University Counselling Services in Scotland:

Insights and Perspectives Following the Covid-19 Pandemic

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CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

University counselling services in Scotland have indicated an increased demand in utilization within the last decade. This report provides an overview of Scottish University Counselling Services by examining internal and external counselling services and support, current student demand, and differences in utilization based on presenting problems and sociodemographic variables. The role of the Scottish Government in improving student mental health through funded initiatives is also evaluated. Lastly, based on the findings of this report, we make recommendations for improving Scottish University Counselling Services.

1. INTRODUCTION

In January 2019, the Heads of University Counselling Services Scotland (HUCSS) produced *University Counselling Services in Scotland: Challenges and Perspectives*, a landmark report which provided an extensive overview of the work of Scottish Higher Education counselling services. Since the publication of this report, the Covid-19 pandemic has fundamentally impacted counselling services in Scotland. One major change relates to the provision of services. For instance, public health and safety measures placed restrictions on traditional forms of counselling, such as face-to-face counselling. Video chat counselling conducted over online platforms such as Zoom and Teams emerged as an alternative psychological intervention and treatment tool during this period. A second change relates to the demand for student counselling. Several studies from the UK and Scotland indicated that Scottish university students faced an unprecedented mental health crisis during the pandemic (Maguire & Cameron, 2021). Early studies on the impact of Covid-19 public health and safety measures reported a high prevalence of mental health problems among students compared to the general population (Evans et al., 2021). In 2020, the Thriving Learners study surveyed over 15,000 university students in Scotland and found that nearly three-quarters of students reported low well-being (74%) and that more than one-third (36%) of students reported moderate to severe depression symptoms (Maguire & Cameron, 2021). Studies conducted following the easing of public health restrictions suggest that Scottish university students continue to report low well-being in the aftermath of the pandemic (Feeny et al., 2022, in press). As a result of these findings, there is a need to evaluate the extent to which Scotland's universities are adequately equipped to support students' mental health and well-being.

The aim of this report is to provide an updated overview of Scottish University Counselling Services. First, this report summarizes the landscape of provision within University Counselling Services in Scotland. It identifies the range of internal and

external services and supports offered by universities. Second, the demand for student counselling across universities is examined. Third, the utilization of University Counselling services in regard to presenting problems and usage differences based on students' gender, ethnicity, and year of study, is summarized. The role of the Scottish government in improving student mental health through funded initiatives is also examined. Lastly, based on the findings of this report, recommendations are made for improving Scottish University Counselling Services.

2. METHODOLOGY

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

1. We filed freedom of information (FOI) requests to 18 Scottish Universities. All requests were filed on June 6th, 2022. Data included in the report is available for 17 universities, as one university did not respond within a reasonable timeframe.

2. We filed two FOI requests to the Scottish Government. The requests were filed on August 15th, 2022, and September 6th, 2022.

3. We utilized data included in the original HUCSS report to investigate historic trajectories.

4. We cite other publicly available FOI data on University Counselling Services in Scotland.

5. We collected further information on university websites and the Scottish Government website.

3. THE SHAPE OF STUDENT SERVICES

This chapter provides an overview of the work of Scottish Higher Education Counselling Services. First, the activities university counselling services are involved with 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, the presence of mental health advisors and mentors and referral routes for at-risk students. Second, the structure of individual counselling services at Scottish universities is summarized. We describe the short-term focus of counselling services, the therapeutic modalities offered and the counsellor to student ratio at different universities.

3.1 Range of internal counselling activities

There is a great variety in the range of activities that University Counselling Services in Scotland provide. The HUCSS report on *University Counselling Services in Scotland: Challenges and Perspective* broke down the activities of the Scottish University Counselling Services Activities into three main categories: universal activities that affect the whole university community, preventative activities that affect the whole student community and focused activities that directly affect students requesting counselling or support. Their classification scheme is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Scottish University Counselling Services Activities

Universal	Preventative	Focused
Bespoke staff training to help university staff identify and support students in distress.	Wellbeing seminars and workshops e.g., mental health awareness training workshops for staff/students	Individual Counselling
Responding to critical incidents e.g., student at risk of self-harm or suicide.	Collaboration with Student Unions on stigma reduction/wellbeing campaigns	Triage and mental health assessment including referral to external services where appropriate
Membership of fitness to study, fitness to practice groups.	Embedded programmes in academic courses.	Online support e.g., online counselling, Big White Wall, Living Life to the Full.
Membership of mental health steering, policy groups.	Self-help information and online resources.	Clinical groups e.g., overcoming depression, managing anxiety, mindfulness based groups.
Peer-mentoring programmes	Exercise referral schemes	One off psychoeducational workshops e.g., overcoming procrastination

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

The Covid-19 pandemic has especially impacted focused activities, thus activities that directly affect students requesting counselling or support. Hence, we aimed to provide an update on these activities. We asked universities to indicate which focused activities their services offer. Our key findings were:

* All surveyed universities (N=17) provide individual counselling for students
* All but one institution (N=16) offer in-person counselling
* All but one institution (N=16) offer Digital Mental Health Technologies, such as TogetherAll or Living Life to the Full
* Triage and Mental Health Assessments are available at fifteen universities, although only five universities are able to make external referrals into community mental health services
* Psychoeducation workshops on a wide range of topics, such as overcoming procrastinating, are available to students at twelve universities
* Clinical groups, for example for managing depression and anxiety, are only available to students at nine universities

