

# College Counselling Services in Scotland:

Insights and Perspectives Amidst the  
Student Mental Health Crisis

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# CONTENTS

- PHRONESIS RESEARCH GROUP..... 2
- 1. INTRODUCTION ..... 3
- 2. METHODOLOGY..... 5
- 3. THE SHAPE OF STUDENT SERVICES..... 6
  - 3.1 Range of internal counselling activities..... 6
  - 3.2 Structure of internal counselling provision ..... 13
- 4. DEMAND FOR STUDENT COUNSELLING ..... 17
  - 4.1 Mental Health Disability Disclosures..... 17
  - 4.2 Number of Students Requesting Counselling..... 18
  - 4.3 Waiting Times for Counselling..... 23
- 5. UTILIZATION OF COUNSELLING SERVICES ..... 25
  - 5.1 Presenting Problems ..... 25
  - 5.2 Utilization by Gender..... 27
  - 5.3 Utilization by Ethnicity..... 29
- 6. EVALUATION OF COUNSELLING SERVICES ..... 30
  - 6.1 Evaluation Measures ..... 30
  - 6.2 Evaluation Procedures..... 32
- 7. ROLE OF GOVERNMENT ..... 33
  - 7.1 Think Positive ..... 33
  - 7.2 Additional Mental Health Counsellors ..... 35
  - 7.3 Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Working Group ..... 36
  - 7.4 An uncertain future ..... 37
- 8. RECOMMENDATIONS ..... 38
- REFERENCES ..... 40

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

College Counselling Services in Scotland have indicated an increased demand in utilization within the last decade. Yet, much remains unknown about the accessibility and functioning of these services. This report provides an overview of Scottish College Counselling Services by examining the landscape of counselling provision, current student demand, student utilization, and college-led evaluations of their counselling provision. Furthermore, the report analyses the role of the Scottish Government in improving student mental health through funded initiatives. Lastly, based on the findings of this report, this report makes recommendations for improving Scottish College Counselling Services.

## PHRONESIS RESEARCH GROUP

Phronesis Research Group is a non-profit mental health research collective committed to bridging gaps in student mental health research. Recognizing that mental health is a critical area of concern for young people, we aim to generate insights into the unique challenges faced by students, with the goal of developing evidence-based interventions and policy that can help support their mental health. Our collective engages with a diverse group of stakeholders, including students, mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers, to identify emerging research questions and ensure that our work aligns with the needs of our communities. At the heart of our work is a commitment to promoting positive change and improving the lives of students. We believe that every student deserves access to the support and resources they need to thrive, and we are dedicated to making this a reality. We welcome any communications regarding our report to [fabienndossantossousa1998@gmail.com](mailto:fabienndossantossousa1998@gmail.com).

# 1. INTRODUCTION

In December 2022, the Mental Health Foundation published *Thriving Learners College Research*, a landmark report which provided invaluable insights into the mental health and wellbeing of college students in Scotland (Maguire et al., 2022). The report demonstrated that 54% of college students present with moderate to severe symptoms of depression, with 4% of respondents indicating that they had attempted suicide in the last six months. These alarming findings demonstrate that college students are facing an unprecedented mental health crisis. Embedded College Counselling Services may present an effective solution to tackle the student mental health crisis. Existing literature consistently demonstrates that counselling services are effective in improving mental health and academic outcomes of service users (Connell et al., 2008; McKenzie et al., 2015). For example, a 2016 study on a large UK university counselling service showed that 63% of students showed a reliable improvement on clinical measures following counselling intervention (Murray et al., 2015). Another study at two UK university counselling services found that 83% of service users felt counselling was helpful for academic outcomes (Scruggs et al., 2023). This demonstrates that College Counselling Services could play a crucial role in tackling the student mental health crisis in Scotland.

However, the *Thriving Learners College Research* indicates that individual College Counselling Services in Scotland may vary in their ability to support the mental health of their students. The report included qualitative interviews with 18 professional stakeholders working within the college sector and found that (1) the level of support available through Embedded Counselling Services varies significantly across Scotland's 27 FE colleges, (2) there is a lack of support provision for students with trauma and (3) there is a lack of onward referral pathways for students with complex mental health difficulties.

Moreover, important insights about the mental health and wellbeing services of Scottish colleges come from a recent report by the National Union of Students (Oloyede et al., 2020). The report included an in-depth analysis of the mental health and wellbeing services at four Scottish further education colleges and discussed (1) the types of counselling and therapies offered across institutions (2) the availability of referral pathways and (3) waiting times and demand for counselling. However, due to the limited number of included services, the findings of this report cannot be generalized to the wider service of College Counselling Services in Scotland. Furthermore, the study showed that only one in five further education students in Scotland are aware of the mental health and wellbeing support available to them at their college. This demonstrates an urgent need to critically examine College Counselling Services in more detail.

Our current report provides an overview of Scottish College Counselling Services by examining the landscape of counselling provision, current student demand, student utilization and college-led evaluations of their counselling provision. Furthermore, the report analyses the role of the Scottish Government in improving student mental health through funded initiatives. Lastly, based on the findings of this report, this report makes recommendations for improving Scottish College Counselling Services.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodology of data collection for this report. Data from this report had three sources.

1. We filed freedom of information (FOI) requests to all 27 Scottish Colleges. We filed two separate requests dated on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2023, and February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2023. Data included in the report is available for 25 colleges, as two Colleges did not respond to our requests within the required timescale.
2. We filed a FOI request to the Scottish Government on February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2023.
3. We collected further information on college websites and the Scottish Government website.

Our data and analyses are available upon request to the authors.

## 3. THE SHAPE OF STUDENT SERVICES

This chapter provides an overview of Scottish College Counselling Services. First, the activities College Counselling Services are involved in are reviewed. We describe the range of internal counselling activities, the role of digital mental health technologies, the availability of psychoeducational workshops and clinical groups, and referral routes for at-risk students. Second, the structure of individual counselling services at Scottish Colleges is summarized. We discuss the short-term focus of college counselling services, the therapeutic modalities offered, the counsellor to student ratio at different colleges, and specialist provision in place for deaf and hard of hearing (HOH) students.

### 3.1 Range of internal counselling activities

There is a great variety in the range of activities that College Counselling Services in Scotland may be involved in. Some of these activities may affect the whole college community (e.g., staff training to identify and support students in distress), while others may affect the whole student community (e.g., collaboration with student unions on stigma reduction campaigns). This report will exclusively focus on activities that directly affect students requesting counselling and support.

The report will employ a classification scheme originally designed for University Counselling Services by the Heads of University Counselling Services in Scotland (see Figure 1). The classification scheme defines five focused counselling services: individual counselling, triage and mental health assessment + referral to external services, online support, clinical groups and one-off psychoeducational workshops. The availability of these services across Scottish Colleges is summarized in Figure 2.

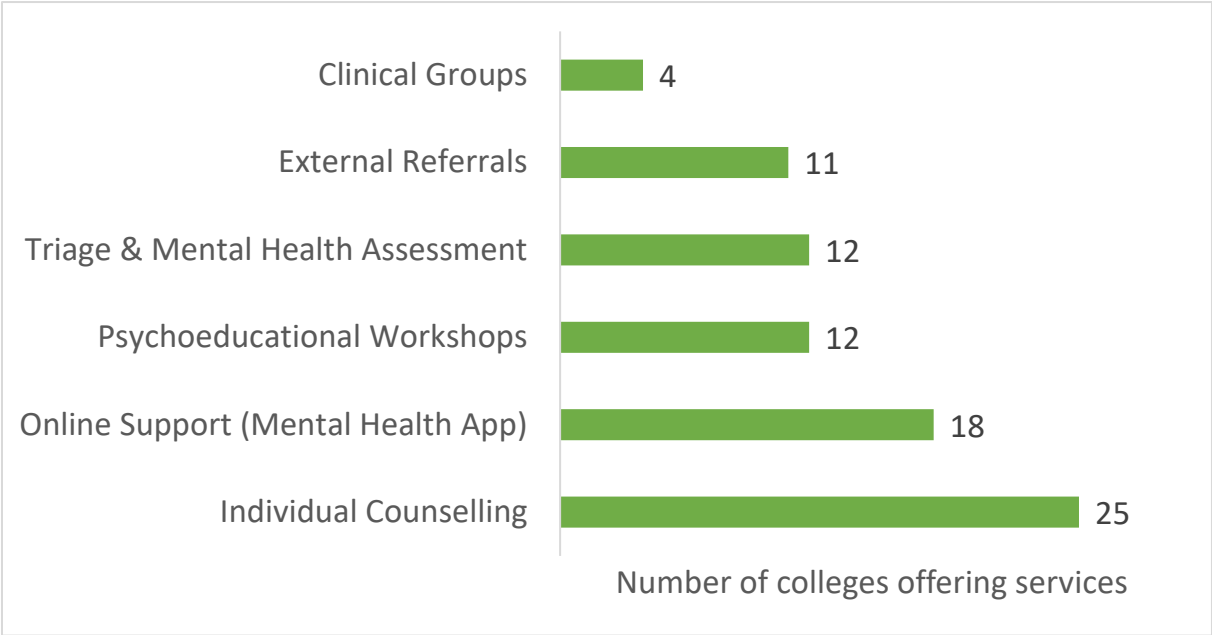
**Figure 1.** Classification Scheme for Focused Counselling Services



*Note.* This scheme was adapted from the HUCSS publication on *Counselling Services in Scotland: Challenges and Perspectives* (2019).



