

# Student Advice Service: Annual Report 2012-13



## **Forewords**

### **CUSU President:**

*“CUSU is extremely pleased with the work of the Student Advice Service this year in playing its part in supporting the wellbeing of the student body, positively impacting the day-to-day lives of our members, and the important role that our service plays in informing and developing the student support systems across this Collegiate University.*

*This year’s report seeks to highlight a number of the main issues and concerns among our students, which the Advice Service, as a uniquely independent support service, has been in the best position to deal with.*

*We look forward to continuing to work with others to develop best practice within this Collegiate University.”*

Rosalyn Old (CUSU President 2012-13)

### **Student Advisor:**

*“I joined the Advice Service as the full-time Student Advisor at the beginning of August 2012 to cover for Lisa Déry during her period of maternity leave. Lisa had organised a careful handover period and we worked together through most of August until it was time for her to concentrate on the imminent arrival of Emily!*

*My background is in legal advice and representation in the voluntary sector and as a higher education tutor: the year spent in this post has enabled me to combine my experience of both sectors and it has been an instructive and enjoyable experience. It has been a pleasure to work in the Student Advice Service and to work with the elected sabbatical officers. I have been impressed by the dedication which they show to their roles. They have all worked hard to acquire the skills necessary to carry out casework on behalf of individual students and I am grateful to them for sharing their extensive knowledge of the University procedures and practices with me. We have worked together on many issues and sought to find ways to help the many students who have approached us for advice and assistance through the year. We have worked closely with college staff – tutors, nurses and others involved in the pastoral care of students and with our colleagues in the Disability Resource Centre and University Counselling Service to achieve the best possible outcomes for individuals and also to address the more systemic issues which arise on a regular basis. I have been involved with the college Peer2Peer support system and have been impressed by the dedication and professional attitude shown by the individual volunteers who give so much of their time to support their peers in college.*

*The Advice Service is still young and is still evolving. There is clearly a real need for the professional and independent service it provides. This year has been busy and has presented its challenges. Some of the cases which we have worked on have been complex and time-consuming and have involved many hours of working with individual students to resolve difficult and often entrenched situations. We work on cases involving appeals and reviews and which depend upon understanding, interpreting and explaining not only complex university rules and regulations but also rights based in UK equalities legislation. The sabbatical officers in this year's team have all been hugely professional in the way in which they have applied themselves to this task.*

*I am looking forward to the next few weeks of handing over to the new team of sabbatical officers and preparing them for the year ahead. I know that Lisa is looking forward to returning to work in September and working with the new team.”*

Kate Jones (Student Advisor 2012-13)

### **Disability Resource Centre:**

*The Student Advice Service is a valuable and independent support service for all students. The Disability Resource Centre's role is primarily related to academic-related disability support and therefore when disabled students require support beyond this remit, such as advice on rules and regulations, advocacy and representation we refer them to the Student Advice Service.*

*Representatives of both the DRC and the SAS may be involved in their different capacities in individual student cases, and both services have robust confidentiality protocols to ensure sensitive information is only shared on a 'need to know' basis with the express permission of the student concerned.*

*The Head of the DRC meets on a termly basis with representatives of the Student Advice Service to identify trends related to disability from the referrals during that period and to determine any required action or reporting.*

John Harding, Head of the Disability Resource Centre

## **Introduction**

The Student Advice Service has entered into its third year of business with an increased profile among the student body. This year, the Service has seen a high number of references from the colleges and University.

We are independent of the University and colleges, and are operationally autonomous from the political structures of CUSU and the Graduate Union. We offer impartial advice to students on a huge variety of topics; importantly we try our best to give students practical and helpful advice, to allow them to work through their problems, as well as simply listening to them if that is all that is required. We act as a point of reference and a source of practical advice for students seeking to understand and access the vast myriad of procedures, opportunities, and support services within the University. As a service, we remain committed to offering professional, impartial, confidential and non-directive advice to our student-users.

This year, we bid a temporary farewell to Lisa Déry, our original Student Advisor, who went on maternity leave in August 2012. Lisa has been instrumental in making the Service what it is today. We welcomed Kate Jones as her maternity cover around the same time - Kate has been an invaluable asset to the Advice Service, due to her background in the legal profession.

We have continued to build excellent working relationships with colleges and service providers in the University, which is essential given the nature of our work; we aim to help individual students find the support they need, and achieve the outcomes they want through practical, impartial advice. We began the year with annual presentations at the International Students Orientation event (attended by approximately 600 students) and at three transitional events run by the Disability Resource Centre. We have maintained our strong working relationship with the Disability Resource Centre and the University Counselling Service.