**Figure 1**. Range of Internal Activities Services are Involved With
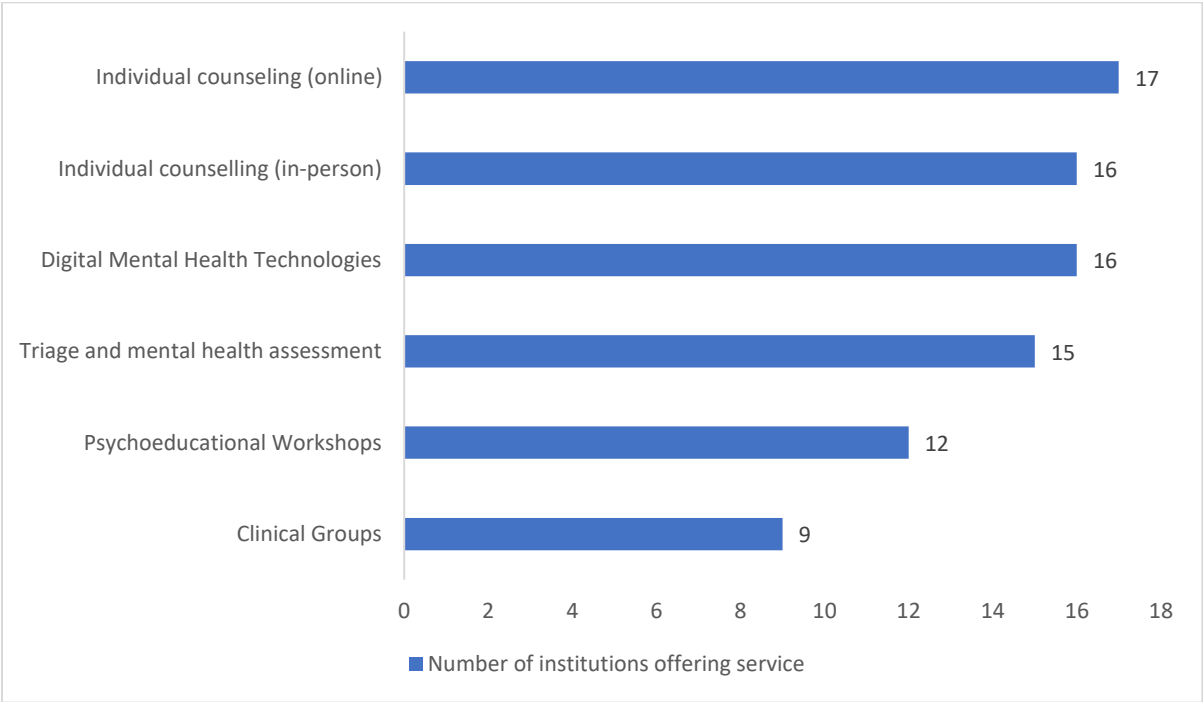
DIGITAL MENTAL HEALTH TECHNOLOGIES

Our data shows that digital mental health technologies are now an integral aspect of mental health service delivery among Scottish universities. Digital mental health technologies can support students in self-managing their mental health by providing access to evidence-based psychological self-help information and resources. During the Covid-19 pandemic, digital mental health interventions enabled students to continue to receive mental health support despite the presence of Covid-19 public health restrictions. Overall, universities reported offering a wide range of digital mental health technologies. We found that:

* All seventeen universities offer online counselling for students
* Several universities offer or are affiliated with 24/7-hour crisis lines
* Several universities offer email and telephone counselling and counselling via WhatsApp
* Most universities offer mental health apps including TogetherAll, Silvercloud, 'Beat the Blues' and other Wellbeing Apps to students (see Figure 2)

Figure 2. Number of Institutions Offering Digital Mental Health Apps to Students
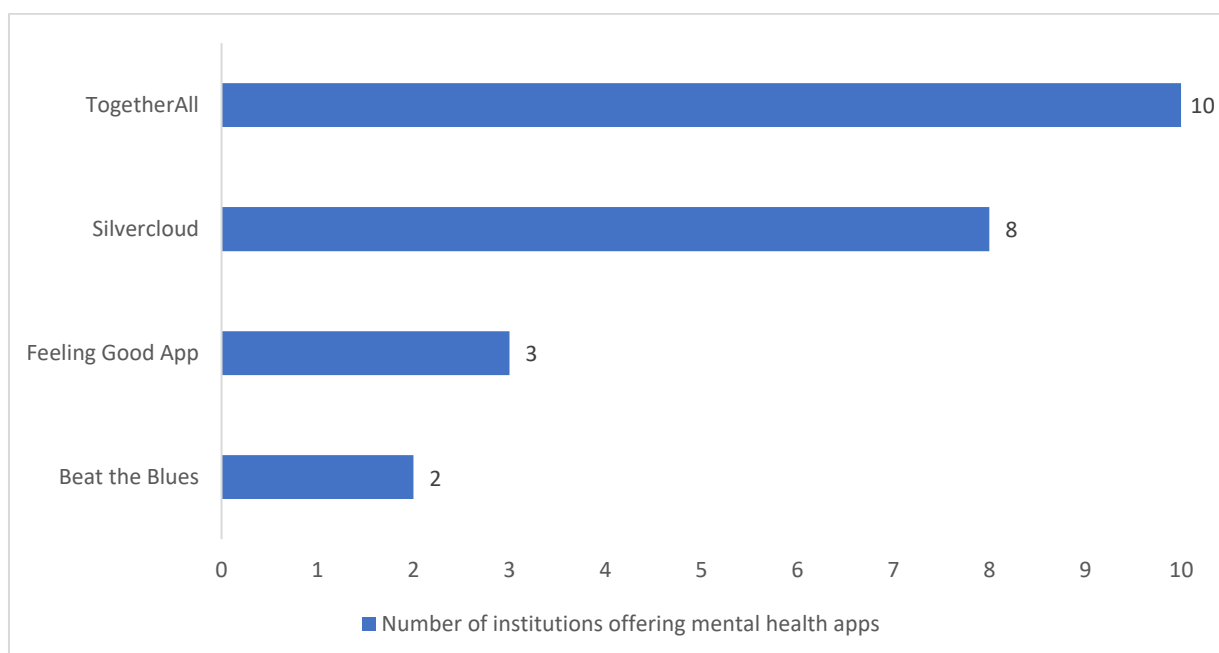
PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL WORKSHOPS

Overall, 12 universities reported offering psychoeducational workshops. Psychoeducational workshops spanned a wide variety of topics relating to mental and behavioural health, including:

* Overcoming anxiety and stress
* Building relationships
* Overcoming perfectionism
* Building resilience and finding motivation
* Managing change (of being a new university student)
* Harm reduction
* Behavioural workshops targeting sleep, nutrition, and exercise

The widespread availability of psychoeducational workshops at Scottish universities is promising, as research supports the effectiveness of well-implemented, evidence-based psychoeducational workshops in improving student mental health and wellbeing (Hood et al., 2021). It is important that universities implement well-researched interventions and routinely collect feedback from students, to ensure psychoeducational workshops have the intended benefits on student mental health.

CLINICAL GROUPS

Overall, 9 universities currently offer clinical groups for students. Some of the available groups include weekly mindfulness groups, regular groups for managing stress and anxiety and a gender-based violence survivor group. Further, one university reported facilitating a student-led bereavement group. When adequately implemented, clinical groups can be a valuable resource for struggling students (Van Gordon et al., 2014).