**Figure 2.** Availability of Focused Counselling Services across Scottish Colleges



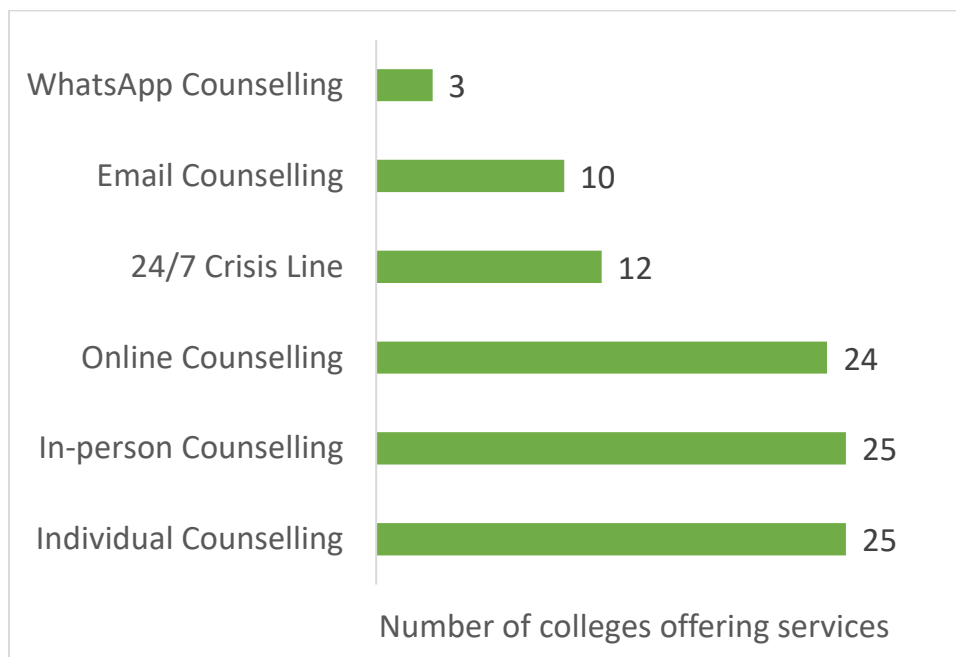
*Note.* Data was available for 25 Colleges.

## INDIVIDUAL COUNSELLING

We asked Scottish Colleges to indicate their availability of individual counselling provision. We found that:

- Three institutions offer WhatsApp Counselling
- Email counselling is available at 10 institutions
- 10 institutions offer or are affiliated with 24/7 crisis lines
- All but one institution offers online counselling
- All surveyed colleges offer in-person counselling
- All surveyed colleges provide individual counselling

**Figure 3.** Availability of Individual Counselling Provision across Colleges

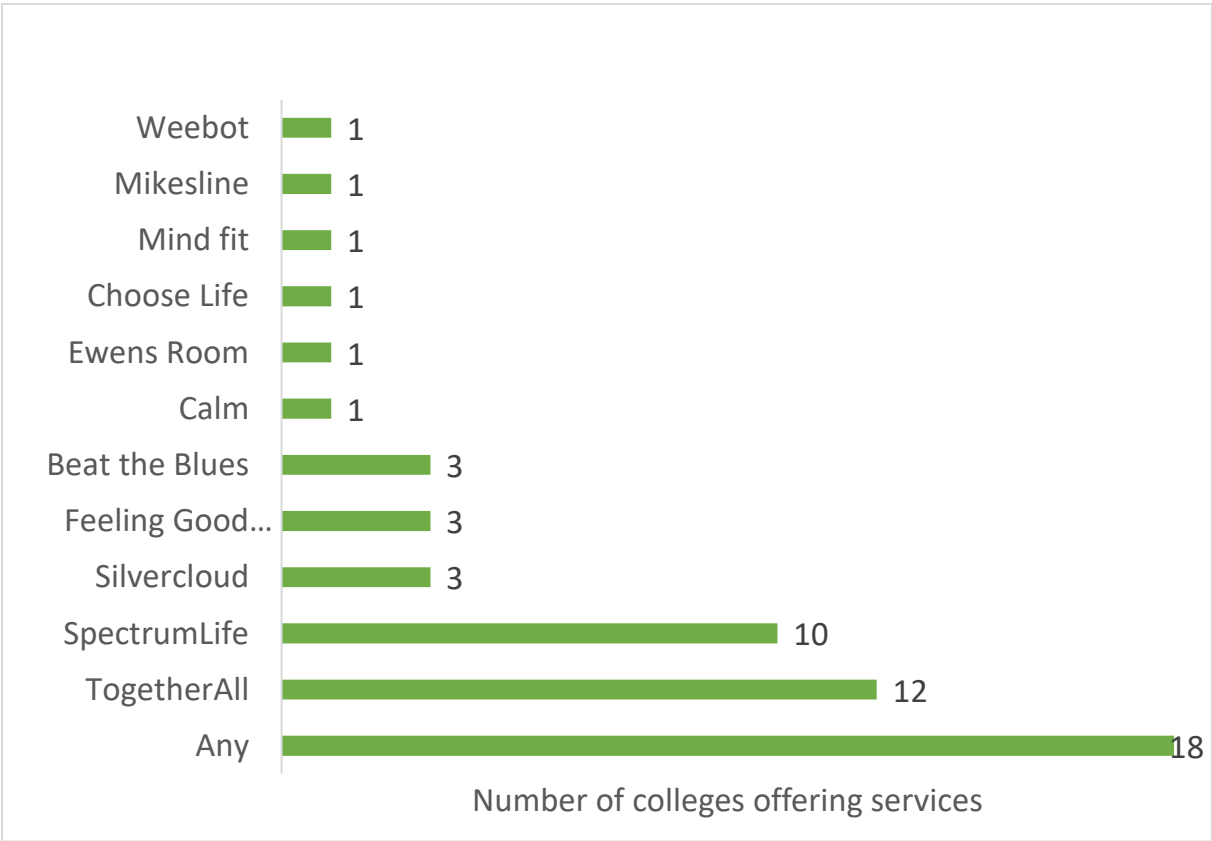


*Note.* Data was available for 25 Colleges.

DIGITAL MENTAL HEALTH TECHNOLOGIES

Digital mental health technologies are an integral component of counselling service delivery among Scottish colleges. Digital mental health technologies can support students in the self-management of their mental health by providing access to evidence-based information and resources. Our data collection exclusively focused on Scottish colleges use of mental health and wellbeing apps in their service delivery. Overall, 18 colleges reported offering a wide range of digital mental health apps to students. More detail about the type of apps offered to students can be found in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Availability of Digital Mental Health Apps across Scottish Colleges



Note. Data was available for 25 Colleges.

## PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL WORKSHOPS

Overall, 12 Scottish Colleges currently offer psychoeducational workshops for students. Psycho-educational workshops available at some of the colleges focus on:

- Mental Health Awareness
- Suicide Awareness
- Loneliness
- CBT Workshops around stress and resilience
- Anxiety and low mood
- Managing relationships
- Focus and Motivation for Study
- Mental Health First Aid Kits
- Staff Training

One college indicated that they have discontinued psychoeducational workshops due to low uptake. Other colleges have noted that their availability of psychoeducational workshops is budget and resource dependent.

