE, further reducing the sabbatical officers' caseloads thus allowing them to shift focus to the development and marketing of the Service.

D. ROLE OF SABBATICAL ADVICE OFFICERS

All who are involved in the Service are in agreement that sabbatical officers should continue to be part of the Advice Team and to undertake casework. This arrangement benefits the Service, as sabbatical officers bring in-depth understanding of student life, the informal processes at work within the institution and also the background to any changes that are made to relevant procedures and processes relevant to student cases. In addition, sabbatical officers benefit as casework provides them with a more concrete understanding of policies and procedures and how they work in practice. However, in previous years the casework load on sabbatical officers has been considered to be too high, and to limit their representative potential outside of the Service.

With increased staff resources for 2013/14, the Service has been able to reduce its reliance on sabbatical officers as caseworkers, so that sabbatical officers need only take on cases when it is appropriate for them to do so, given other work demands. This is evidenced by a reduction in the percentage of cases seen by sabbatical officers from 50% to 37%.

7. CHALLENGES

A. LOCATION

The Service currently operates over two sites - Mill Lane and the New Museums Site. The split location has remained a challenge since the formation of the Service, due to the logistical issues involved with staff moving between sites, however there were benefits due to the greater student footfall than either individual site could offer. Unfortunately 2013/4 has seen a significant reduction in the footfall in both locations due to the closure of the GU café and construction work being undertaken at the New Museums Site. This has been linked with a sharp fall in the number of drop-ins seen by the Service, which traditionally made up a large number of student users.

CUSU is scheduled to move from the New Museums Site in 2015 and, though the move to a new site will no doubt present its own challenges, it also presents an opportunity for the University to find a space for CUSU that is central, and on a site that is frequented by many students. Over time, this would no doubt not only increase students' awareness of CUSU but also increase that of the Student Advice Service – leading to a greater number of students accessing and benefitting from the Service as a whole.

B. STUDENT AWARENESS

With the majority of students involved in the original campaign for the formation of the Student Advice Service having graduated, the Service cannot rely on high levels of awareness within the general student population. There is no doubt that the Service needs to further increase its publicity efforts and continue to think creatively of how to improve student awareness of the Student Advice Service. By continuing to work towards reducing caseloads for sabbatical Advice Officers in the future, it is hoped that publicising the Service can become one of the key areas of involvement for sabbatical Advice Officers, where their recent experiences of being a student will be key to ensuring that efforts are targeted effectively.

C. STAFF RESOURCES

From the creation of the Student Advice Service, staff time has always been a challenge. However, the appointment of a second professional Student Advisor has allowed the Service, for the first time since its creation, to assign an appropriate caseload to sabbatical officers. This allows them increase focus on the future development of the Service, together with the Advice Service Manager.

The Service has set major goals for the next three years, including achieving the Advice Quality Standard, but these are dependent on the continued provision of sufficient staff resources. Unfortunately, the Service's planning round bid was not accepted by the University and so it is hoped that a temporary funding arrangement can be made by CUSU and the GU to provide for 2 FTE staff for 2014/15.

8. CONCLUSION

This year has seen a Student Advice Service with an increased capacity, both to provide a high quality of service to students, and to engage with its many vital non-casework activities. With more appropriate workloads, sabbatical officers have been better placed to contribute to the development of the Service, as can be seen by the many improvements undertaken this year or planned for the near future. Each change will be a step towards a vision of the Service that reaches more students, works more closely with partners throughout the Collegiate University, and continues to maintain standards of excellence in the work that it undertakes.

The coming year will bring its own set of challenges, in particular preparing for assessment for the Advice Quality Standard, but it is the hope of the current team that the Student Advice Service is well placed to meet them.

Helen Hoogewerf-McComb

CUSU-GU Welfare & Rights Officer (2013-14)

Lisa Déry

CUSU-GU Advice Service Manager

9. APPENDIX – CASE STUDIES

CASE STUDY 1

An MPhil student has made an appointment with the Student Advice Service because he has failed his MPhil. At the beginning of the appointment, the student is very distressed and shocked. After a few minutes, the student explains that his father died a few weeks before his Viva. He explains that his state of mind prevented him from defending his work effectively – and at some points he lacked the energy and confidence to disagree with the examiners.

Role of the Advice Officer

- Listen
- Is student receiving support (family, friends, other service)?
- Has student been in touch with his Tutor? If not, explore why
- Inform student about Counselling Service (individual support and student groups –bereavement, self-esteem, assertiveness)
- Explore academic options
- Provide assistance in whatever option student chooses

After having talked through options with the Advice Officer, the student decides he would like to apply for an allowance to be re-examined due to grave cause. The student has not informed his college Tutor of his situation, and the Advice Officer helps the student re-establish contact with his Tutor by helping him draft an email requesting an appointment. From the point where communication has been re-established with his Tutor, the Advice Officer helps the student draft his request for an allowance which is then submitted to the Tutor for feedback and submission. The student, Advice Officer and Tutor have worked collaboratively, and the Tutor submits the request for an allowance.