MENTAL HEALTH ADVISORS AND MENTORS

One important resource for students with long-term mental health issues is mental health advisors and mentors. Mental health advisors and mentors can provide students with the support needed to navigate day-to-day stresses and academic challenges. Currently, 14 out of 17 surveyed universities reported hiring either Mental Health Advisors or Mentors or both. An additional 2 universities receive related services for students from external contractors. It is important to note that the employment criterion, role titles, qualifications, and funding for Mental Health Advisors and Mentors vary widely across institutions.

REFERRAL ROUTES FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS

In 2019, the HUCSS report on *University Counselling Services in Scotland* found that only 5 counselling services out of 15 surveyed universities were able to make direct referrals into Community Mental Health Teams for at risk students, such as those experiencing a first episode psychosis. The HUCSS recommended that all University Counselling Services in Scotland should be able to make direct referrals in to Early Intervention Teams.

At the time of our FOI requests (June 2022), only 2 additional universities are in the process of developing formal pathways for mental health referrals. While most universities are not able to make direct referrals to Community Mental Health Teams for at-risk students, some universities report that they help students to self-refer through their GPs or that they liaise with mental health professionals with students' consent. Overall, most universities are currently unable to make direct referrals to Early Intervention Teams.

3.2 Structure of Individual Counselling Provision

MODELS OF INDIVIDUAL COUNSELLING PROVISION

To assess the structure of University Counselling Services, we asked universities to provide details on the maximum number of counselling sessions a student can receive in one academic year. We received data from all 17 universities. Our findings indicated that:

* Most universities in Scotland offer a short-term counselling service to students. Nine universities report using a six-session model.
* Thirteen universities offer additional appointments in exceptional circumstances, for example when a student is considered at risk.
* Seven universities report not having any limit for the total number of counselling sessions a student can receiving in one academic year.
* One university uses a One At A Time (OOAT) model for counselling, that allows students to book a OAAT session as many times as they would like.

THERAPEUTIC MODALITIS

According to information available on the websites of all university websites, Scottish universities currently offer a wide range of therapeutic modalities to students, including:

* Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)
* Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR)
* Integrative Therapy
* Person-Centred Counselling
* Mindfulness-Based Interventions

It is commendable that some universities offer counselling in British Sign Language and Multilingual counselling.

COUNSELLOR TO STUDENT RATIO

We were interested in the counsellor-to-student ratio at universities, as it provides indications of the availability of support to students. Hence, we asked universities to provide us with the total enrolled student body and the number of employed counsellors (in FTE) for the academic year 2020-21. Figure 3 shows that the counsellor-to-student ratio varies significantly between Scottish Higher Education Institutions.

Figure 3. Ratio of 1 counsellors to total student population
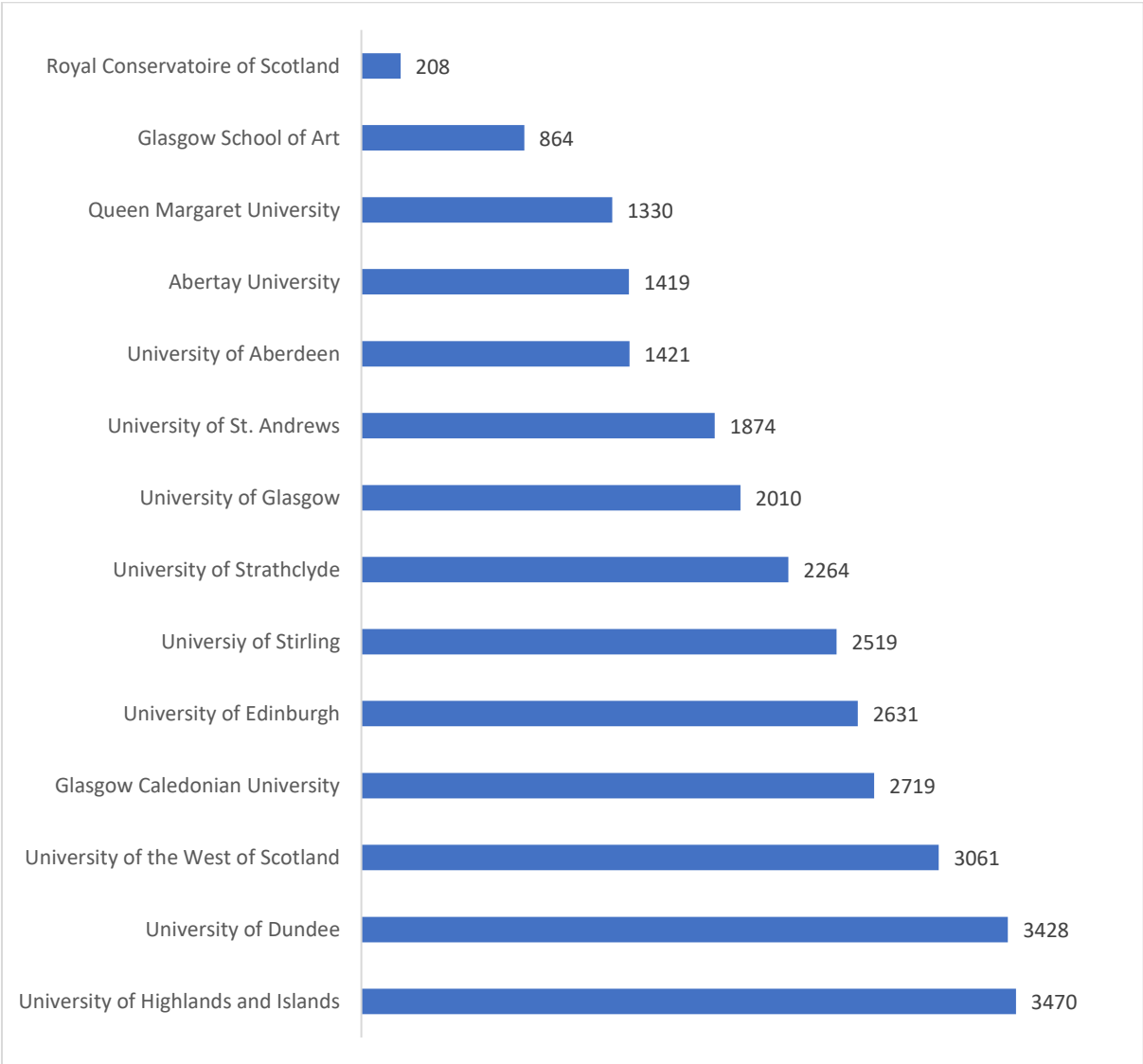
4. DEMAND FOR STUDENT COUNSELLING

This chapter illustrates the rising demand facing University Counselling Services in Scotland. We illustrate demand along three dimensions: (1) mental health disability disclosures, (2) the number of students requesting counselling in Scotland overall and variations in demand between institutions, (3) variations in demand for student counselling across the year and (4) waiting times for student counselling.