Our annual report has previously presented our student advice work through its recorded statistics. As we have continued to develop the Service we have improved the specificity and accuracy of recorded data, in order to ensure that information collected is as meaningful as possible. This report continues to provide summary statistics, but we have also endeavoured to share what can be learned from our advice work over the period covered in this report by presenting its complexity in a more qualitative manner. In so doing, we hope to improve the usefulness of this report to the many others working to support students within the Collegiate University by more clearly communicating what we do and what general or systemic issues we discover by doing it.

**Student Advice Service team 2012-13**

**Student Advisor:** Kate Jones (maternity cover for Lisa Déry)

**CUSU/GU Welfare & Rights Officer:** Chris Page

**CUSU Women's Officer:** Susy Langsdale

**CUSU Education Officer:** Sam Wakeford

**Student Advice Service team 2013-14**

**Student Advisor:** Lisa Déry

**CUSU/GU Welfare & Rights Officer:** Helen Hoogewerf-McComb

**CUSU Women's Officer:** Lauren Steele

**CUSU Education Officer:** Jia Hui Lee.

# Headline Data

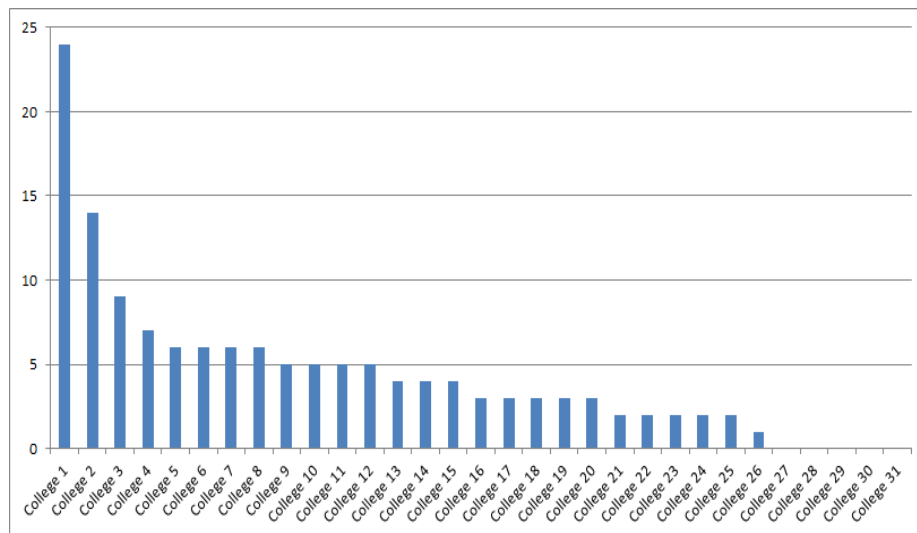
The Student Advice Service has supported 206 individual students on substantive cases over the past year (compared with 166 and 236 in the Service’s first two years). We define a ‘case’ as contact with a student that requires significant investment of time by the Service in supporting them, which can involve activities such as undertaking case-specific research into the implication of University or college regulations for them, entering into communication on their behalf with a college or department, or representing or supporting them at a meeting.

We have also previously formally recorded student contacts requiring minimal work by the Service as ‘enquiries’ - such as answering a specific question or simply making a student aware of other relevant support services in the University or the wider city of Cambridge - in addition to our recording of substantive cases. Given the limited time resource of the Advice Service this year, we have decided to not record simple enquiries.

Of those students whose details were known, 70% were women and 30% were men (compared with a ratio of 64:36 last year), and 20% were international (compared with 22% last year) with a further 9% non-UK EU (compared with 14% last year).