## CLINICAL GROUPS

Overall, four Scottish Colleges currently offer clinical groups for students. Clinical groups available at some of the colleges include:

- Autism support groups (two Colleges)
- Counselling group for LGBTQIA+ students

When implemented in adherence with student needs, clinical groups can be invaluable component of counselling service delivery (Franzoi et al. 2022).

## REFERRAL ROUTES FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS

Referral routes into community mental health teams are an important pathway to support at-risk students (e.g., those experiencing a first episode of psychosis). However, we found that only 11 colleges were able to make direct referrals into community mental health teams. One best practice example can be found at Newbattle Abbey College, who can refer students to the Mental Health Assessment Service at the Royal Edinburgh College. Furthermore, the UHI Outer Hebrides have built comprehensive pathways for referrals by collaborating with mental health charities such as the Western Isles Association for Mental Health and Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) to accommodate at-risk students. An exciting upcoming project can be found at Edinburgh Colleges who are working in collaboration with the NHS on a pilot project where appointed staff at Edinburgh Colleges can refer to a distress brief intervention (DBI) service.

It is also encouraging that colleges who cannot currently make direct referrals into community mental health teams offer alternative solutions. An example of this can be found at South Lanarkshire College, where trained staff members accompany at-risk students directly to their local hospital which has a mental health unit. Several other colleges also help students to self-refer to their GP and NHS 24.

## 3.2 Structure of internal counselling provision

### MODELS OF INDIVIDUAL COUNSELLING PROVISION

To assess what counselling support is available to students, we asked each college to provide more details about the type of counselling model they offer. We received data from 25 Colleges.

All Colleges have a standard offer of at least six counselling sessions for students. Several colleges also offer a standard number of eight, ten or twelve sessions. Three colleges offer additional One At A Time (OAAT) model for students. The OAAT model, also known as single session therapy, allows students to book one counselling session at a time. Indicatively, 14 out of 25 colleges have a maximum number of sessions students can attend. These vary between seven sessions at some colleges up to 20 sessions at others. However, all but one college are able to provide further counselling sessions for at-risk students.

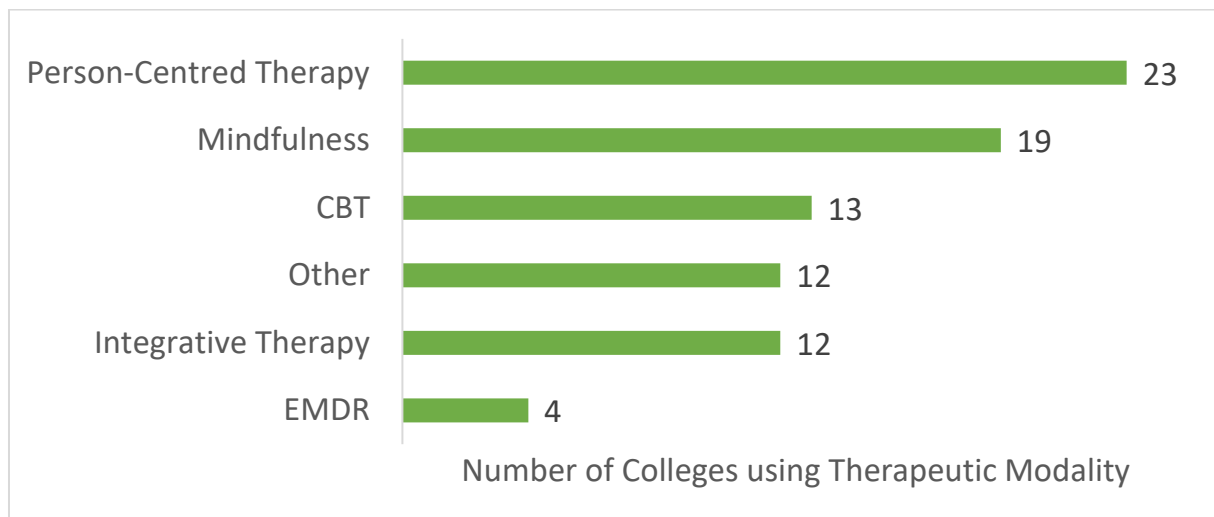
### THERAPEUTIC MODALITIES

Scottish Colleges employ a broad range of therapeutic modalities to students including person centred therapy, mindfulness, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), integrative therapy, and evidence-based trauma therapy (EDMR). Other offered therapeutic modalities include:

- Psychodynamic Counselling
- Compassion Focused Therapy
- Trauma Support
- Pluralistic Therapy
- Transactional Analysis
- Acceptance Commitment Therapy
- Schema Therapy

- Solution Focused Brief Therapy
- Client Centred Therapeutic Counselling
- Creative Therapies

**Figure 5.** Therapeutic Modalities used across colleges.



*Note.* Data was available for 25 Colleges.

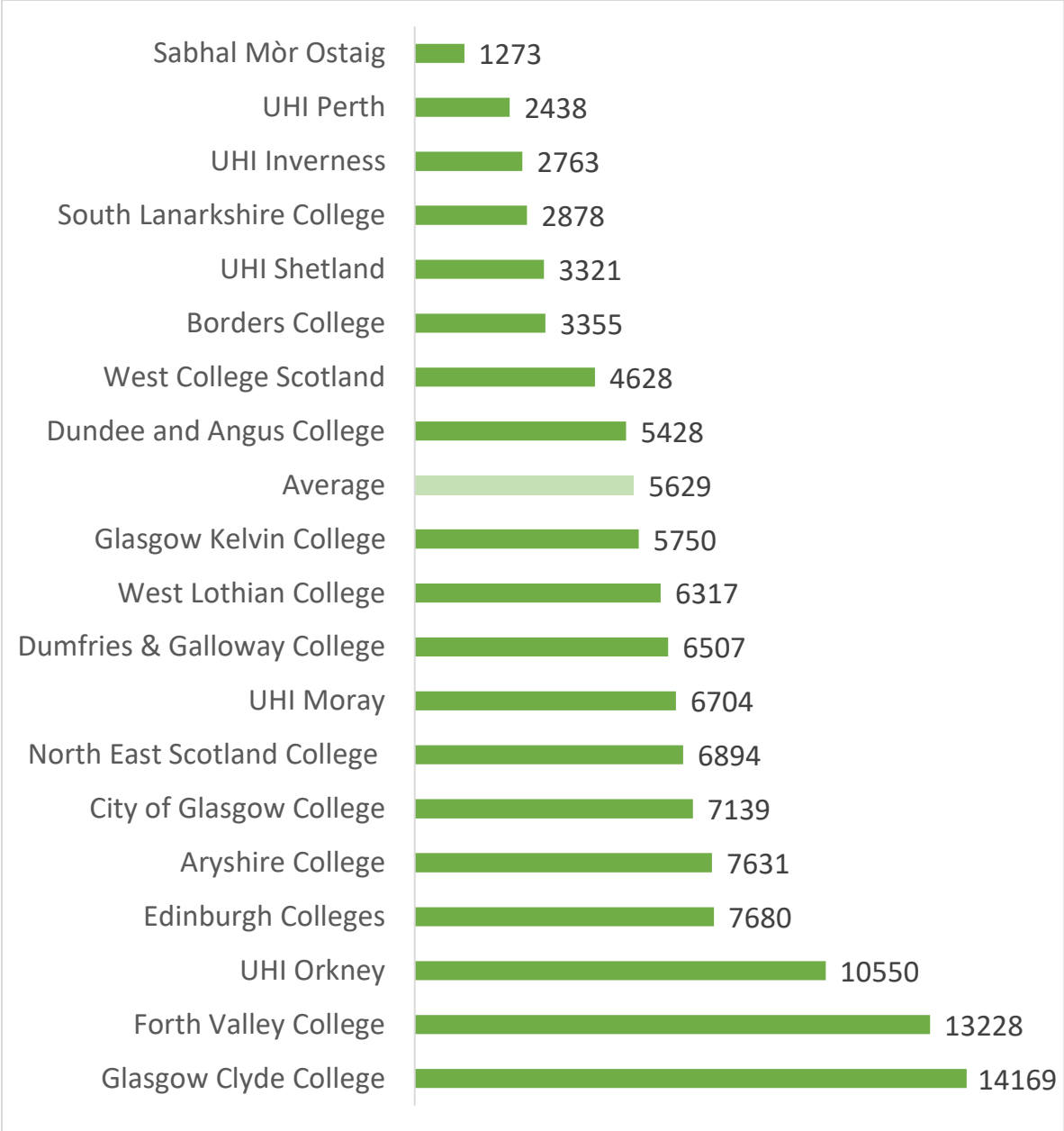
## COUNSELLOR TO STUDENT RATIO

Understanding counsellor-student-ratio at colleges provides insights into the availability of support to students. We asked colleges to provide us with the total number of enrolled student body and the number of employed counsellors (in FTE) for the academic year 2021/22. Figure 6 indicates that the counsellor-to-student ratio varies significantly across Scottish Colleges.

