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British Association for
Counselling & Psychotherapy

THE COMPETENCES REQUIRED TO DELIVER EFFECTIVE
COUNSELLING IN FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Counsellors' Guide

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The full listing of competences for counselling in further and higher education at www.bacp.co.uk/ethics/competences_and_curricula

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Executive summary

This document identifies the activities associated with the delivery of effective counselling in further and higher education (FE/HE) and the competences required to achieve these. It describes a model of the relevant competences, and discusses how this should be applied by practitioners, its advantages for counsellors, service managers and trainers, and how it can be used. It is applicable to working in universities and colleges with students of all backgrounds and age groups.

The competences are organised into five domains, as follows:

- The first domain covers competences that should be demonstrated by all counsellors regardless of their work settings. These describe the competences required for managing sessions and any form of counselling intervention.
- The second domain covers the underpinning knowledge necessary for the delivery of counselling in FE/HE contexts.
- The third describes knowledge and skills needed to operate effectively in the FE/HE organisational context, including therapeutic knowledge and abilities, and the ability to conduct assessments in this setting.
- The fourth describes the application of interventions with an emphasis on the skills and knowledge necessary to provide therapeutic interventions to students in FE/HE.
- The fifth domain identifies meta-competences – overarching, higher-order competences which counsellors need to use to guide the implementation of any assessment or intervention.

The report then describes and comments on the type of competences found in each domain, and maps them to show how they fit together and inter-relate. Finally it addresses issues that are relevant to the implementation of the competence framework, and considers some of the organisational issues around its application.

Acknowledgements

This report was commissioned by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP). The project team was headed by Andrew Hill, and the Expert Reference Group (ERG)¹ was chaired by Helen Coles. Professor Tony Roth acted as Advisor to the project team.

The ERG comprised: Alison Brettle, Ruth Caleb, Helen Coles, Vicky Groves, Dawn Hastings, Andy Hill, Ronnie Millar, Tony Roth, Susan Steging, Patti Wallace and Mel Withers.

Alison Brettle (University of Salford) conducted the literature review that underpins the competence framework.

We are also grateful to colleagues on the BACP UC Executive for their valued contribution.

A note on terminology – counselling in FE/HE

The term counselling is used generically in this framework and does not specify a particular modality or theoretical approach. It is assumed that all counsellors working in FE/HE would use these competences, regardless of theoretical approach.

Who can apply the competence framework?

Competence frameworks describe what a counsellor might do; they do not identify who can implement them. The standards set by the framework can be met by counsellors with a range of professional backgrounds, on the basis that they have received a training which equips them to carry out the counselling competently. The issue of competence and of relevant training is the critical factor, rather than the title of the person offering the therapy. Although many practitioners will use the professional title of 'counsellor' some may be denoted as 'psychotherapists'. The distinction in title reflects a mix of factors, such as the theoretical orientation and the type of core professional training undertaken. Counsellors and psychotherapists could offer the competences embodied in this framework, with the appropriate level of training.

¹ Appendix A shows the professional affiliations of members of the ERG

The competences required to deliver effective counselling in FE/HE

How to use this report

This report describes the model of competences for counselling in FE/HE and indicates the various areas of activity, which together, represent good clinical practice. This report does not include detailed descriptions of the competences associated with each of these activities: these can be downloaded from www.bacp.co.uk/ethics/competences_and_curricula. They are available as pdf files, which can be accessed directly or by navigating the map of competences (shown in Figure 2).

Background

How the competences were identified

Oversight and peer-review: The work described in this report was overseen by an Expert Reference Group (ERG) with specific expertise in counselling in FE/HE. Although nearly all were members of BACP, membership of a professional organisation was considered a secondary concern, since the framework aims to set out clinical practice rather than to describe professional affiliations. Tony Roth acted as an external consultant to the ERG in order to provide consistency with previously published competence frameworks.

The ERG helped to identify the trials, manuals and basic texts most relevant to counselling in FE/HE, ensured that the process of extracting competences was appropriate and systematic, and contributed directly to the process of open peer-review while subjecting the competence lists to an appropriate level of scrutiny.

Identifying competences: The initial aim in developing the FE/HE framework was broadly to follow the methodology for identifying competences developed at University College London². This approach starts by interrogating research studies to identify interventions with a strong evidence base provided by clinical control trials. Alison Brettell was commissioned to undertake a systematic review of evidence for counselling in FE/HE. In relation to the criteria we applied, it seems that the evidence base for the efficacy of counselling in FE/HE is not extensive, and so the identification of competences drew extensively upon the opinion of the ERG. No specific counselling approach has a substantive evidence of efficacy. Therefore the framework does not attempt to detail specific models of counselling in FE/HE but instead focuses on the knowledge, attitudes and skills needed to work effectively in this setting, based upon broad evidence for efficacy, and/or strong professional consensus regarding their importance and value.

² A detailed account of this methodology can be found in Roth and Pilling (2008). Although this paper focuses on the development of the CBT framework the methodological issues it raises are relevant to the present framework.



Stock photo. Posed by models.

Selection of source materials

Literature searches discovered very few therapy manuals. Descriptions of FE/HE counselling are mostly available in textbooks which combine statements of theory with specific practice. The ERG identified a series of core texts, which were representative of counselling in FE/HE (for example those used on courses (listed in Appendix B).

Scope of the work

A focus on the FE/HE context

The competence framework focuses on the knowledge, attitudes and skills needed to work effectively in FE/HE organisations. It is intended to be applicable to therapists working from any theoretical base and in all modalities.

The nature of counselling in FE/HE

Counselling in FE/HE is characterised by the need to work briefly and strategically within the constraints of semesters and the academic cycle, so has a tendency to be pragmatic and contextual.

Age range: generally 16 to 25, although students may be as young as 14 or mature students. Particular knowledge and skills for working with young people and flexibility to work with a wide range of age groups will be needed.

The competence model for counselling in FE/HE

Organising the competence lists

Competence lists need to be of practical use; they risk being either too rigid or too vague. The aim has been to develop competence lists structured in a way which reflects the practice they describe, set out in a framework that is both understandable and valid (recognisable to practitioners as something which accurately represents therapeutic work).

Figure 1 shows the way in which competences have been organised into five domains.