4.1 Mental Health Disability Disclosures

Trends in mental health disability disclosures over time can give an indication of the demand placed on student counselling services. Previous findings from the HUCSS report found a 171% increase in the number of mental health disclosures between 2009 and 2014. In 2009, 1,070 students disclosed a mental health disability to Scottish Universities. This figure rose to 2,910 mental health disability disclosures in 2014.

Contrastingly, in the four-year period between the academic year 2017-18 and the academic year 2021-22, there has been a 50.5% increase in the number of students disclosing a mental health condition at the surveyed universities (see Table 2). Thus, while the number of students in Scotland requiring support for mental health disability disclosures still rises significantly, the increase seems to be slowing.

Overall, more than 4% of students (10,876 students) at the surveyed universities currently disclose a mental health condition. These disclosure statistics likely underrepresent the levels of mental illness among the student population. A 2017 report by the Institute for Public Policy Research found that a significant number of students in the United Kingdom who experience mental health conditions choose not to disclose them to their university. Some of the reasons why students choose not to disclosure mental health conditions involve stigma and lack of awareness of

importance or availability of receiving support. University Counselling Services must be equipped to face the needs of students with mental health disabilities and should anticipate continuously rising numbers in mental health disability disclosures over the coming academic years.

Table 2. Trends in Mental Health Disability Disclosures Between 17-18 and 21-22

| Year	2017-18	2021-22	% Increase
Total students	224,102	250,559	11.8%
Disabled students	25,676	33,386	30%
Mental Health Disability	7,277	10,876	50.5%

4.2 Number of Students Requesting Counselling

In the academic year 2020-21, 16,654 students at the surveyed universities (N=17) requested counselling. The total student body at the surveyed universities is 276,087. Thus, 6% of university students at the surveyed universities requested counselling.

DEMAND VARIES ACROSS INSTITUTIONS

Hereby, it is notable that there is significant variation in the proportion of students requesting counselling at different higher education institutions. The proportion of the student body requesting counselling at different universities ranges between 1% and 22% in the academic year 2020-21 (see Figure 4). Some possible reasons why some universities face higher demands in student counselling are:

* The prevalence of mental health difficulties within student populations is higher

* Counselling Services are more appealing to student body

* Counselling Services are more accessible to student body

Figure 4. Proportion of Student Body Requesting Counselling At Individual Scottish Institutions in the Academic Year 2020-21
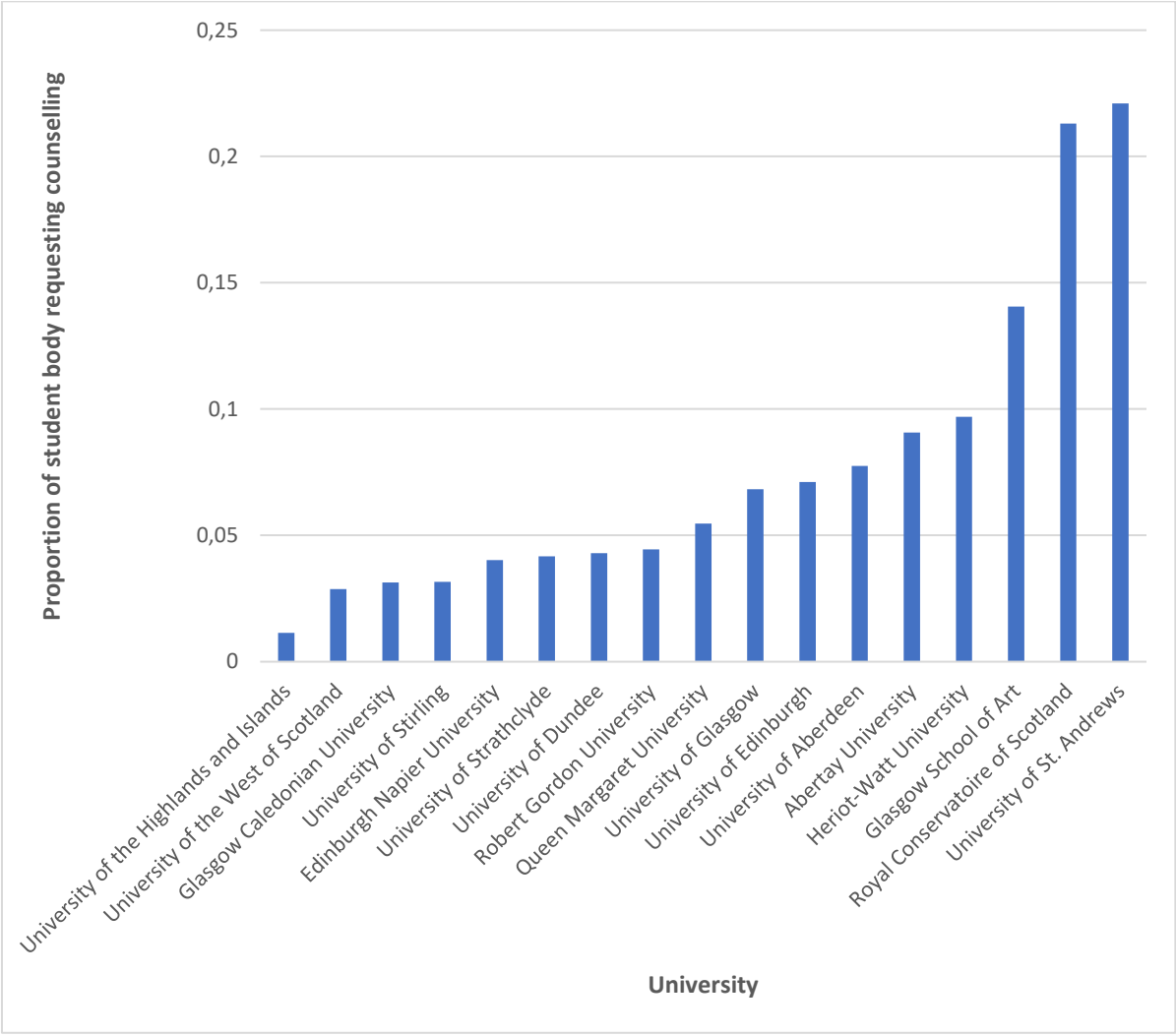
RISING DEMAND OVER THE PAST TEN YEARS

There has been an ongoing steady incline in the number of students requesting counselling at Scottish universities over the past ten years (see Figure 5). While only 5,521 students requested student counselling in the academic year 2010-11, this number tripled to 16,654 students over the successive ten years. One notable exception to the upward trend is the academic year 2019-20, when universities saw a slight decline in the number of students requesting counselling. This is likely due to the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic. Given studies have documented a clear immediate

and long-term detrimental mental health impact of Covid-19 on university students, universities should expect ongoing increases in the number of students requesting counselling over the next academic years.