CASE STUDY 2

An undergraduate student drops into the Student Advice Service. She explains to the Advice Officer that she is struggling with her coursework and fears she might fail. Through further discussion, she discloses that she has depression and has been going through a bad patch. She is thinking about taking a year out but would prefer to continue.

Role of the SAS:

- Listen
- Is student receiving support for depression (Counselling Service, external psychologist, GP)?
- Has student been officially diagnosed (may be eligible for DSA)?
- Is student struggling due to depression or something else (e.g. SpLD, supervision quality)?
- Inform student about the Counselling Service
- Inform student about the Disability Resource Centre
- Has student been in touch with her Tutor? If not, explore why
- Explore with student option of taking a year out
- Explore with student scenario of staying and failing, and options available in that situation
- Provide assistance to student with whatever option she chooses

The student has been in touch with her Tutor but thought it would be helpful to also speak to someone outside of her College. Having discussed and explored the options with her Tutor and the Advice Officer over several meetings, the student decides to continue with her studies with the necessary support in place. The Advice Officer helps the student make contact with the University Counselling Service and Disability Resource Centre. From then on, the student has individual counselling sessions, and also eventually benefits from the support the Disability Resource Centre is able to offer her to allow her to continue with her studies.

CASE STUDY 3

A PhD student drops in to discuss a breakdown in her relationship with her supervisor. She says that her supervisor has been giving her less feedback and is often unavailable to meet to discuss drafts of her writing. The graduate student has said that she had been registered formally for the PhD, this year being her second year.

Role of the Advice Officer:

- Listen
- Ask the student how she is feeling about her academic progress
- Discuss the Code of Practice for Research Students with the student
- Discuss the role of the Graduate Tutor and ask the student if she has reached out to them; if not, explore why
- Provide other resources that the student may need, including a departmental contact who can handle the case confidentially

The Advice Officer subsequently offers to make contact with the student's Graduate Tutor if the student feels anxious about doing so. The Advice Officer also invites the student to return to the Service should the situation not improve.

CASE STUDY 4

An undergraduate student makes an appointment with the Student Advice Service. During the appointment, she says that she is being bullied by another student in her college who lives in a neighboring room. The student says that she feels unsupported and alone.

Role of the Advice Officer:

- Listen
- What does the student mean by bullying?
- Has student been in touch with her Tutor? If not, explore why
- Does student have support around her (friends, family, partner)?
- Inform student about Counselling Service - individual support, self-help leaflets and workshops such as "Learning to be Assertive" and "Healthy Self-Esteem"
- Inform student about local and national organisations that specialise in bullying
- Explore options with student

After having discussed with the student the options of taking no action, informal action and formal action, the student decides that her preferred way forward would be to try to resolve the issue informally. It emerges that the student has not felt confident approaching her Tutor as her neighbor is in the same tutorial group and she is unsure about whether or not they will have spoken about the situation already. After discussing other figures in college who might be approached, the student decides she would feel more comfortable talking with her Senior Tutor and asks to be accompanied by an Advice Officer. During the meeting, the student, Senior Tutor and Advice Officer discuss possible options such as the Senior Tutor speaking to the student in question, possible mediation between the two students, and the option of the student who is being bullied changing rooms. The student decides to change rooms and to take no further action other than to ignore and not engage with the student. She makes an appointment at the Counselling Service in the hope of attending the “Learning to be Assertive” workshop as well as accessing individual counselling.

CASE STUDY 5

An undergraduate student phones the Student Advice Service expressing some panic that he might be “kicked out of Cambridge”. The student says that he has just finished his exams but he knows that he will fail. The student also says that he thinks the College doesn’t like him and wants to see him expelled and he is afraid of what will happen when the results come out. The student further explains that his family has been going through a difficult time: his mother had been hospitalised for a heart attack and he has since become depressed. He also says that as the eldest son in his family, which is of Asian background, he felt responsible for the family’s well-being.

Role of the Advice Officer

- Listen and ask clarifying questions about the student’s situation
- Explain to the student that a College would not ‘expel’ students without cause and outline the processes which could lead to a student being removed from the college, assessing their relevance to his situation
- Explain to the student the options available if he fails
- Explore with the student his reasons for not wanting to speak with the tutor
- Explain to the student the role of the tutor and the role of the College in submitting an appeal to the Applications Committee, but also assure the student that he may still submit an appeal even if the College does not support his application
- Explore with the student the cultural and family issues that he feels are affecting him and possible sources of support
- Offer other resources: College nurse, the Disability Resource Centre, Study Skills for other exams

The Advice Officer lets the student know that he can make an appointment to further discuss the issue in person. The Advice Officer also offers to help the student prepare his appeal and collate the documents required in the case of an exam failure.