The components are as follows:

The first represents 'underpinning' competences for the rest of the framework. The **Generic Therapeutic Competences** domain identifies the competences required to manage counselling sessions and any form of counselling intervention. These skills should be demonstrated by all counsellors; since they secure the integrity of all counselling interventions.

Knowledge relevant to working in the FE/HE context

This domain describes the knowledge needed to provide effective counselling in the FE/HE context. Particular areas are knowledge of relevant legal frameworks and procedures, together with knowledge of the student population with regard to their psychosocial development and their experience of FE/HE.

Working in the organisational context

To work effectively in the FE/HE context counsellors need to have a detailed understanding of the organisation and to work collaboratively with key stakeholders. Counsellors need to understand the aims and objectives of the organisation and how these relate to the provision of counselling services. It is also important to take on board patterns of student attendance and assessment in planning the delivery of therapy. The counsellor's role within the organisation is wide-ranging and varied, involving input into policies that relate to mental wellbeing, audit and evaluation of counselling services, liaising with other support services and offering training, advice and consultancy, as appropriate. Complex skills are involved in managing these varied activities.

Assessment in the FE/HE context

Traditionally, formal structured assessment is not standard in the counselling field; for some practitioners this could be seen as shifting the focus away from what the client wishes to bring, and towards the imposition of an agenda defined by the counsellor. ERG acknowledged this concern, but the consensus view was that there are important clinical and professional risks in working with students in the absence of a sensitive but thorough process geared to understanding their needs and resources. In practice, assessment and risk assessment are not solely a one-off activity (at the start of an intervention), but are often carried out at stages during the course of an intervention.

Areas of application

This domain describes how counselling is provided, working briefly and strategically in both individual and group settings. A number of common problem areas particular to the FE/HE context are described and how the counsellor will work with these, eg working with transitions, stress, interpersonal issues and sexual relationships.

Metacompetences

Carrying out a skilled task requires the therapist to know why and when to do something (and when not to do it!). This is a critical skill which needs to be recognised in any competence model. Psychological therapy cannot be reduced to a series of rote operations, because competent practitioners need to make links between theory and practice in order to adapt therapy to the needs of individual clients. These are referred to as metacompetences in this framework: the procedures used by therapists to guide practice, and operate across all levels of the model. These competences are more abstract than those in other domains because they usually reflect the intentions of the therapist. Although they cannot be seen they can be inferred from therapists' actions, and may form an important part of discussions in supervision.

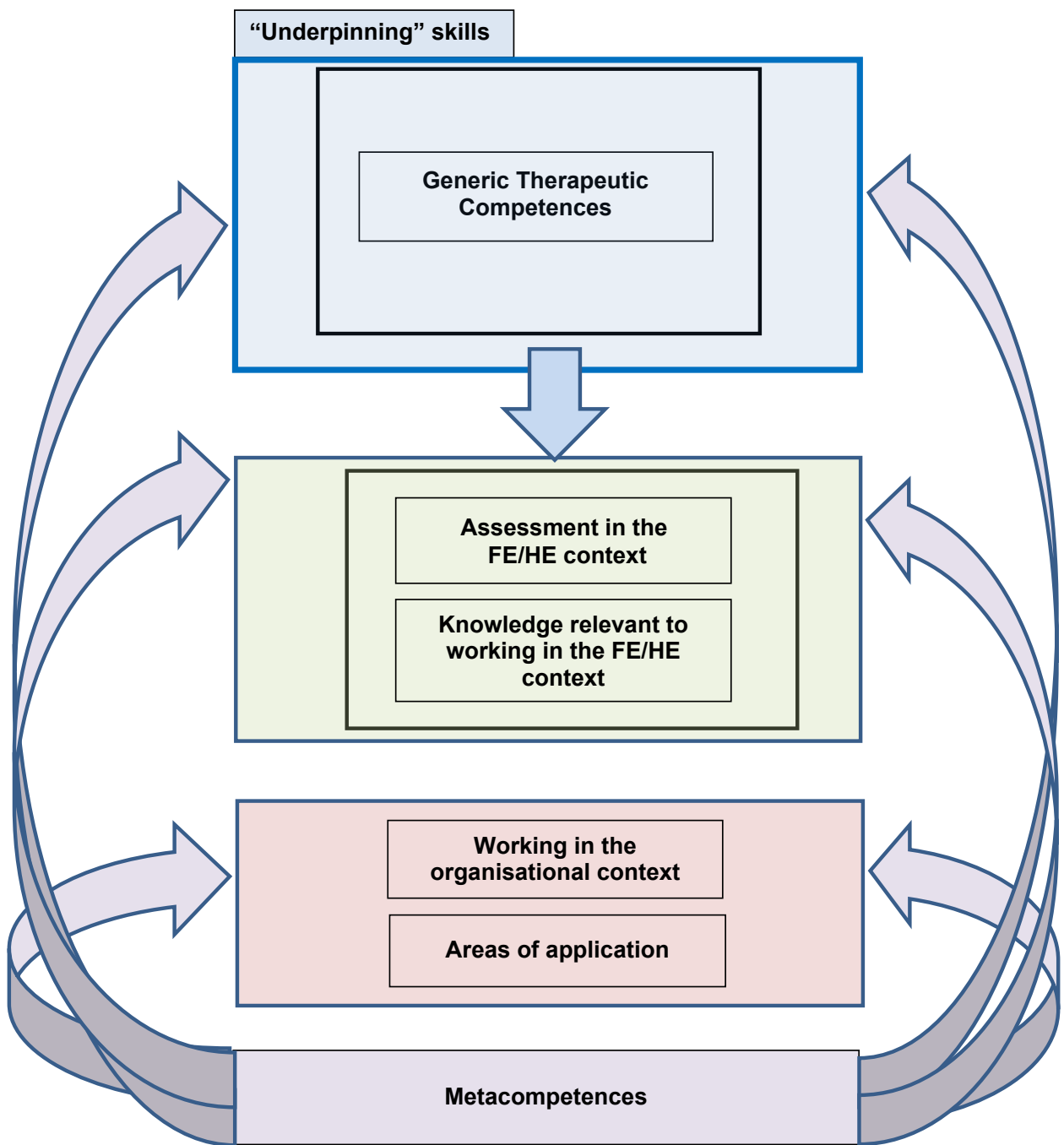


Figure 1: Outline model for competences in counselling in FE/HE

Specifying the competences needed to deliver counselling in FE/HE

Integrating knowledge, skills and attitudes

A competent counsellor brings together knowledge, attitudes and skills, which defines competence; without the ability to integrate these areas practice is unlikely to be good.