Our data indicates that the average ratio is 1 counsellor to 5629 students. Compared to the average counsellor-to-student ratio among universities which stood at 1:2087, students at Scottish colleges appear to have less access to counsellors (dos Santos Sousa & Feeny, 2023). Counsellor-to-student ratios do vary significantly across colleges

(see Figure 6), suggesting that students at some colleges may have decreased access to mental health support.

**Figure 6.** Counsellor-student ratio across Scottish Colleges



*Note.* Ratio of one counsellor to number of students within the College.



It is important to note that there are some limitations associated with the findings presented above. Several colleges who outsource counselling services do not collect data on counsellor-to-student ratios, hence our data is incomplete. Further, several colleges offer both internal and external counselling streams. For example, all colleges within the UHI group offer individual counselling services but students can also access counselling through a joint 'central' counselling service offered across the UHI partnership. This means that it is not always possible to evaluate the exact availability of counsellors.

### COUNSELLING PROVISION FOR DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING STUDENTS

Mental health support for students that are deaf or hard of hearing (HOH) are becoming more common place within higher education settings. Seven out of the total surveyed colleges are currently able to offer counselling in British Sign Language. Another 16 colleges can offer alternative counselling provision for deaf and HOH students. These alternative provision solutions include:

- Providing a BSL interpreter for deaf students
- Referring to external counselling services
- Email/text counselling
- Instant messaging

Unfortunately, two colleges cannot provide any alternative counselling provision for deaf or hard of hearing students.

## 4. DEMAND FOR STUDENT COUNSELLING

This chapter illustrates the increasing student demand facing Scottish College Counselling Services. Student demand is illustrated using three dimensions: (1) mental health disability disclosures, (2) the overall number of students requesting counselling and variations in demand between institutions, and (3) the average and maximum waiting times for student counselling.

### 4.1 Mental Health Disability Disclosures

Previous findings from the Thriving Learners College Report indicated that nearly four in ten (37%) surveyed college students disclosed a mental health diagnosis. Further, more than half of students (55%) said that they had concealed a mental health problem (Maguire et al., 2022). Some possible reasons why students choose not to disclose mental illness to their colleges may stem from stigmatization and lack of awareness or availability of counselling services. Examining mental health disability disclosures across colleges can provide insights into the number of students who may need mental health support and further, the demand placed on student counselling services.

We received data from 23 colleges. The total student body at the surveyed colleges is 254,820. 18% of the total college student body (N=46,080) in Scotland disclosed a disability (includes mental health disability as a category). 7% of the total college student body (N=19,930) in Scotland specifically disclosed a mental health disability. These findings demonstrate that there are many students who may be in need of counselling. College Counselling Services must be adequately prepared to meet the needs of students with mental health disabilities.

## 4.2 Number of Students Requesting Counselling

### TOTAL DEMAND

We received data from 18 colleges on the number of students requesting college counselling in the academic year 2021/22. We found that overall, at least 3586 students requested counselling. Given a total student body of 233,811 students across those 18 colleges, around 1.5% of the total college student population has requested counselling.

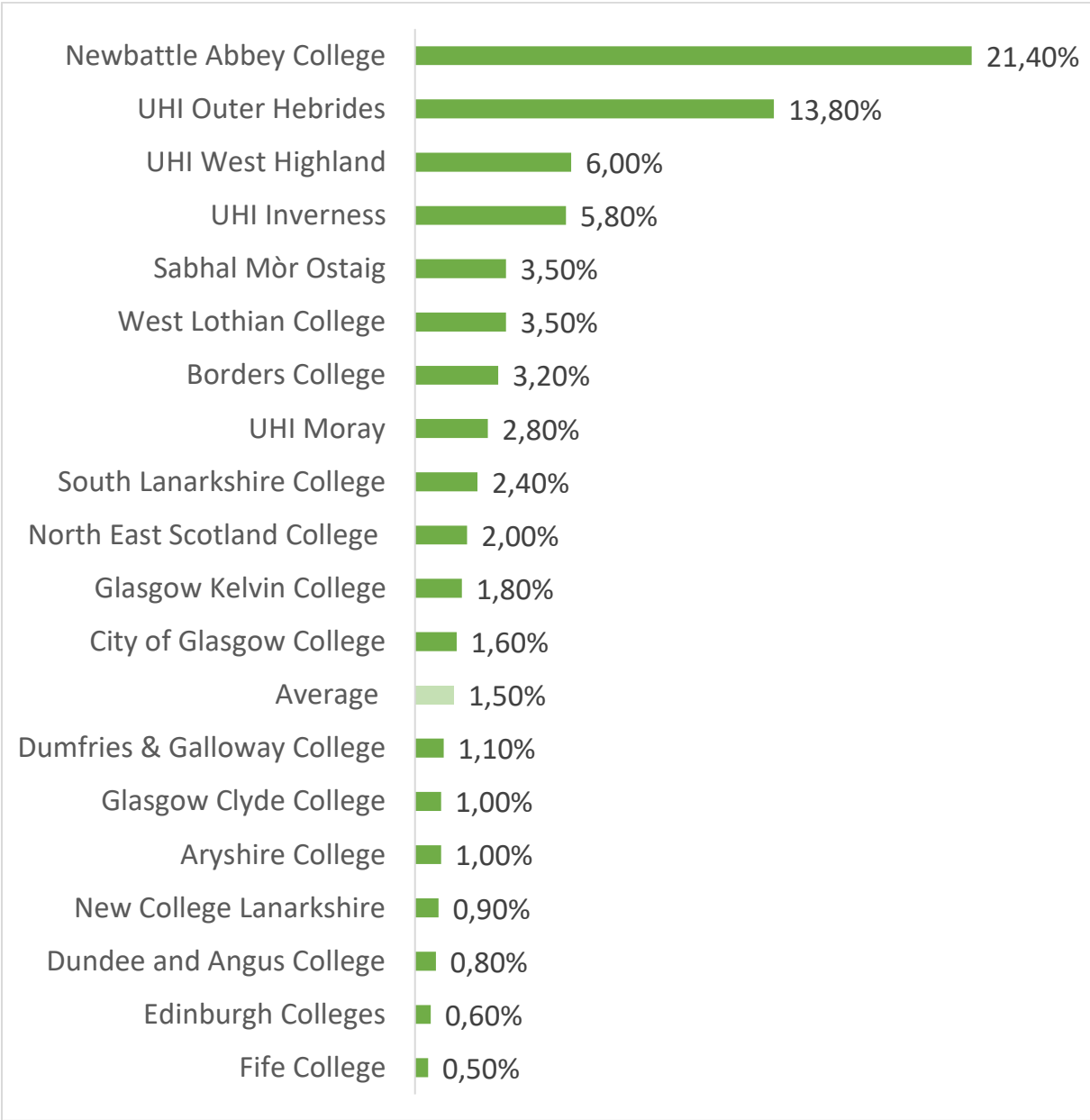
### DEMAND VARIES ACROSS INSTITUTIONS

Not all institutions face the same demand. As illustrated in Figure 7, at Newbattle Abbey College more than 1 in 5 students requested counselling. Contrastingly, at Fife College only 1 in 20 students requested counselling.