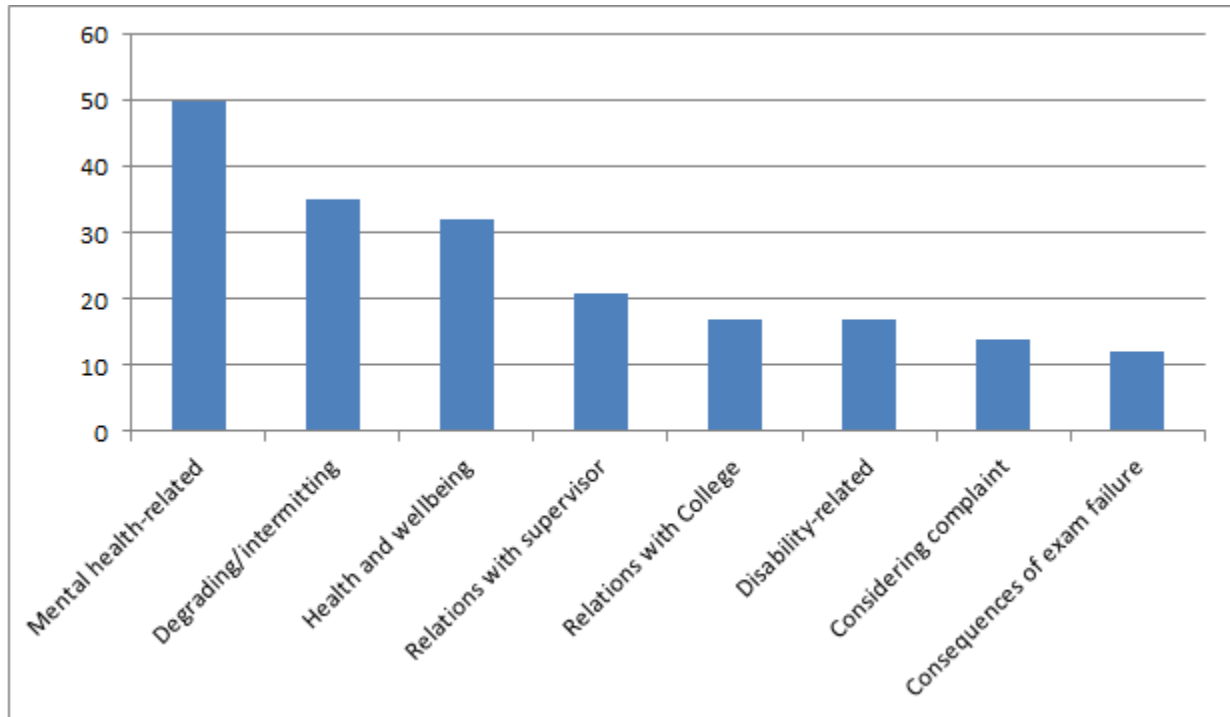
## Colleges

Students are sometimes hesitant to disclose their College to us. We therefore have College data for only 136 of the students we have supported. As shown by the graph below, and reflecting the trend in previous years, these students were not spread proportionately across the Colleges; this trend is not removed by weighting by college size. We still do not fully understand the explanation for this, but it is likely to be some combination of better publicity, advertising and a greater awareness of the Advice Service among students and staff at certain colleges.



## Case issues

Cases over the period were recorded under 43 different (but not exclusive) categories. The most frequent categories of cases (those categories recorded a dozen times or more) are shown in the graph below, and are discussed in the section of this report that follows.



## **Themes and Discussion of the Report:**

The Advice Service provides independent and impartial advice to the students who approach us. The Advice Service is made up of one staff member, and three sabbatical officers; in the case of the sabbatical officers, this is in addition to our political campaigning, our representation and our work to engage our student body. Much of this involves working with the University and colleges, through our membership of the committee structures, with the aim to contribute to the improvement of what underlies the issues we see through individual students who approach us in our Advice Service capacity. It is with this in mind that we present below our observations on some of the regular issues which have been brought to the Advice Service this year.

As noted above, the six most prevalent student issues for which our advice has been sought this year are as follows:

- **Mental health-related issue - 24%**
- **Degrading/intermitting - 17%**
- **Health and wellbeing - 16%**
- **Relations with supervisor - 10%**
- **Relations with college - 8%**
- **Disability-related issue - 8%**

It is worth clarifying with these figures that students often approach us with more than one issue, but we consider these to accurately reflect our qualitative perception of the most common issues facing students who use the Service. We include below some of our more detailed observations about these figures, based upon our interactions with students. Contained within some of our following observations, some opportunities for development may be highlighted, and we invite consideration from the Collegiate University on our experiences.

***Issues relating to disability and mental health*** – In many cases, this relates to making students aware of the existing support available from other services, such as the Disability Resource Centre and the University Counselling Service, and may infer that students would benefit from these valuable services receiving wider and more effective promotion across the Collegiate University. We were approached by a number of students for guidance on alternative forms of support that they did not feel they had received from other sources. This exemplifies two key roles the Student Advice Service plays in the Collegiate University's welfare provision: firstly, that the Advice Service provides an independent option should the student feel, for whatever reason, that they would not be satisfied with a University or college-led service; and secondly, that we have strong relationships with the the DRC and the Counselling Service and so are able to provide feedback to these services from users of the Advice Service.