Counsellors need background knowledge relevant to their practice, but it is the ability to apply this knowledge in clinical situations that marks out competence. Knowledge helps the practitioner understand the rationale for applying their skills, to think not just about how and when to implement their skills, but also why they are implementing them.

Beyond knowledge and skills, the counsellor's attitude to therapy is also critical – not just to the relationship with the client, but also to their organisation, and the cultural context within which the organisation is located (professionally, ethically and socially). The therapist needs to be aware of these since they influence the capacity to deliver therapy that is ethical, professional, and appropriate to the client's needs and cultural context.

The map of competences for counselling in FE/HE

Using the map

The map of competences for FE/HE counselling is shown in Figure 2. It organises the competences into the five domains outlined above and shows the different activities which, taken together, constitute each domain. Each activity is made up of a set of detailed competences; the details of which are not included in this report; but can be downloaded from www.bacp.co.uk/ethics/competences_and_curricula.

The map shows the ways in which the activities fit together and need to be 'assembled' in order for practice to be proficient. A commentary on these competences follows.

Layout of the competence lists

Competences are set out in boxes.

Most competence statements start with the phrase 'An ability to...', indicating that the focus is on the counsellor being able to carry out an action.

Some competences are concerned with the knowledge that a practitioner needs to carry out an action. In these cases the wording is usually "An ability to draw on knowledge..."; practitioners should know when to apply knowledge to further an intervention.

The competence descriptions try to identify what a counsellor actually needs to do to carry out the competence.

The boxes are indented when a fairly high-level skill is introduced, and needs to be 'unpacked'. In the example below, the high level skill is being able to work with transitional issues regarding leaving college/university. Followed by some concrete examples of what the specific issues might be.

An ability to work with issues relating to leaving the college/university context, such as:

the transition from being a student to becoming a member of the full-time workforce

anxieties about employment prospects

The competences make sense if practitioners remember the high-level skill that precedes them. The idea behind an action should give counsellors a 'road map', and make it less likely that they apply techniques by rote.

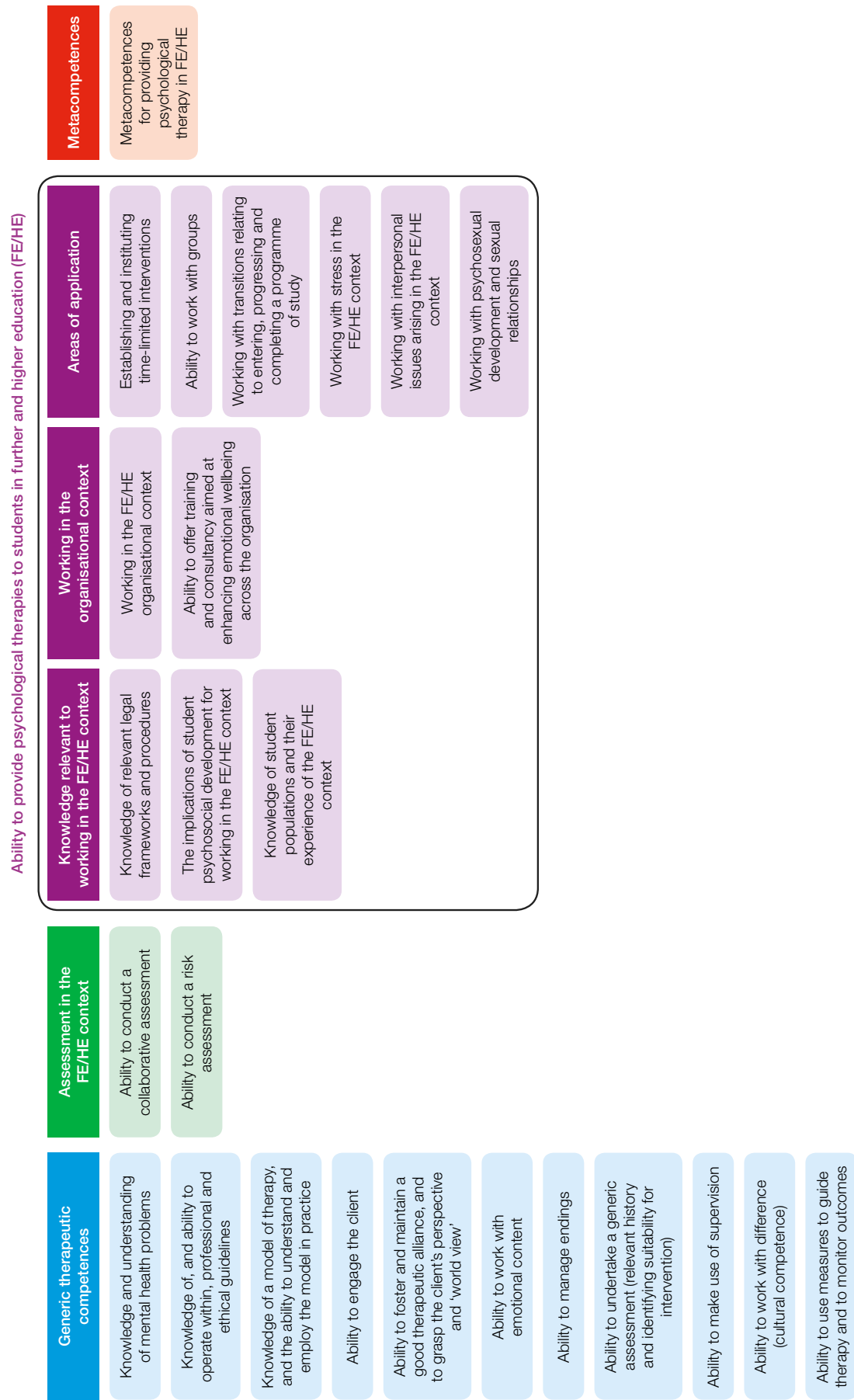


Figure 2: The competences required to deliver effective counselling in further and higher education

Generic therapeutic competences

This domain of competences sets out knowledge, attitudes and skills relating to the provision of counselling. Competences are generic as they do not refer to a particular type of therapy and so are applicable to all modalities.