There are several reasons why some colleges may face higher demand for counselling services:

- The prevalence of mental health difficulties within student populations is higher
- Counselling Services are more accessible to the student body
- Counselling Services are more appealing to the student body

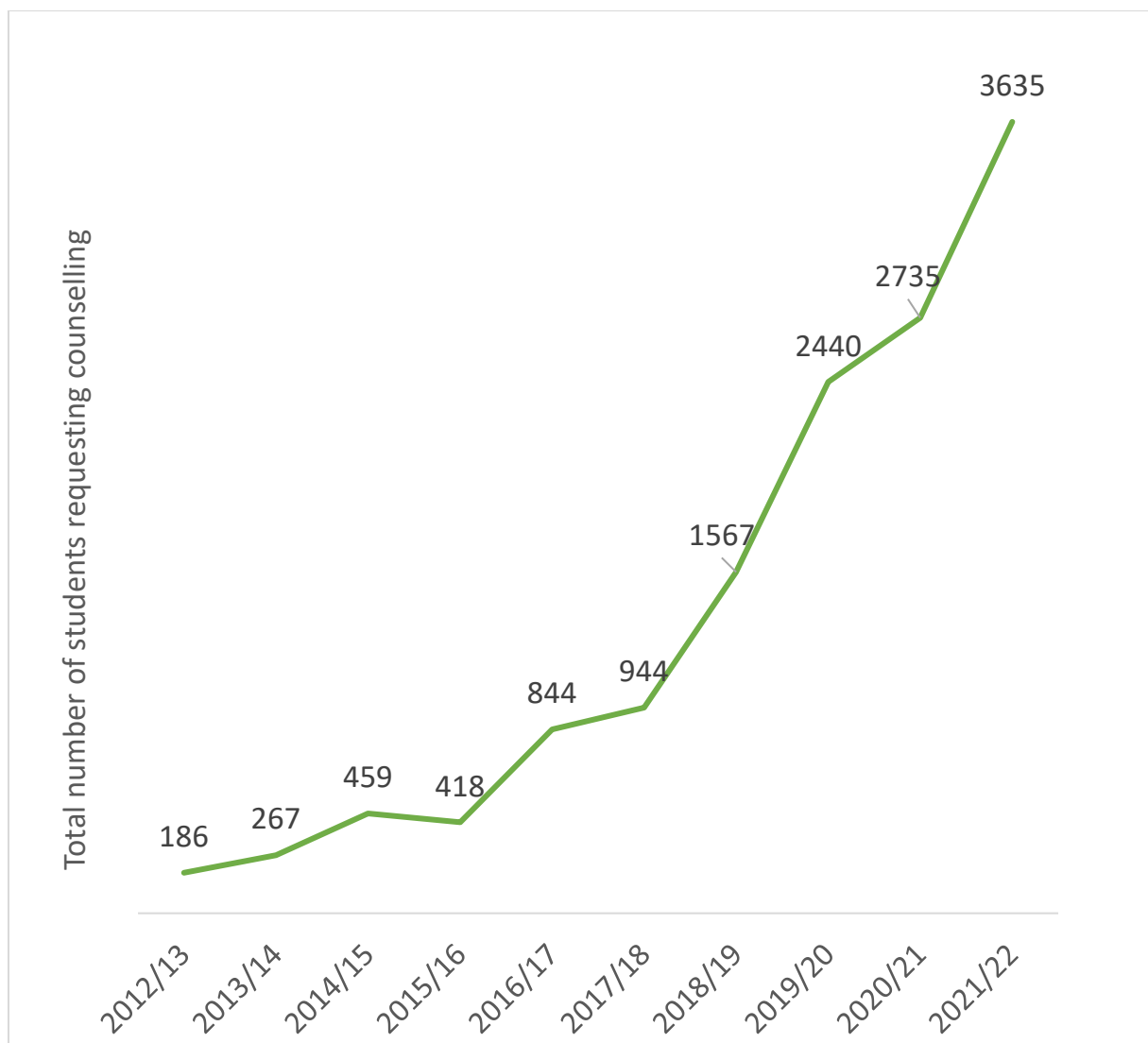
**Figure 7.** Proportion of total student body requesting counselling



## RISING DEMAND OVER THE PAST 10 YEARS

There has been an ongoing steady incline in the number of students requesting counselling at Scottish colleges over the past ten years (see Figure 8). It is important to note that many College Counselling Services have only been set up over the past few years, hence little data on student demand is available for some years. Nonetheless, our data demonstrates that there is increasing demand for Scottish College Counselling Services.

**Figure 8.** Historical Trajectory of Counselling Demand Across Scottish Colleges



*Note.* Data was available for a total of 25 colleges.

## HISTORICAL DEMAND AT INDIVIDUAL COLLEGES

Taking a closer look at the historical demand facing individual colleges can provide further insights into the challenges facing Scottish College Counselling Services. We received data from 17 colleges who recorded the number of students requesting counselling across at least two years. 15 of those colleges recorded an increase in the number of students requesting counselling between their first and last data point. The largest increase was found at UHI Perth who faced a demand of 1460% (from 12 students requesting counselling in 2013/14 to 187 students in 2020/21). More detailed findings can be found in Table 1.

There was one college which did not record a significant change in the historical demand for student counselling. At UHI Inverness, the number of students requesting counselling did not differ significantly between their first data point in 2019/20 (424 students) and their most recent point in 2021/22 (414 students). Furthermore, Edinburgh Colleges reported an approximate 10% decrease in the number of students seeking counselling between their first recorded number in 2018/19 (190 students) and their latest recorded number in 2021/22 (170 students). However, it is crucial to mention that these colleges only recorded data over the last few years.

Overall, Scottish Colleges should continue to prepare for increasing demand for their Counselling Services. It is highly likely that the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis in Scotland will have had a detrimental impact on the mental health of college students (National Union of Students, 2023), further driving demand for counselling over the next few years.

**Table 1.** Changes in Demand for Student Counselling

College	Earliest	N	Latest	N	Percentual Change
City of Glasgow College	2012/13	186	2021/22	535	+ 190 %
Glasgow Clyde College	2013/14	137	2021/22	256	+ 90%
UHI Perth	2013/14	12	2020/21	187	+ 1460%
South Lanarkshire College	2015/16	33	2021/22	137	+ 320%
UHI West Highland	2015/16	9	2021/22	33	+ 270%
West College Scotland	2016/17	154	2020/21	344	+ 120%
Forth Valley College	2016/17	69	2020/21	173	+ 150%
Dundee and Angus College	2016/17	27	2021/22	131	+ 390%
Ayrshire College	2017/18	53	2021/22	159	+ 200%
Sabhal Mòr Ostaig	2017/18	12	2021/22	18	+ 50%
New College Lanarkshire	2018/19	26	2021/22	128	+ 390%
Edinburgh Colleges	2018/19	190	2021/22	170	- 10%
Fife Colleges	2019/20	12	2021/22	143	+ 1090%
Borders College	2019/20	80	2021/22	169	+ 110%
UHI Inverness	2019/20	424	2021/22	414	- 2%
Dumfries & Galloway	2020/21	14	2021/22	70	+ 400%
Glasgow Kelvin College	2020/21	210	2021/22	244	+ 14%

*Note.* The columns earliest and latest record the older and most recent year for which data on counselling demand is available. N refers to the number of students requesting counselling in the left-indicated academic year.

## 4.3 Waiting Times for Counselling

### AVERAGE WAITING TIMES FOR COUNSELLING

Waiting lists for higher education mental health services in Scotland have been the subject of political discourse in Scotland. Freedom of Information (FOI) requests submitted by the Scottish Liberal Democrats indicated that in March 2023, 1,874 students awaited university counselling services. Students at some universities had to wait longer than three months to access counselling. Long waiting lists for counselling support are associated with adverse psychological and behavioural consequences (Punton et al., 2022). Therefore, it is important to assess whether long waiting times are a challenge that affects Scottish colleges too. To do so, we asked colleges to provide data about average and maximum waiting times for student counselling.

Overall, 18 colleges provided us with data on their average waiting times for student counselling in the academic year 2021/22. We found that:

- The average waiting time for counselling was more than 30 days at four colleges
- The average waiting time for counselling was less than 30 days at 14 colleges
- Out of those 14 colleges, 8 colleges had waiting times of less than 10 days

We were unable to calculate the total average waiting time across colleges due to discrepancies in the way waiting times are recorded.

### MAXIMUM WAITING TIMES FOR COUNSELLING

The maximum waiting times for college counselling in the academic year 2021/22 varied significantly across Scottish colleges. Based on available data from 20 colleges we found that:

- 13 Colleges had maximum waiting times below 30 days
- Seven colleges recorded maximum waiting times exceeding 30 days
- Out of those, two colleges recorded maximum waiting times exceeding 100 days



We were unable to calculate the average maximum waiting time across colleges due to inconsistencies in how colleges recorded maximum waiting times. However, these findings demonstrate that students at some colleges are disproportionately affected by long waiting times for counselling.