***Resolving Conflicts*** We find that, as a neutral third party, we are frequently well-placed to help students achieve closure in their case - to take an active decision not to pursue an appeal or complaint, for example. Sometimes the advice and support is needed because other relationships have become difficult or have broken down, and as an independent agency the



Advice Service can assist the student in mending relationships. This often applies in relation to graduate students who have become unable to communicate productively with their supervisor and do not know where else to turn. Students seem to appreciate the independent and confidential nature of the service which enables them to speak openly and frankly about their difficulties thereby gaining insight into often difficult situations.

***Graduate Supervisor Issues*** - 10% of our cases have revolved around the issue of graduate supervision. These have varied from student concerns about supervisor absence, behaviour, and perceived conflicts between a supervisor's academic interests and their own. Each case tends to be dealt with slightly differently so a generalised avenue of advice is hard to define, however it is clear that liaising with Graduate Tutors or, in some cases, the Dignity at Study/Work procedures can help to alleviate the situation.

***Degrading/Intermitting*** - In the main in this area, students have sought our support due to a lack of clarity about the possibilities and procedures for applying to degrade or for intermission. The Advice Service assists students in making submissions to the Applications Committee, and Easter term is particularly busy supporting students who have concerns about their fitness to sit exams and need to obtain medical and other supporting evidence. In some cases the Advice Service meets with College representatives at the students' request to facilitate discussion when relationships have broken down.

Given the centrality of the college tutorial system to students' ability to navigate rules, procedures and services within the Collegiate University, it is concerning - though entirely understandable - that in cases involving the issues above, and others, students have apparently not always received comprehensive information and signposting from Tutors that could have enabled resolution of their issues at an earlier stage. We acknowledge that the cases we see are not representative of all students using the tutorial system in the Collegiate University, and that due to the nature of the Student Advice Service, we are more likely to see students who have had issues with the support they received in their college or lack of.

## **Reflections**

After three years of development and careful consideration of the data we are accumulating, we are becoming increasingly confident in identifying specific issues that students bring to the us. While the Service would not be involved in change of policy, we feel that it is important that we provide information about the issues we frequently encounter to those involved in the development and improvement of procedures.

With intermission, supervisor relations, mental health, wellbeing and disability being the areas that most students have repeatedly sought support for, we have begun to reflect on what is causing students to seek help outside of their normal collegiate environment. As the case studies illustrate, there are certainly a multitudes of reasons as to why students may seek advice externally, but the inability to find the support they need in college seems to stand out as a central cause.

It would seem to be a primary objective for the next few years that the Service, as it continues to develop, aims to find a useful way to recognise trends in issues faced by students and notify the sources of support for students of the primary problems we encounter. This will likely involve collecting more data, analysing it more frequently and continuing to maintain relations with other support networks in Cambridge.

# **Student Advice Service Activities 2012-13**

## **Membership of national organisations:**

This year we have renewed our membership with 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.

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.

## **Maintaining and developing professional relationships:**

The Advice Service is keen to maintain and continue to build excellent working relationships with University service providers, colleges and University departments. We believe that these relationships are crucial to us being effective in our referrals, and for obtaining correct and up to date information for students.

In previous years, Lisa Déry took a lead role in engaging with college tutorial teams. This year, in Lisa's absence, Chris Page, the CUSU/GU Welfare & Rights Officer, maintained this channel of communication, and was invited to speak at Homerton and Queen's college tutorial meetings; these meetings were fruitful and allowed the tutorial teams of these colleges to directly engage with the work carried out by the Student Advice Service.

In addition to this, we have worked closely with the University Counselling Service, the Disability Resource Centre, College Nurses, the Childcare Office, the Accommodation Service, Student Registry and the Board of Graduate Studies. We have continued to work with the Oxford University Student Advice Service, and our Welfare & Rights Officer has maintained a regular channel of communication with his counterpart at OUSU (Oxford University Students' Union).

Special mention should go to John Harding of the DRC, James Kelly, the Senior Tutor of Queen's College, and Jan Brighting, the Pembroke College nurse, who have made themselves readily available for providing useful information to the Advice Service team.

We have continued to build awareness of the Service among student representatives and groups; awareness of the Service has also been raised by each Advice Officer (Education, Women's and Welfare and Rights) in their regular individual meetings and training sessions with incoming JCR, MCR and SU Welfare Officers, Women's Officers and Faculty Reps, and we receive a great number of referrals through these channels.