Knowledge and understanding of mental health problems

A knowledge of common mental health problems is important for counsellors working in FE/HE. This includes an understanding of how problems develop, are maintained and what the symptoms are. This is particularly important when undertaking assessments.

Knowledge of, and ability to operate within, professional and ethical guidelines

Competent practice is underpinned by knowledge of national and local codes of practice, professional ethical guidelines and relevant legislation. The ability to apply ethical principles to therapeutic work is also necessary, particularly with regard to informed consent, confidentiality, avoiding 'dual relationships' and fitness to practice.

Knowledge of a model of therapy, and the ability to understand and employ the model in practice

Counsellors need a sound knowledge of therapeutic models, particularly those commonly applied in the setting in which they work, along with an understanding of the evidence base of the various models, to ensure clients receive appropriate therapy. Additionally, it is important for counsellors to have a comprehensive and in-depth knowledge of a therapeutic model as this provides a coherent rationale for the methods used. This ensures that clients experience a consistent therapeutic approach which supports the building of a collaborative alliance. However, it is also necessary for therapeutic models to be implemented in ways that are flexible and responsive to the client's individual needs. A balance has to be struck between consistency and flexibility. Also, beyond the model, knowledge of factors common to all therapeutic approaches is important in the delivery of effective therapy.

Ability to engage the client

Engaging the client in the early stages of therapeutic work supports the building of an effective therapeutic relationship. In order to achieve this counsellors need to communicate confidence, competence, warmth, empathy and genuineness, while, at the same time, maintaining professional boundaries. This is to engender trust and build rapport. Negative interpersonal behaviours, such as impatience, aloofness, and insincerity are to be avoided, whereas, being flexible and adapting therapy to the client's needs are good practice.

Ability to foster and maintain a good therapeutic alliance, and to grasp the client's perspective and 'world view'

The therapeutic alliance is the most important factor in psychological therapy and is associated with positive outcomes regardless of the type of therapy. Counsellors need to understand what constitutes a good therapeutic alliance and be able to form one. Knowing what may undermine the alliance is also helpful. Ensuring the client understands the intervention is an important aspect of building the alliance, and the counsellor needs to listen carefully to the client's concerns, appreciate the client's perspective and 'world view', and explain simply the intervention. The counsellor needs to recognise when the alliance becomes strained and/or disrupted and take appropriate action to rebuild the therapeutic bond.

Ability to work with emotional content

Exploring emotion is an essential aspect of most therapeutic approaches. However there are instances when emotional arousal can present a barrier to effective therapy – for example, when a client is overwhelmed by emotion and so unable to reflect or get in touch with underlying issues. In such cases counsellors need to help clients contain and manage their emotions in order to achieve an optimal level of emotional arousal for therapeutic work.

Ability to manage endings

The ending of the therapeutic relationship is an important transition for the client and needs to be managed skilfully and sensitively. The end of counselling needs to be signalled at appropriate points during therapy, particularly when agreeing the counselling contract, and as therapy draws to a close. Reviewing the work undertaken together helps clients to reflect on themselves and what they may have gained from therapy, and it is useful for counsellors to help clients discuss their feelings and thoughts about endings and any anxieties about managing after therapy.

Ability to undertake a generic assessment (relevant history and identifying suitability for intervention)

This is a core activity for all counsellors aimed at gaining an understanding of the client's difficulties and how they may have developed over time. The client's social situation with regard to supportive relationships is a relevant factor, along with personality factors such as their ability to cope with strong emotions and their level of motivation to change. Assessing the level of risk to self or others is a key ethical concern at this point and to discuss the range of therapeutic options available is appropriate as it supports client choice.

Ability to make use of supervision

The effectiveness of therapy and the protection of the client are supported by the supervisory process. To maximise the benefits of supervision counsellors need the skills to work collaboratively with supervisors and present their work in an open and engaged manner. The capacity to reflect on therapeutic work and to be responsive to feedback from the supervisor are important aspects of the counsellor's engagement in the process. Reflecting on therapeutic work in supervision has an ethical dimension, allowing counsellors to monitor their levels of competence and fitness to practice. Supervision is also where ethical dilemmas should be discussed and resolved. Adapting practice in the light of supervisory guidance and using supervision as a springboard for learning more about therapy and professional practice are desirable outcomes.

Ability to work with difference (cultural competence)

The delivery of effective therapy is underpinned by the counsellor's 'cultural competence', or ability to work with individuals from a diverse range of backgrounds. Whereas an appreciation of the lifestyle, beliefs and attitudes of various demographic groups is central to the provision of culturally-sensitive therapy, the impact of disadvantage and discrimination on such groups is also important. Additionally, a full appreciation of difference is impossible without counsellors developing an awareness of their own culture and the way it has affected their thinking, attitudes and behaviour. Cultural attitudes to help-seeking, the stigma relating to mental illness, beliefs about "selfhood" will all impact on therapeutic work and so are key areas of understanding. In summary, an understanding of how social and cultural difference can impact on the accessibility, acceptability and effectiveness of an intervention and the ability to mediate for these factors are important areas of competence.

Ability to use measures to guide therapy and to monitor outcomes

The need to measure the outcomes of therapy and evaluate counselling services is widely acknowledged, requiring counsellors to be familiar with the questionnaires and rating scales commonly used in routine practice. Counsellors should have an understanding of how such measures are constructed and how to interpret results. The benefits of integrating outcome measures into routine practice, in terms of gaining direct feedback from the client and being able to track progress over time, should be appreciated by counsellors, so therapy can be adapted accordingly. Counsellors should avoid administering measures in ways that are burdensome to clients and should use them as a basis for active collaboration between client and therapist. Counsellors should help clients make use of the process as a form of self-monitoring, so they can reflect on their levels of distress and track progress.