## 5. UTILIZATION OF COUNSELLING SERVICES

This chapter reviews the utilization of University Counselling Services in Scotland. First, we review the main presenting problems students present with at counselling services. Then, we explore differences in the utilization of counselling services based on student gender and ethnicity.

### 5.1 Presenting Problems

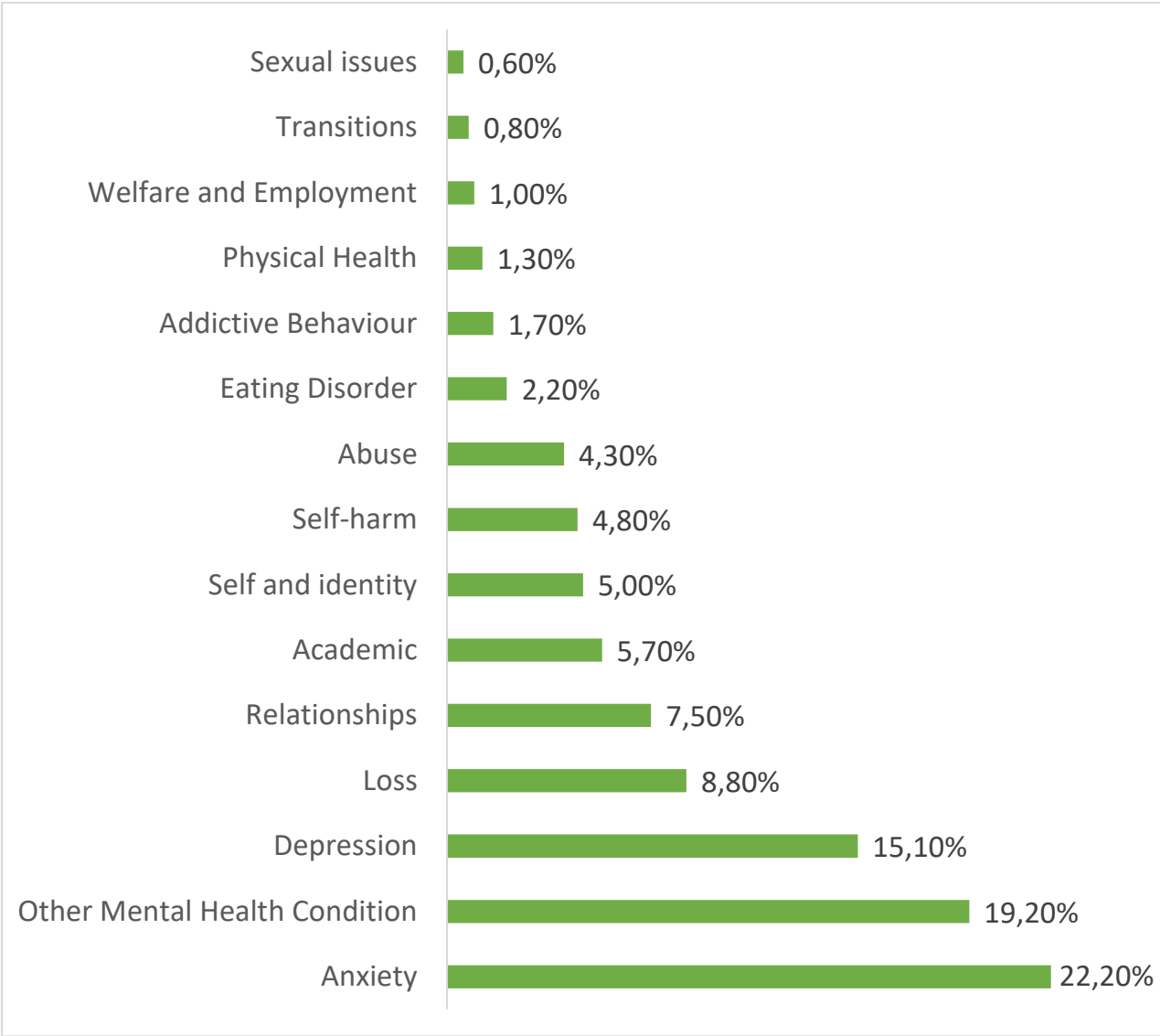
In 2022, the Thriving Learner's College Study found that more than half of college students (54%) reported moderate to severe symptoms of depression. Further, one in six (16%) students reported that they had intentionally self-harmed within the last six months (Maguire et al., 2022).

We collected data from 13 colleges on the main presenting mental health problems at Scottish College Counselling Services in the 2021-2022 academic year. Most colleges employed a classification scheme developed by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy's division for University and College Counselling Services.

Our main findings were:

- Anxiety was the main presenting mental health problem at all colleges (22%)
- Nearly one in five students (19%) presented with other undisclosed mental health conditions
- Depression was the third leading mental health problem (15%)

**Figure 8.** Presenting Problems at Scottish Colleges



*Note.* Proportion of students presenting at counselling services with each presenting problem.

**STUDENT SUICIDES**

The BACP records suicidal ideation as part of the self-harm mental health category. Overall, nearly 5% of college students receiving counselling presented with this main presenting problem. Furthermore, our data from 13 Colleges showed there have been at least 16 student suicides since 2016/17. These findings illustrate that Scottish College Counselling Services often see at-risk students with complex needs.

## 5.2 Utilization by Gender

We aimed to examine whether the utilization of counselling services differs depending on student gender. Data on the total number of students who received counselling in the 2021-2022 academic year was available for 16 colleges. Our findings indicated that:

- 63% of students who received counselling were female
- More than one in three (34%) students who received counselling were male
- 3% of students who received counselling identified as belonging to a gender minority or preferred not to indicate their gender identity

One of the reasons for this disparity between male and female students seeking counselling, may be that female students often present with poorer mental health (Feeny et al., 2021; Maguire et al., 2021). However, research has also indicated that male students struggle to access mental health support (Sagar-Ouriagli et al., 2019; Vogel et al., 2014). Thus, colleges should aim to promote counselling services to male students.

A best practice example of promoting counselling services to male students can be found among Scottish universities. The University of Edinburgh has a separate section on their website for male students seeking counselling. There, they highlight reasons why male students may be hesitant to seek mental health support and how the counselling service caters to their diverse needs. We recommend similar initiatives at colleges in Scotland to ensure that all students have equitable access to support.

Gender-minority students were also a substantial minority in counselling services, which demonstrates a need for adequate support for these students. The expansion of clinical groups for LGBTQIA+ students (see 3.1) at all colleges in Scotland may prove to be beneficial for students seeking support. However, there are significant limitations associated with this finding. Most colleges do not calculate data on the utilization of counselling services by gender, hence our data is incomplete. Further, the categorisation of students into female, male, and gender-minority groups is

problematic in practice. Employing this classification system fails to account for differences between students from various gender-minority groups. Therefore, our findings on the utilization of counselling services among gender-minority students should be interpreted with caution.

## GENDER OF COUNSELLORS

We received data from 15 colleges on the gender of their counsellors. Overall, ten colleges disclosed that they only had female counsellors. Further, four colleges had more female counsellors than male counsellors, and one college had an equal number of female to male counsellors. It is commendable that the ratio of male to female trainee counsellors was approximately equal across colleges.

Matching counsellors and clients based on gender is common within therapeutic practice outside higher education. There is some evidence that gender matching in therapeutic relationships, may promote treatment retention among male patients (Wintersteen et al., 2005). Some possible reasons for this finding are that male counsellors may have a greater understanding of internalized gendered perspectives and biases towards therapeutic interventions, than female counsellors (Blow et al., 2007). Given that male students are already underrepresented in counselling, colleges should seek to employ more male counsellors to further promote treatment retention and access.

## 5.3 Utilization by Ethnicity

We aimed to examine whether the utilization of counselling differs among students from different ethnic backgrounds. Previous studies have indicated that ethnic minority students are at an increased risk of experiencing mental health problems (Car et al., 2022).

Data on the total number of students who received counselling by ethnicity was available for five colleges. Three colleges reported that all students requesting student counselling were White. Two colleges reported a more ethnically diverse student body seeking counselling. Due to a lack of available data, it remains unclear whether ethnic minority students are over- or underrepresented in student counselling.