Figure 5. Number of Students Requesting Counselling at Scottish Universities Between the Academic Years 2010-11 and 2020-21
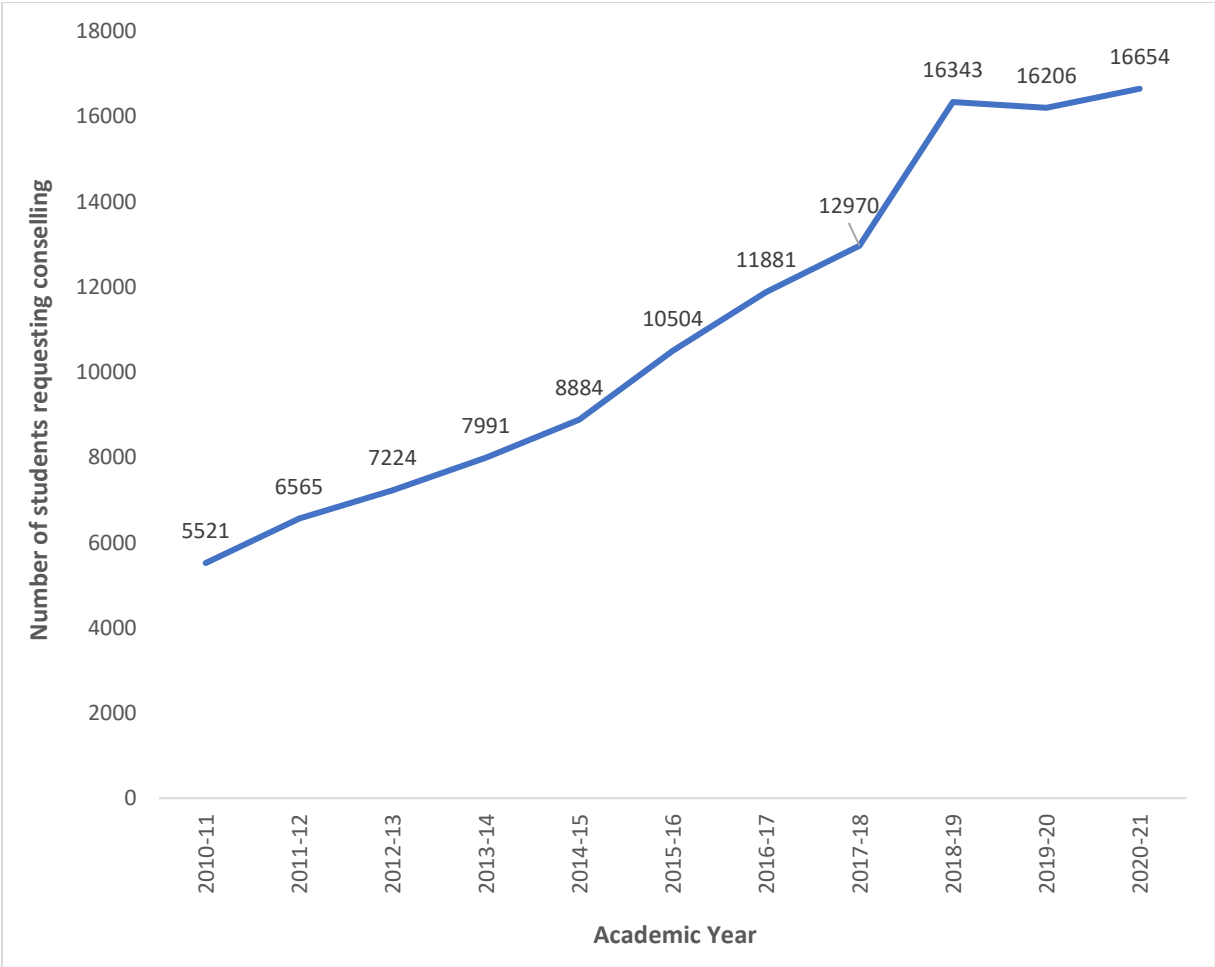
4.3 Demand for Student Counselling Across the Year

Universities should be aware of changes in demand for student counselling across the year, to ensure that demand peaks can be anticipated and managed. This can prevent long waiting lists for student counselling. We asked universities to break down the total requests for student counselling by month. Nine universities provided data for the academic year 2020-21. Figure 6 shows that overall, there were peaks for student counselling around October and November 2020 and then from January to March 2021. There was variation in the main peak times for student counselling at different universities. This is displayed in Figure 7.