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Assessment in the FE/HE context

Assessment is best seen as a process that is revisited throughout the course of counselling, rather than being a one-off event. It affords the students an opportunity to describe their difficulties, as well as their strengths and resources, such that the focus and goals for the therapeutic work can be established and agreed. Within the competence framework assessment, knowledge and skills are viewed as generic and applicable to any therapeutic modality.

Ability to conduct a collaborative assessment

The purpose of the assessment process is to develop a collaborative understanding of the student's difficulties as well as their strengths and resources, in order to identify the most suitable intervention and help them make informed choices (including, in some cases, referring on to another service as opposed to continuing in counselling).

Identifying the areas in which problems tend to be experienced is central to the assessment process, along with tracing how the problem has developed and how it may be affecting the student's ability to function. Tracking those areas that are emotionally significant for the student and identifying how current experiences may contribute to their difficulties help to develop a therapeutic focus that is relevant to the student's needs and wishes.

The use of suitable outcome and process measures and tools can be helpful both for the counselling assessment and the on-going work. Measures should be appropriate and acceptable, so they can be used most effectively in the therapeutic process. Measures can help to identify key areas of difficulty experienced by students and also provide useful feedback on how therapy is progressing. Used collaboratively they can guide the focus of the therapy and help to monitor students' levels of distress. Despite these advantages there will inevitably be occasions when the student does not wish to complete them.

Ability to conduct a risk assessment

It is important to assess and monitor risk when working with students. Knowledge of local and national policies on risk and safeguarding is fundamental, along with knowledge of relevant legislation. While levels of risk need to be assessed routinely, risk issues can crop up at any point in the therapeutic relationship. An understanding of the types of risk (harm to self, harm to others, harm from others) and factors which may predict these are important in making appropriate judgements. Tools can be of benefit when assessing risk and the level and complexity of risk will predict how in-depth the assessment should be. Understanding the social context, situations which may trigger increased levels of risk, together with the student's perspective on risk issues are important considerations in making an assessment. Should significant risk issues be identified, counsellors should collaborate with students to develop a risk management plan that identifies the actions that the student and relevant services should take if there is an acute increase in risk factors. Inevitably this may involve working with other agencies and managing confidentiality.

Knowledge relevant to working in the FE/HE context

Knowledge of relevant legal frameworks and procedures

Effective counselling in FE/HE is underpinned by a sound knowledge of legal frameworks and procedures, particularly with regard to safeguarding. Counsellors should be conversant with relevant legislation and policy relating to safeguarding children and vulnerable adults (e.g. The Children Act (1989 and 2004), The Children and Families Act (2014), The Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act (2006), Keeping Children safe in Education (2014)). Such policy and legislation aim to protect vulnerable people from abuse and neglect, promote health and development, and ensure safety, care and optimum opportunities in life. Additionally, counsellors should be aware of (and be able to act on) institutional policy regarding legal duties placed upon colleges and universities (for example, by Section 26 of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act, 2015, which requires colleges and universities to have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism).

Knowledge of legal frameworks and procedures relating to disability (e.g. the Disability Discrimination Act, 1995; Equality Act 2010) is also important. Counsellors need to understand that the college/university has a legal duty of care to students with disabilities, including those whose disability relates to mental health issues. Under the legal framework colleges/universities are required to anticipate the needs of disabled students and to make reasonable adjustments to facilitate access to learning. In many cases counselling services will have a role in helping the college/university meet its obligations to students with disabilities, particularly where mental health issues are involved.

The implications of student psychosocial development for working in the FE/HE context

Knowledge of psychosocial development across the lifespan is a basic requirement for all counsellors, but therapists in FE/HE need detailed knowledge of developmental phases most pertinent to students (i.e. adolescence and early adulthood). This enables them to differentiate between "normal" and "abnormal" patterns of psychological development in young people and hence be better able to identify the significance of psychological problems. Central tasks for young people are to achieve independence and establish a secure sense of identity, which can be difficult and painful processes, in some cases prompting students to seek counselling support.

Knowledge of student populations and their experience of the FE/HE context

Student populations are made up of a number of sub-groups, for example; school/college leavers, mature students, international students, disabled students. These subgroups differ in relation to developmental stage, social origins (including ethnicity and social class), peer group culture, beliefs and values. Knowledge of the student population and its various subgroups helps the FE/HE counsellor to appreciate and understand students' experience of the university/college context and the challenges faced by the different sub-groups. A number of social stressors relating to the FE/HE context may impact on students' psychological wellbeing, for example, living in unsuitable/poor quality accommodation or being subject to unhelpful peer group pressures. It is also important to appreciate that some students may be reluctant to seek psychological support, for example, out of fear of stigma, or because of cultural assumptions about, and attitudes towards, mental health.

Working in the organisational context

Working in the FE/HE organisational context

Universities and colleges are usually large and diverse organisations and FE/HE counsellors need a sound understanding of the organisational context in order to work effectively within them. A number of organisational objectives and priorities (e.g. retention, achievement, employability, enhancing the student experience) will be relevant to the provision of student counselling, as it may reduce the risk of drop-out, enhance students' ability to study, improve their chances of getting a job by building self-confidence, and enhance their experience of studying in FE/HE. There will, however, be instances where the aims of counselling are in conflict with these agendas and in such cases counsellors need to be clear about the aims of and rationale for the intervention.

The nature of the organisational context inevitably impacts on the provision of counselling, particularly with regard to patterns of student attendance and the cycle of academic assessment. Students attending college/university in blocks of 10–12 weeks inevitably has implications for counselling contracts, and periods of academic assessment are likely to create high demand for counselling services. Counselling provision needs to be brief, strategic and flexible to fit in with the constraints of this environment.

The role of counsellor in FE/HE is often varied and extends much wider than the central task of providing therapy to students. Counselling services aim to promote self-agency, personal effectiveness and resilience across the academic community, in addition to supporting individual students who are experiencing difficulties. Hence, counsellors may become involved in procedures that impact on student progression, such as mitigating circumstances or fitness to practise. They may contribute to the development of service-specific policies and protocols, (e.g. safeguarding, managing confidentiality) or university/college-wide policies and protocols, such as dealing with serious incidents (e.g. a student death). Involvement in student inductions and staff training in the field of mental health/pastoral care may also be an expectation and significant trends in the emotional wellbeing and mental health of students, gleaned from the evaluation of counselling services, may need to be fed back to institutional management.