### ETHNICITY OF COUNSELLORS

We received data from 14 colleges on the total number of counsellors by ethnicity. Overall, 11 colleges disclosed that they had only White counsellors. Further, three colleges disclosed that they had ethnic minority counsellors from Asian ethnic backgrounds.

Some studies have shown ethnic concordance between counsellors and clients is associated with greater therapeutic satisfaction and treatment retention (Kim & Kang, 2018; Laveist & Nuru-Jeter, 2002; Wintersteen et al., 2005). Shared ethnicity may be regarded as a proxy for cultural understanding related to the client's own experiences, values, and behaviours. It is likely that some students may have less therapeutic satisfaction and lower treatment retention at some College Counselling Services where the ethnicity of their counsellor is discordant from their own.

## 6. EVALUATION OF COUNSELLING SERVICES

This chapter reviews college-led evaluations of their own counselling provision. We will first introduce the clinical and non-clinical evaluation measures used by colleges. Then we explore the procedures used by colleges to evaluate their services based on this data.

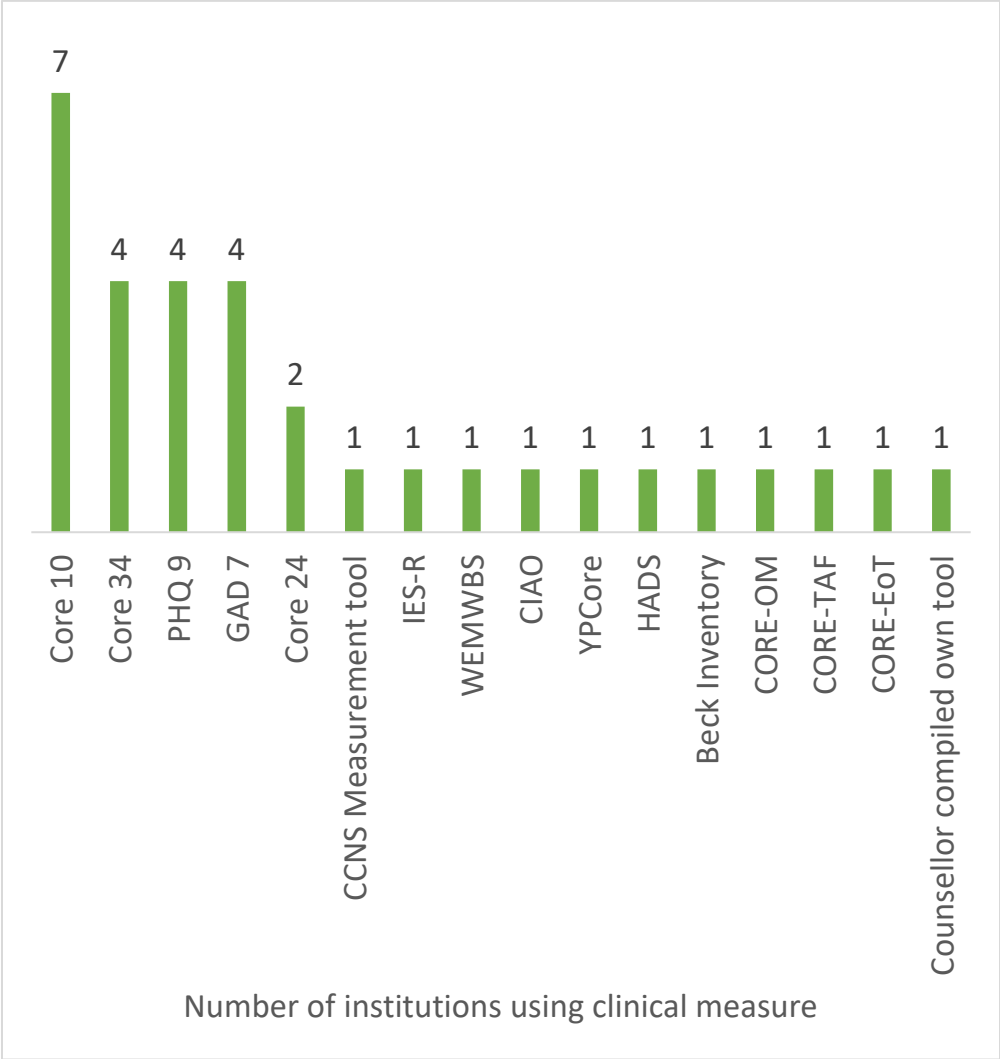
### 6.1 Evaluation Measures

College counselling services use a broad range of clinical and non-clinical measures to evaluate the progress of their students. Overall, we received information on the use of evaluation measures from 22 colleges. We found that:

- 18 colleges evaluated client outcomes using clinical measures
- 4 colleges did not collect any clinical feedback
- 19 colleges collected non-clinical feedback

The most commonly used clinical outcome measures were CORE forms, the PHQ 9 and the GAD 7 (see Figure 9). The most common non-clinical method of collecting feedback on the individual progress of students included completing formal evaluation forms at the end of counselling and engaging in regular spoken feedback with the counsellor. Some colleges also schedule mid-therapy reviews to allow the course of therapy to be amended to suit students' needs.

**Figure 9.** Use of clinical measures across institutions





## 6.2 Evaluation Procedures

Colleges report using a variety of procedures to evaluate the efficiency of their services. Overall, we received information on these procedures from 22 colleges. 19 colleges report using non-clinical measures (e.g., end of counselling evaluation forms) to evaluate the efficiency of their counselling service. 13 colleges also consider clinical measures and students' clinical scores when evaluating the efficiency of their service. Some best practice evaluation procedures can be found:

- At Dundee and Angus College who gather feedback with service users through regular student review sessions
- At UHI Orkney, who evaluate the accessibility of their counselling service based on the gender and ethnicity of the students presenting for college
- At UHI Inverness who (1) gather feedback on the counselling service through twice-yearly student satisfaction surveys (2) hold service self-evaluation activities to evaluate the counselling service three times per academic year and (3) who hold weekly meetings with the counselling team to identify potential gaps in provision

It is concerning that two colleges did not report any procedures to evaluate their service. Furthermore, several colleges report only using minimal data (e.g., short questionnaires) to evaluate their service. It is unlikely that these colleges can evaluate the accessibility and efficiency of their counselling services in sufficient detail.

## 7. ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

The Scottish Government continues to fund student mental health initiatives and programmes. This chapter starts by reviewing Government funding for Think Positive, a project aimed to improve student mental health support across Scotland. Next, we give a progress report on the use of governmental funding for additional mental health counsellors at Scottish colleges. Third, we summarize the work of the Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Working Group. Lastly, we comment on the uncertain funding future facing Scotland's College Counselling Services.

### 7.1 Think Positive

For the past decade, the Scottish Government has funded Think Positive, a NUS Scotland-run project aimed at improving student mental health and creating a more cohesive student support sector. *Think Positive* currently supports 86% of all colleges, universities, and students' associations across Scotland. In the academic year 2022-23, the project has the opportunity to positively impact 499,370+ university and college students in Scotland.

The project works through Student Mental Health Agreements (SMHA). Universities individually tailor SMHA, which covers practical and strategic plans to enhance how the university and their students' association can work together to improve the mental health of the student body. Further, participants can apply to a Small Grant Scheme, which offers a £375 grant to pilot activities, campaigns, events, and projects which support their SMHA agreement. In 2021-22, recipients of the Small Grant Scheme for example used funding to:

- Establish an LGBT+ library, including self-help titles (Ayrshire College)

- Provide a mental health course to the Student Executive Committee who are in direct contact with students, to support their learning journey and boost student engagement (Glasgow Kelvin College)
- Host Wellness Days for students decided by students with targeted activities such as featuring game days and yoga sessions (North East Scotland College)