Figure 6. Monthly Demand for Student Counselling 2020-21

	September	October	November	December	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August
Percentual Share	7,8	12,9	12,9	5,8	9,6	10,6	12,3	8,5	7	5,4	3,4	3,9
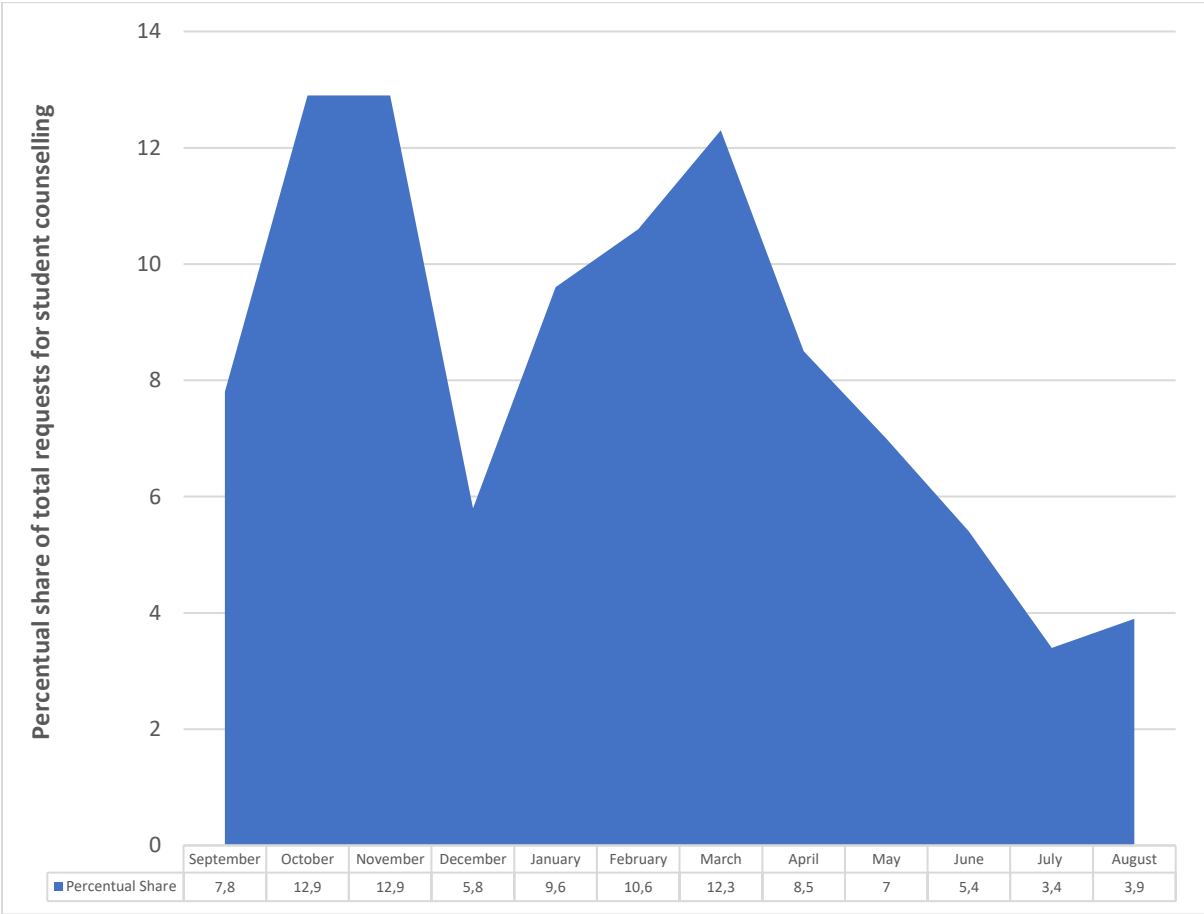
Figure 7. Monthly demand for student counselling 2020-21 at the level of individual universities
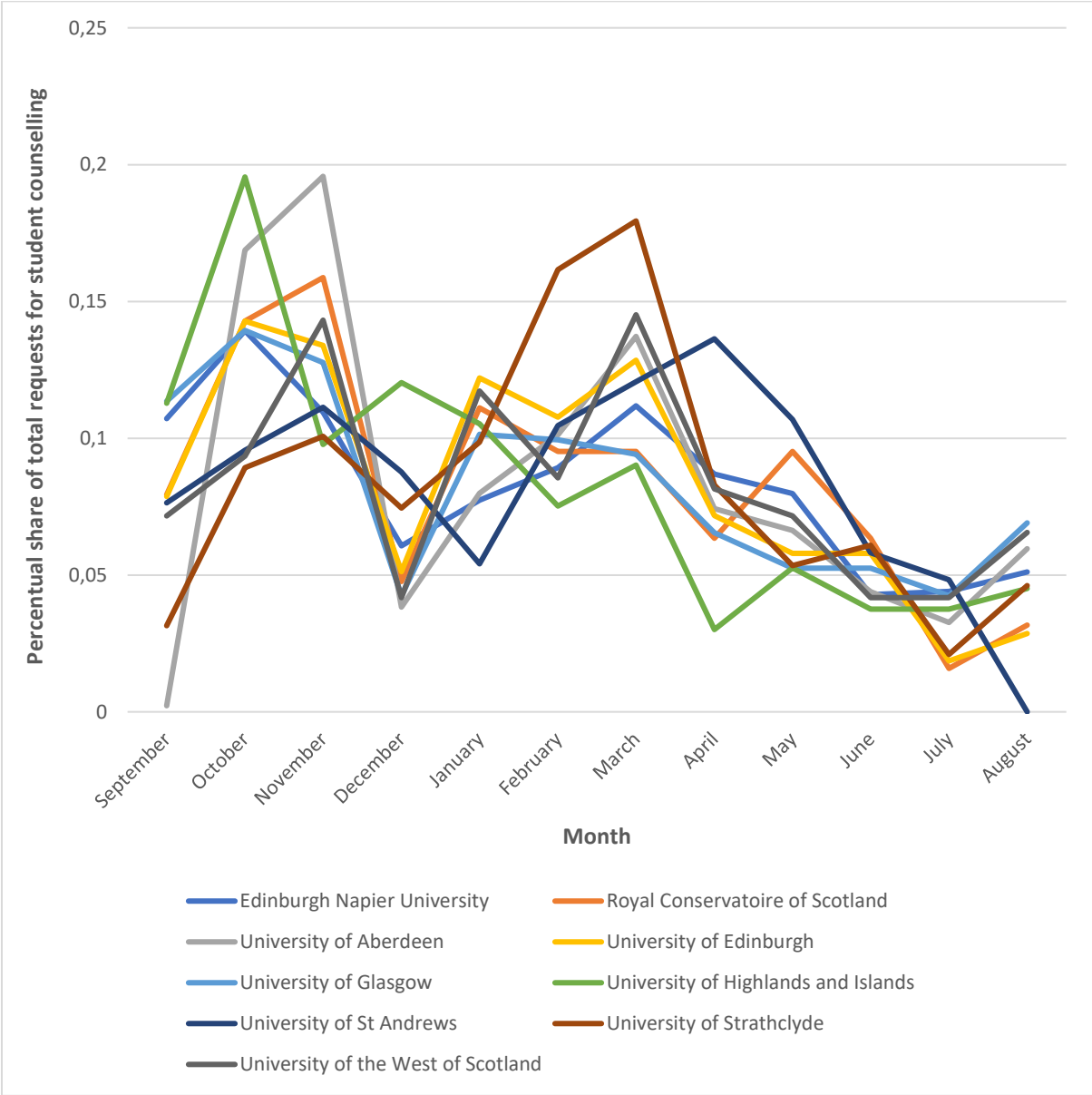
It is also noteworthy, that the Covid-19 pandemic likely had an influence on the peak demand times for student counselling in the academic year 2020-21. At the beginning of 2021, the Scottish Government had reintroduced major public health restrictions, that significantly impacted university students. This may have exacerbated the demand for student counselling, which has traditionally been high in the early months of the

new calendar year. Figure 8 shows the monthly demand for student counselling in the academic year 2017-18 for comparison.