Counselling services often work in collaboration with a number of other support services (e.g. disability support services, support for international students, financial advice etc.) and counsellors need to have a good knowledge of what these services offer and how the counselling service complements their work. Counsellors often work in collaboration with these services to meet needs of students with disabilities, welfare and/or mental health problems.



Stock photo. Posed by models.

The role and function of the counselling service needs to be communicated widely across the organisation, to ensure that the service is accessed by those who need it. Academic and administrative/support staff need to know how to make appropriate referrals to the service. Counsellors may also need to work with the students' union to develop the provision of appropriate support for students (e.g. peer-support or mentoring programmes). In addition to collaborative working within the organisation, there are likely to be instances where counsellors need to draw on sources of external help (e.g. citizens' advice, welfare rights, NHS services) and to work collaboratively with these agencies.

Working collaboratively often requires the ability to manage confidentiality and other boundary issues that arise from having roles and responsibilities additional to providing therapy. Conflicts may arise in relation to duty of care of the client and accountability to the college/university. Where a student is accessing more than one service, there may be a need to share information with other student support teams. In order to manage these situations and make decisions that are ethical and lawful, counsellors need to be well-informed about policies relating to confidentiality and data protection in the institutional setting, particularly with regard to access to case notes and other personal records. Counsellors need to be able to respond to requests for information about a student's progress in counselling and to manage these sensitively by explaining procedures relating to confidentiality. The need to make thoughtful decisions about information sharing may be particularly salient where students undergoing counselling are involved in disciplinary processes, are making academic appeals, or have submitted a claim for mitigating circumstances in relation to academic assessment.

Ability to offer training and consultancy aimed at enhancing emotional wellbeing across the organisation

In addition to providing therapy, counsellors are often required to offer training and consultancy to the wider organisation, focused on emotional wellbeing, in order to build the organisation's capacity to enhance levels of wellbeing and mental health. There may be occasions where problems presented in student counselling may indicate the need for intervention at an organisational level, for example, where a recurrent issue is producing inappropriate levels of stress on students. In such cases counsellors need to address the problem at an organisational level, in addition to providing therapy to individual students.

Involvement in staff development and in-house training are useful ways to help staff identify and understand mental health problems, have greater awareness of the support services available for those with mental health problems, be better able to make referrals to services and recognise the adverse impact of mental health problems on student learning and development. Training may also help staff to develop the listening and empathic skills relevant to their tutorial, supervisory and welfare roles.

Counsellors also need to be able to provide support, advice and consultancy to members of staff who may be concerned about the psychological wellbeing of specific students for whom they have responsibility. In such cases a collaborative approach is necessary, helping staff decide on a course of action to meet the needs of the student and to help reduce the impact that the student's mental health issues may be having on their studies.

In addition to college/university staff, counsellors may also find themselves working with student unions to promote mental health. This may involve offering advice, support and training for student support services provided by the student union (for example peer-support programmes, telephone helplines, student self-help groups, mentoring programmes).

Areas of application

Establishing and instituting time-limited interventions

The college/university context inevitably imposes constraints on how counselling is provided. Interventions need to be flexible, relatively brief and scheduled to fit in with a student's programme of study. Hence the theoretical approaches used by the counsellor will need to be adapted to a time-limited framework. Therefore a high degree of collaboration is necessary, where the student takes a proactive approach to their problems and there is a high level of agreement between counsellor and client on the goals of therapy and the methods used. Students' expectations of therapy will need to be explored in order to gain agreement about what can be achieved in the time available.

Counsellors need to establish and maintain a strong empathic bond with the student to ensure high levels of collaboration. To support motivation and engagement, it will be useful for the counsellor to affirm the student's strengths and resources and to encourage a hopeful but realistic attitude. Where students experience emotions that feel overwhelming counsellors can help to contain and moderate these and support students' ability to continue to function in the college/university setting. Progress towards agreed therapeutic goals needs to be reviewed regularly and feedback from students encouraged, bearing in mind the number of remaining sessions to ensure best use is made of the time available.

Counsellors need to be alert to any indications of a therapeutic impasse that may undermine time-limited therapy. Indications of this can be where a student's discourse becomes very circular, where they present as emotionally "flat", or where there are signs of them becoming disengaged. A number of responses may be useful, such as reviewing therapeutic goals, using meta-communication to review how student and counsellor are relating to each other, or considering alternative therapeutic interventions where the current approach may not be working.

When concluding time-limited therapy it is important to review with the student how far their goals have been achieved and, where problems have not been fully resolved, it is helpful to discuss with students strategies to maintain wellbeing post-therapy and to explore options for resuming counselling in the future if necessary.

Ability to work with groups

Group therapy can be an effective alternative or addition to individual counselling, particularly where a number of students are experiencing a similar problem. A planning phase is necessary before starting group therapy, estimating demand for the group and recruiting suitable members. Given the context, groups need to be scheduled to fit in with the demands of members' programmes of study to ensure maximum attendance and a process of assessment is needed to ensure the intervention is appropriate and members are likely to benefit.

Counsellors need to be competent in managing group process and be able to balance the needs of the group with those of individual members. Building rapport and encouraging engagement in group activities are key and it is important to manage the group environment in a way that helps all members to participate comfortably. At times counsellors will need to manage members' challenging behaviour and where the emotional states of individuals impact on the other group members, it is important to ensure others do not become overwhelmed or disengaged.

The ending phase is an important point in the life of therapeutic groups as it may elicit feelings connected to other personal experiences of loss/separation that need to be expressed and reflected upon. Group members may also wish to express feelings of anxiety, anger or disappointment that they may have about ending the group. During the ending phase it is useful to review work done in the group, reflect on progress, and to celebrate this in an appropriate manner.

Working with transitions relating to entering, progressing and completing a programme of study

Many students undergo significant transitions while studying in FE/HE and as a consequence counsellors need to draw on knowledge of theories of transition, attachment and loss in order to support students with these. A student's ability to manage transitions is often moderated by their capacity for self-direction, in terms of their life skills and capacity for independence. Some students may struggle with managing independent living, or unfamiliar modes of teaching, learning and assessment, whereas others may not.