### **Regular Weekly activities:**

The SAS team have met every week to hold a reflective practice meeting at which particular cases have been discussed to ensure that all team members are aware of ongoing issues. These meetings also ensure that casework skills are developed over the year. We are keen to ensure that whichever officer a student approaches, they will be able to access the same kind of support and expertise.

To this end, we have held regular in-house service development sessions, which focus on sharing knowledge among the Advice Officers.

The Welfare and Rights Officer and the Student Advisor also meet up each week to coordinate the day-to-day management of the Service.

### **Publicity:**

The Student Advice Service has continued to promote itself to the student body, and to raise awareness of itself among the University and colleges. We have produced posters and flyers, which were circulated to the JCRs/MCRs, Tutorial Teams, University service providers (i.e. DRC and UCS) and to the college Nurses. In addition to this, the Advice Service was advertised weekly in the CUSU and GU bulletins, and via social media on the CUSU Welfare & Rights Facebook page and Twitter account.

During Freshers week, the CUSU Welfare & Rights Officer and President attended numerous Freshers Welfare talks at Christs, Churchill, Clare Hall, Emmanuel, Fitzwilliam, Gonville & Caius, Homerton, Hughes Hall, King's, Lucy Cavendish, Magdalene, Murray Edwards, Pembroke, Peterhouse, Queen's, Robinson, St Catharine's, St Edmunds, St John's and Trinity Hall, to speak about the support that the Advice Service could offer to students. In addition to this, the Welfare & Rights Officer attended two days of Veterinary Medicine Welfare talks to represent the Student Advice Service.

### **Training given by the Advice Service to Student Volunteers:**

Alongside training that is provided by the CUSU sabbatical team, the Student Advice Service has provided extensive training for JCR and MCR Welfare and Women's Officers to make them aware of the support available to them in their roles in the colleges, and to help them develop key skills. We encourage JCR and MCR reps to be aware of boundaries and limitations when supporting students, and to refer students to their tutors or to the Advice Service, or come to seek advice themselves, when in doubt.

This year, the Advice Service has delivered its highest number of trainings to date. This included:

- **Core Skills for New Welfare Officers** - (10 sessions over the course of the year - 6 general, and 4 college specific)
- **Understanding Mental Health** - (14 sessions over the course of the year - 8 general cross campus trainings, and additional college based trainings in Clare, Clare Hall, St. Johns, Churchill, Emmanuel, Sidney Sussex.)
- **Freshers Week: Core Skills for Welfare Officers, Sexual Health, and basic mental health training** - (3 sessions, carried out in the first weekend before full term in Michaelmas, with support from DHVerse, attended by 35 welfare officers over the course of two days)

In addition to the aforementioned, the Student Advisor and Welfare & Rights Officer assisted in Peer2Peer training sessions, which took place over the course of two weekends in the Michaelmas and Lent terms; the Advice Officers were present to answer questions on confidentiality and when it could and should be breached, as well as providing information on the Student Advice Service and how it can support the Peer2Peer scheme.

#### **Training received by the Advice Officers:**

As in previous years, 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:

- Meeting University Service Providers
- Introduction to the Student Advice Service
- Introduction to Casework and Case Recording
- Support in Cambridge
- Student Advice Service Core Skills (active listening, confidentiality, boundaries, non-directive advice etc)
- Eating Disorders
- Equality and Diversity (provided by E&D)
- Time Management
- Working with Students with Asperger's Syndrome (provided by DRC)
- Work/Life Balance
- Communication Skills
- Exam appeals

These training sessions were offered by the Student Advisor, external providers, internal providers, and Advice Officers with relevant experience in particular areas.

The whole team received training on exam appeals procedure at the beginning of Easter term, in light of the prevalence of cases relating to exams during the Easter term.

### **Training received by Student Advisor**

During the year the Student Advisor has received training on “Managing and Developing Effective Teams” and training provided by the Disability Resource Centre: “Disabled People - Providing a Good Face to Face Service.”

### **Concluding Remarks**

Overall, 2012-13 has been a positive year for the Advice Service, and we look forward to handing the Service over to the new sabbatical team in July 2013. We would like to offer our thanks to the CUSU and GU sabbatical teams and staff for their encouragement and support, and also to the various members of University and college staff who have provided us with assistance and advice during this year. We intend to continue our levels of service provision into 2013-14, and are hopeful that we are leaving the Service in good hands with the incoming CUSU/GU Sabbatical team.

Chris Page  
**CUSU/GU Welfare & Rights Officer 2012-13**

Kate Jones  
**Student Advisor 2012-13**