Figure 8. Monthly Demand for Student Counselling 2017-18

	September	October	November	December	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August
■ Percentual Share	12	17,1	13	4,5	11,6	10,6	9,8	6	4,6	3,4	3,6	3,8
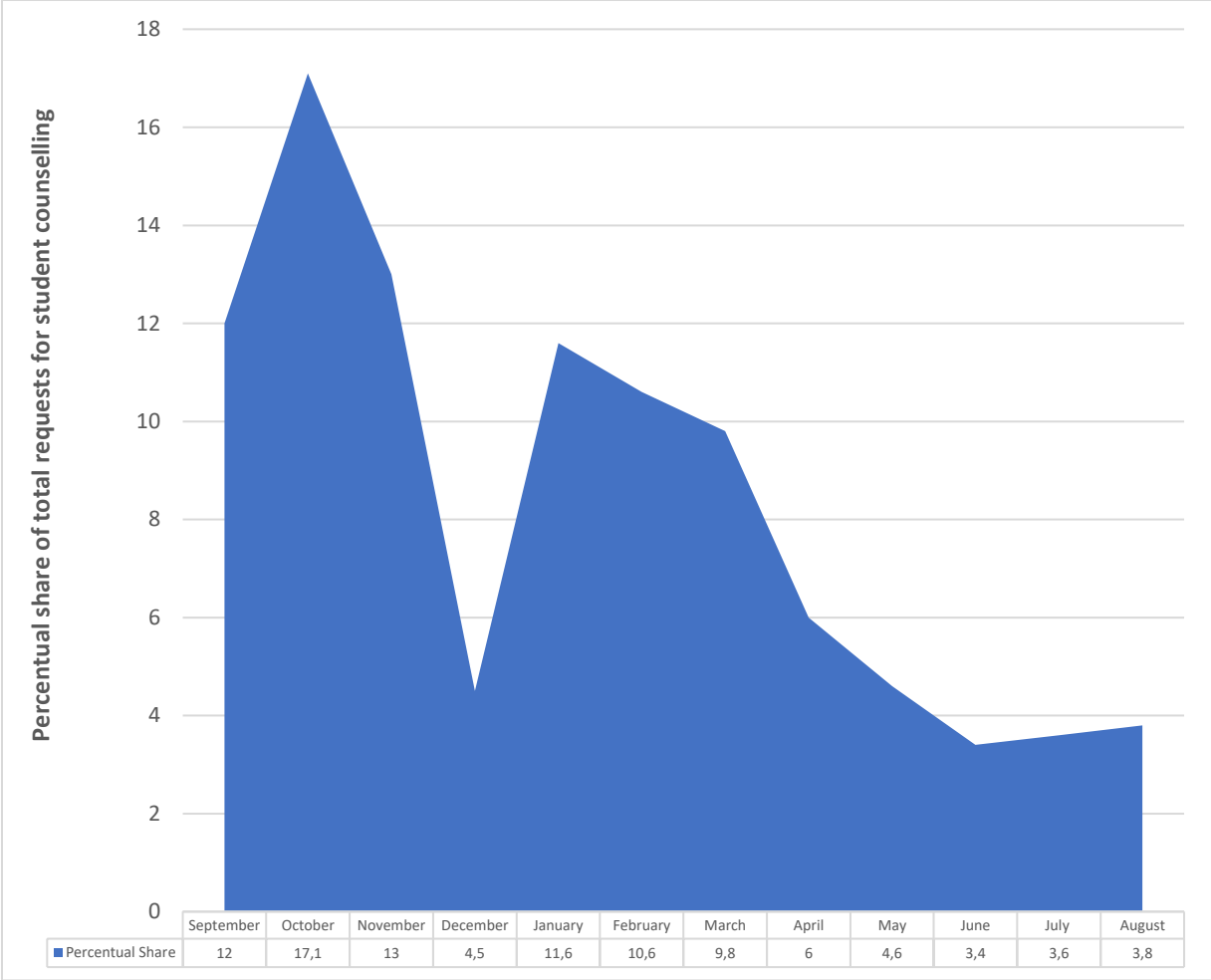
4.4 Waiting Times for Counselling

Recently, waiting lists for university mental health services in Scotland have been at the centre of political discourse in Scotland. FOI requests submitted by the Scottish Liberal Democrats showed that in March 2022, at least 1,874 students in Scotland were awaiting counselling. The FOI data showed that 900 students at the University of Edinburgh alone awaited counselling, while some students at both the University of

Edinburgh and the University of Glasgow waited over three months for support (Bell, 2022). Long waiting lists for mental health support are associated with a variety of negative psychological and behavioural consequences (Punton et al., 2022).

We aimed to investigate whether long waiting times are a challenge across institutions or disproportionally affect some institutions. Overall, 11 out of 17 surveyed universities provided us with data on average waiting times for student counselling. Seven universities provided us with data on average waiting times for student counselling measured in days, as displayed in Table 3. Over the past five years, the average waiting time for student counselling has decreased for all seven universities. In the academic year 2020-21, evidently during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, the average waiting time for student counselling at those universities was only 6.2 days. These findings are encouraging, as they suggest that many students at Scottish universities are able to access mental health support in reasonable timeframes.

Table 3. Average University Counselling Waiting Times for Student Counselling (in Days) Between the Academic Years 2017-18 and 2020-21

University	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
University of Abertay	20	14	7	9.6
Glasgow Caledonian University	10.8	11.7	12.1	7.2
Queen Margaret University	5	7	7.5	2.5
University of Aberdeen	18.7	15.3	1.1	1.6
University of Dundee	8.1	8	8	5
University of Glasgow	27	24.8	19.4	14.6
University of the West of Scotland	13	13	6.2	3
Average waiting time (in days)	*14.6*	*13.4*	*8.8*	*6.2*

5. UTILIZATION OF STUDENT SERVICES

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

5.1 Presenting Problems

In 2019 the HUCSS found that the two main presenting issues recorded by university counselling services were depression and anxiety. This is in line with findings from the wider Scottish Population, which indicate that depression and anxiety are major presenting mental health problems (Scottish Health Survey, 2015).