There are organisational procedures for managing progression within programmes of study (such as; mitigating circumstances, fitness to practise, fitness to study, returning to study) which represent points of transition for students. Completion of a programme of study may give rise to further issues of transition, relating to career choices and employment prospects. Some students may experience a sense of loss at leaving the college/university setting, or losing their independence when returning to live with family. Such challenges may prompt students to seek counselling support.

Working with stress in the FE/HE context

Academic assessment and self-directed learning make heavy demands on students and can be experienced as stressful. The stress produced by fear of academic failure can impact on students' ability to study, affecting their ability to concentrate, manage and complete coursework, manage time, and perform in exams. While partly a response to external pressure, the experience of stress is also determined by the student's perceptions of academic demands; so counsellors need to be able to explore with the student their subjective responses to these demands. Also important is helping students develop resilience in the face of academic stress and to experience a greater sense of control over their work. Counsellors should appreciate that supporting students who are experiencing academic stress is likely to involve helping them focus on managing anxieties in order to continue their studies, as opposed to exploring deep-seated psychological issues.



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Students may also experience stress regarding finance. For example, students may need to earn money from part-time work, which can impact on academic work. Living on a low income and being in debt can lead to anxieties about being able to pay bills or repay debts, and students who cannot afford to engage in social and leisure activities may feel isolated. When working with such issues, counsellors need to be able to identify and explore any underlying psycho-social issues associated with financial difficulties, for example, substance misuse or gambling. To support students experiencing financial stress, a knowledge of student finance (e.g. tuition fees, welfare benefits, sources of finance and repayment procedures) is useful, along with knowledge of specialist agencies that offer financial advice and guidance both within the university/college and in the wider community.

Working with interpersonal issues arising in the FE/HE context

Counsellors working with interpersonal issues arising in the FE/HE context will need to draw on knowledge of relevant organisational policies and procedures – for example grievance and complaints procedures, and policies on bullying and harassment.

For students entering FE/HE, interpersonal relationships are important as they may lose contact with old friends and want to make new ones. Homesickness and a sense of loss are not uncommon and forming new supportive relationships is usually critical to helping students cope with the demands of college/university life. For many students (particularly those aged between 18 and 21) the move to university coincides with a period of individuation and separation from parents, and students may experiment with different relationships as a means of exploring their own identity.

A student's capacity to develop new interpersonal relationships will be influenced by their attachment history, as well as factors such as ongoing interpersonal issues within their family (e.g. parental divorce, caring responsibilities for a family member). It is also worth considering that, for international students, cultural differences may present challenges in establishing interpersonal relationships. As well as offering students opportunities to explore their relationships, counsellors can support students to improve their interpersonal skills, for example, by helping them communicate their feelings more clearly, listen more attentively, increase their ability to empathise, and develop assertiveness. The focus of counselling work is often to help students develop a greater awareness of themselves in relationships with others and to recognise and address problematic ways of relating.

Working with psychosexual development and sexual relationships

In order to understand and support students, counsellors need a sound knowledge of relevant theories of psychosexual development. For many students, particularly those in their teens and twenties, their time at college/university coincides with the development of adult sexuality and sexual relationships. Counsellors may need to work with issues such as shyness, difficulties in sustaining intimacy, fear of rejection, and the impact of the break-up of intimate relationships. In some cases students may seek support and guidance for unplanned pregnancies and perhaps in more rare cases, advice about sexual problems that may merit specialist intervention.

When working in this area counsellors should bear in mind that students from different cultural backgrounds may vary in the ways that they react to their sexual development. For example, an aspect of sexual development may evoke feelings of shame in students from one culture, but not in those from another.

While not necessarily commonplace, cases of sexual assault do occur in the college/university context and counsellors need to be equipped to respond appropriately. Knowledge of the organisation's and the counselling service's guidelines for dealing with reports of sexual assault is an essential starting point. Students who are victims of sexual assault may be reluctant to report the incident, particularly if victim and perpetrator live and work in close proximity to each other in the college/university environment or if students blame themselves for the circumstances of the assault (for example being out alone at night or being intoxicated). A supportive, warm and non-judgemental attitude to students who have experienced sexual assault needs to be adopted to help them feel safe and able to talk about their experiences. Where a sexual assault leads to legal proceedings counsellors involved in such cases need to be aware of the implications, particularly with regard to confidentiality.

The nature of student populations means that counsellors should have sound knowledge of key issues relating to Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transsexual (LGBT) sexual identities and cultures and the ability to implement good practice when working with LGBT students. Counsellors need to work from the assumption that same-sex attractions, feelings, and behaviour are normal variants of human sexuality and that efforts to change a client's sexual orientation are discriminatory and unethical. An understanding of the effects of prejudice, discrimination, and violence that are often manifest in the lives of LGBT people is essential in order to work effectively in this area. When working with transgender issues, counsellors need to be able to help students discuss and explore concerns relating to transgender identity development, gender confusion, gender transition, gender expression and sexual relationships. However, counsellors should work with the whole person rather than just focusing on the gender identity related issues, bearing in mind that when a transgender client presents for counselling, gender identity issues may not necessarily be their main concern.

Metacompetences for counselling in FE/HE

Implementing the competence framework requires a high level of skill and judgement, since the decisions required are often complex. Where there are competing priorities, these need to be balanced carefully. For example, when making safeguarding decisions, a counsellor may need to weigh the student's autonomy against the need to avoid harm, particularly where there is a need to intervene to protect a student who is keen to make their own decisions.

Thoughtful judgements may also be needed where the needs of the individual student do not match the requirements of the organisation, for example, where a student may need to work on emotional problems, but also be able to perform in academic assessments. In such cases, some of the student's issues may need to be deferred in order to resolve more immediate academic issues. At times, counsellors may need to recognise, acknowledge and contain students' underlying emotional difficulties while working to maintain their ability to function within the educational context.

Counsellors may also need to weigh the different perspectives of potential referrers with that of the student in order to provide a counselling intervention that is in the student's interests. For example, a referring tutor may be very keen to retain a student on their programme, whereas the student may wish to withdraw. Similarly, the counsellor may find themselves needing to strike a balance between the organisation's competing priorities, for example, where the duty to support students with mental health problems conflicts with the need to withdraw students from their studies who are not fit to practise.