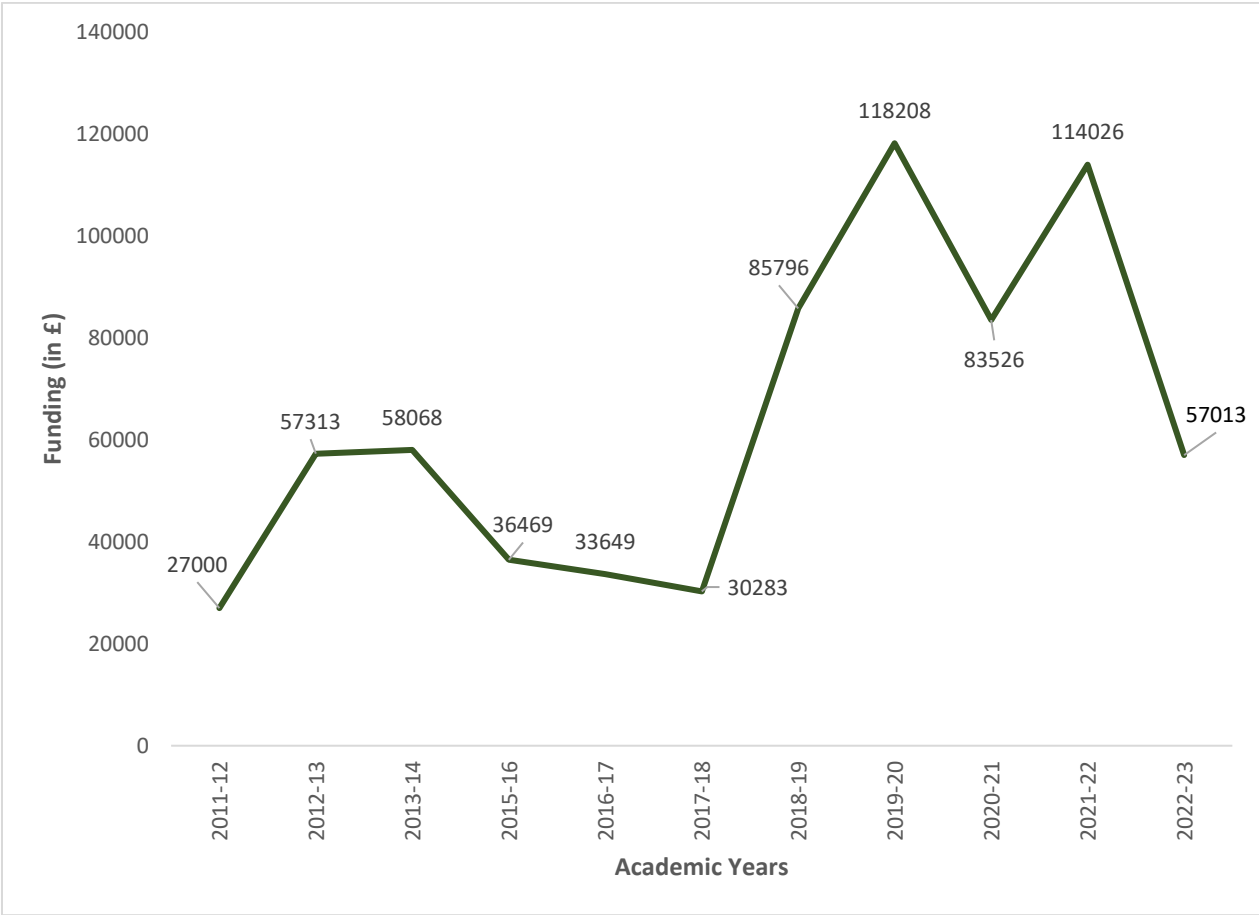
## NATIONAL STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH CAMPAIGN

Think Positive is currently working on co-producing a National Student Mental Health Campaign which focuses on reducing mental health stigma. Further details about this campaign are scheduled to come out in late April 2023.

## GOVERNMENT FUNDING FOR THINK POSITIVE

Scottish Government funding to NUS *Think Positive* is allocated on a financial year basis (see Figure 10). In 2022-23, the Scottish Government allocated £57,013 for *Think Positive*. This represents a sharp decrease compared to previous years. Decisions on future funding will be subject to an annual budget process and Parliamentary approval of the Scottish Budget.

**Figure 10.** Government Funding to Think Positive Between 2011-12 and 2022-23



## 7.2 Additional Mental Health Counsellors

In 2019, the Scottish Government announced plans to fund 80 additional mental health counsellors in Scottish colleges and universities between 2019 and 2023, equalling a £20 million investment. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Scottish Government supplemented this budget by allocating an extra £4.96 million to fund additional counsellors in Further and Higher Education.

Our FOI data shows that 20 out of 25 colleges who responded to our FOI requests have appointed new counsellors using Scottish Government funding. Overall, the Scottish Government reports that 41 FTE mental health counsellors have been appointed by colleges using Government funding (as of April 2022). Our FOI requests showed that

colleges which did not appoint new counsellors often relied on external services to provide counselling services.

Our FOI requests to Scottish Colleges show that newly hired counsellors take on a broad range of tasks, such as providing individual counselling, delivering psycho-educational workshops and running clinical groups.

It is particularly noteworthy that the Scottish Government funding was used to start counselling services at several colleges. These colleges depend on continued funding to secure the ongoing availability of counselling support to students.

### 7.3 Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Working Group

The primary group overseeing the implementation of the Programme for Government commitments on additional counsellors in colleges and universities is the Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Working Group. The group is led by Jamie Hepburn, the Minister for Higher Education and Further Education. Amongst others, the group includes government members, college and university representatives and counsellors and student union representatives (more information is available on their website).

The Mental Health and Wellbeing Working Group is involved in a variety of programmes and tasks. For example, it supports the review of the funding methodology for counsellor provision to further address equity of access to services. It also supports the evaluation of the outcomes of the investment in student mental health counsellors, to ensure that funding is linked to outcomes. More details about their work and detailed minutes from their meetings can be found here: <https://www.gov.scot/groups/student-mental-health-and-wellbeing-working-group/>

## INCORPORATION OF STUDENT VIEWS

We asked the Scottish Government about the incorporation of student views within the Mental Health and Wellbeing Working Group. In their response to our FOI request, the Scottish Government was unable to answer whether the Mental Health and Wellbeing Working Group includes students with lived experienced of mental health difficulties or students who have utilized Counselling or University counselling services in Scotland. Research has indicated that the meaningful inclusion of persons with lived experiences, regarded as *experts by experience*, may help to better inform service evaluation and delivery (Davis et al., 2022). Hence, we recommend that moving forward, the Scottish Government should seek to include current students and counselling service users within the Mental Health and Wellbeing Working Group.

### 7.4 An uncertain future

Considerable investments in College Counselling Services have been made by the Scottish Government since 2019, however, guaranteed funding is not confirmed past July 2023. Considering declining student mental health and increasing demand for counselling services, the withdrawal of funding will considerably undermine colleges' capacity to safeguard the mental health of students through their academic career.

In March 2021, 21 college principals have written to the Scottish Government, asking the Government to support the future of counselling services with further funding (BBC, 2023). Several colleges have stated that they will not be able to continue to employ their counsellors without government funding.

## 8. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The withdrawal of funding for Think Positive and College Counselling Services by the Scottish Government is cause for significant concern. Sustained long-term investment in counselling services for Scottish Colleges is crucial to safeguard the mental health of students following the evidenced long-term mental health effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.
2. College Counselling Services should set comprehensive targets in waiting times and general service delivery. Annual evaluation of targets including maximum and average waiting times will help to better inform service development and design, and further, ensure that student needs are being met.
3. College Counselling Services should extend provision for deaf and hard of hearing (HOH) students to ensure equitable access to mental health support for all students. If colleges are not able to offer counselling to deaf and hard of hearing (HOH) students, they should proactively build referral pathways to off-campus mental health providers.
4. College Counselling Services should continue to integrate the use of email and text counselling, to circumvent physical barriers and facilitate access to counselling services. However, due to the limitations associated with email and text counselling (see Stoll et al. 2020), these services should only be offered to supplement traditional in-person counselling.
5. The Scottish Government's Mental Health and Wellbeing Working Group should seek to incorporate the views of students with lived experiences of mental health difficulties or students who have utilized College or University counselling services.

The integration of student voices within decision-making processes related to counselling services provides diverse insights and helps to better inform service evaluation and delivery.

6. Scottish Colleges should examine differences in service utilisation and student demand among individual ethnic and gender minority groups. As part of counselling service development and design, gaps and barriers to mental health support should be evaluated and addressed to ensure diverse student needs are being met.
  
7. External referral pathways to community mental health services should be established at all College Counselling Services to help at-risk students with complex mental health needs acquire long-term support. While it is encouraging that some colleges have already begun to collaborate with local NHS branches and charities to establish direct referral pathways, it is critical that these pathways be established across all colleges.



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