Working with limited resources may also lead to tensions between the need to work intensively with certain students and the need to provide access to psychological therapy for the wider student community. Hence interventions need to be brief, but effective. Therefore, counsellors may need to balance the exploratory, supportive and problem-solving aspects of counselling in order to focus on achieving realistic therapeutic goals.

As FE/HE counsellors need to engage with the university/college community appropriate boundaries will need to be kept. Inevitably decisions about when to maintain confidentiality and when to communicate information to other parties who are involved in a student's welfare will need to be made. Potential boundary conflicts may need to be managed when working with the same student across different contexts, for example individual counselling, therapeutic groups, training groups.

At times counsellors may be expected to respond to a crisis that impacts on the institution, such as a student suicide. In deciding how to intervene the counsellor will need to ensure that they work within the boundaries of their personal competence and the remit of the counselling service. In such cases the anxieties of staff within the organisation may lead to unhelpful expectations of what the counselling service can achieve to resolve the crisis. It is important for counsellors to acknowledge such anxieties and to plan interventions that are feasible and within the resources available.

Implementing the competence framework

A number of issues are relevant to the practical application of the competence framework.

Therapeutic modalities:

The FE/HE competence framework is contextual, describing the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to work effectively within this setting. Having found little research evidence supporting the effectiveness of particular therapeutic approaches in FE/HE, the framework does not specify the therapeutic modality (or modalities) to be employed in university and college counselling services. Questions as to which therapeutic modalities should be commissioned by universities and colleges, or which modalities should form a part of FE/HE counsellors' training, remain fairly open. However, knowledge of the most common problems presented in student populations and broad evidence of the efficacy of interventions for the treatment of such problems, gleaned from other settings, should provide guiding principles. A number of competence frameworks³ describing interventions with broad evidence of effectiveness for common mental health problems have already been developed and the FE/HE competence framework should be used in conjunction with these.

³ <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/pals/research/cehp/research-groups/core/competence-frameworks>



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The impact of the organisational setting on clinical effectiveness:

The competence lists in this report describe how counsellors should adapt therapy to the organisational setting and to the individual client. The purpose of this is to ensure therapy does not conflict with the demands of a student's programme of study and to encourage the student's active engagement in the therapeutic process. Inevitably this means that therapy needs to be strategic and time-limited. However, the competences do not comment on other aspects of the way in which counselling is organised and delivered – for example, the duration of each session or how sessions are spaced. Although such considerations will undoubtedly shape the counselling work, these variations do not necessarily have implications for the skills that therapists deploy.

Applying the competence framework

This section sets out how the counselling in FE/HE competence framework can be used. Where appropriate it makes suggestions for how relevant work in the area may be developed.

Service organisation – the management and development of counselling services: The framework represents a set of competences that describes good practice - the activities that individuals and teams should follow to deliver effective treatments. As such the framework can support:

- the identification of the key competences required by a practitioner to deliver effective counselling in FE/HE
- the identification of the range of competences that a service or team should demonstrate in order to meet the needs of students
- the likely training and supervision competences of those managing the service.

Clinical governance: Effective monitoring of the quality of services provided is essential if students are to be assured of good outcomes. Monitoring the quality and outcomes of psychological therapies is a key clinical governance activity; the framework will allow providers to ensure that counselling in FE/HE is provided at the level of competence that is most likely to bring real benefit by allowing for an objective assessment of therapist performance.

Supervision: Supervision commonly has two (linked) aims – to improve the performance of practitioners and to improve outcomes for clients. The framework potentially provides a useful tool to improve the quality of supervision by helping supervisors to focus on a set of competences which are known to be associated with the delivery of effective treatments. Used in conjunction with the supervision competence framework (available online at www.ucl.ac.uk/CORE/) it can:

- provide a structure which helps to identify the key components of effective practice in counselling in FE/HE
- help in the process of identification and remedying less than good enough performance.

Supervisor Training: It is important that counsellors receive supervision from supervisors who themselves have knowledge of relevant competence frameworks, and who can also demonstrate their own competence in the requisite skills, knowledge and attitudes that ensure high quality supervision. BACP (in collaboration with the University of Leicester) has produced a core curriculum for the training of counsellors and psychotherapist supervisors (accessible at www.bacp.co.uk/accreditation), based on the UCL supervision competence framework. It contains both a generic three module training programme and an optional module for supervisors working with counsellors who deliver Counselling for Depression in IAPT services.

Training: Effective training is vital to ensuring increased access to well-delivered counselling. The framework will support this by:

- providing a clear set of competences, which can guide and refine the structure and curriculum of training programmes (including pre- and post-qualification professional trainings, as well as the training offered by independent organisations)
- providing a system for the evaluation of the outcome of training programmes.

Research: The framework can contribute to the field of counselling research in a number of areas; these include the development and refinement of appropriate psychometric measures of therapist competence, the further exploration of the relationship between therapy process and outcome, and the evaluation of training programmes and supervision systems.

Concluding comments

This document describes the activities that characterise effective interventions in the field of counselling in FE/HE and locates them in a 'map' of competences.

The work has been guided by two overarching principles. First, it aims to ensure that competences are close to best practice, as far as can be ascertained, and therefore likely to result in good outcomes for students. In the absence of research evidence as to the effectiveness of FE/HE counselling per se, the competences were developed primarily on the basis of expert opinion regarding the application of counselling interventions in the FE/HE context. Second, it aims to be user-friendly by clustering competences in a way that reflects how interventions are actually delivered and hence facilitates their use in routine practice.

Putting the framework into practice – whether as an aid to curriculum development, training, supervision, quality monitoring or research – will test its worth, and indicate the ways in which it needs to be developed and revised. Setting out competences in a way that clarifies the activities associated with a skilled and effective practitioner should prove useful for those working in FE/HE. The more stringent test is whether it results in more effective interventions and better outcomes for clients.

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Andy Hill is a former Senior Lecturer in Counselling at the University of Salford and former Head of Research at BACP. He has a background in training, practice and research and has helped in the development of evidence-informed counselling practice.

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Appendix A

Membership of the ERG

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Patti Wallace	<i>Former Lead Advisor for Universities & Colleges, BACP</i>
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Appendix B – List of sources

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