We collected data from ten universities on the main presenting psychiatric symptomatology at Scottish University Counselling Services in the academic year 2020-21. Our main findings were:

- Anxiety was the main presenting symptom at all universities (N=10).
- Overall, one in three students (33.2%) who sought counselling at Scottish universities presented with anxiety.
- Depression was one of two main presenting symptoms at seven universities.
- Nearly one in six students (15.6%) who sought counselling at Scottish universities presented with depression.
- Academic concerns were one of two main presenting issues at three universities.
- Overall, 9,9% of students who sought counselling at Scottish universities presented with academic issues (see Figure 9).

Figure 9. Percentages of Students Presenting Characterised by Issue
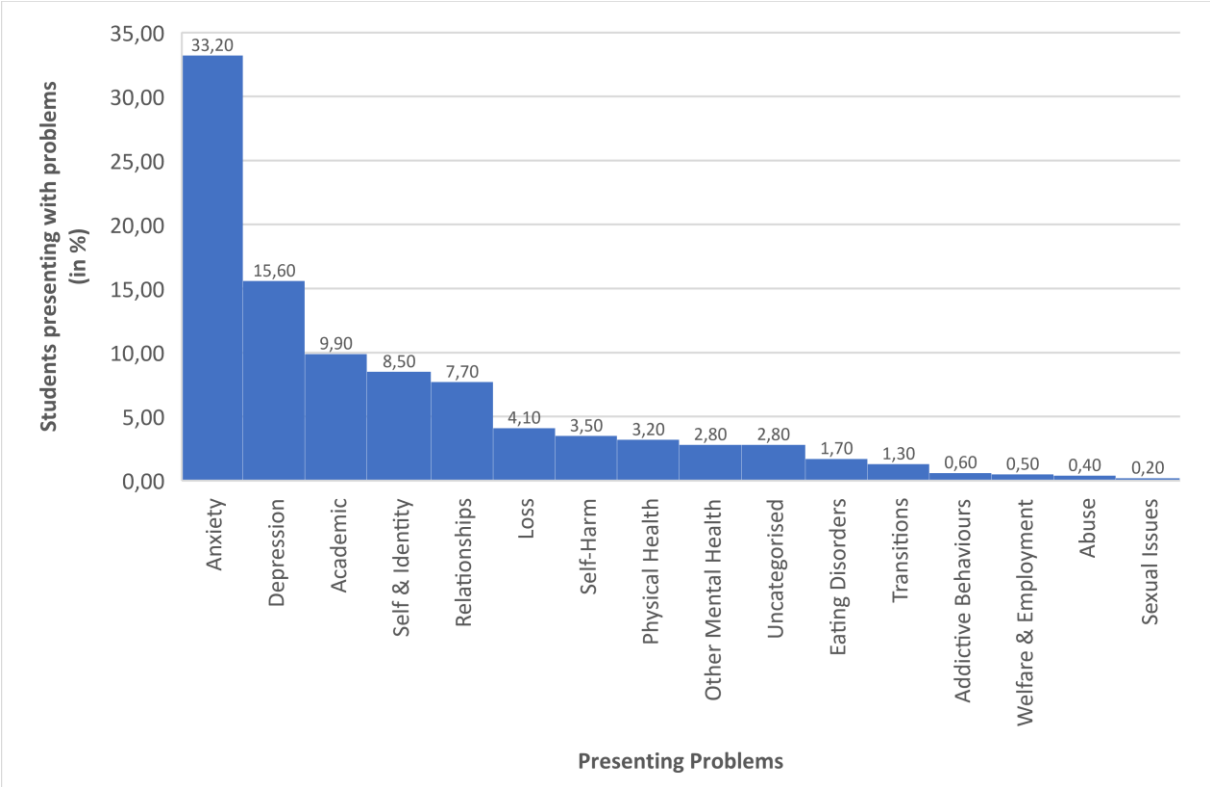
5.2   Utilization by Gender

We aimed to investigate whether the utilization of counselling services differs depending on the gender of students. Data on the total number of students who received counselling in 2020-21 by gender was available for eight universities. Gender identities other than male and female were often not collected or summarized under 'unknown' or 'other gender' categories. We hence excluded them from our analysis. We found that:

* Overall, 73.5% of students who received counselling at university were female
* Only 26.5% of students who received counselling at university were male
* More females than males received counselling at all universities that provided data
* The ratio of male to female students was as low as 1:5 at some universities

Table 4. Students Receiving Counselling by Gender in the Academic Year 2020-21

Gender	Number of students receiving counselling	Percentage
Male	2072	26.5%
Female	5752	73.5%

One of the reasons for this discrepancy might be that female students often present with worse mental health outcomes (Feeny et al., 2021, under review; Maguire et al., 2021). However, studies also show that male students often struggle to seek mental health support (Vogel et al., 2014). Therefore, universities should aim to promote counselling services to male students.

One example of promoting counselling services to male students can be found on the counselling website of the University of Edinburgh. The University of Edinburgh included a separate website section for male students seeking counselling. Here, they explore reasons why male students might be hesitant to seek support for their mental health and explain how the counselling service caters to their needs. We recommend similar actions for all other universities in Scotland.

5.3   Utilization by Year of Study

We set out to investigate whether there are differences in the use of student counselling services in Scotland for students from different year groups. We received data on the total number of students who received counselling by year group in the academic year 2020-21 was available for eight universities. However, the classification of postgraduate students differed significantly across universities, hence we focused our analysis on undergraduate students. Overall, the final dataset was based on five universities with a total student body of 52,321 students and 1,661 students receiving counselling. Our main findings were:

- * First-year students were strongly underrepresented in student counselling
- * Second-year students and third-year students were slightly overrepresented in student counselling
- * Fourth-year students were strongly overrepresented in student counselling

Table 5. Utilization of Counselling Services By Year of Study

Year Group	Proportion of total student body	Proportion of students in counselling
Year 1	42.4%	13.8%
Year 2	24.1%	27.9%
Year 3	19.4%	27.9%
Year 4	14.1%	30.3%

Our findings are concurrent with prior research from Scotland. A recent study found that second-year students experience significantly higher anxiety symptoms than first-year students (Feeny et al., 2022, in press). This might explain why second-year students are over-represented in student counselling. There are several reasons that might explain why the proportion of students self-referring to student counselling is higher in Year 3 and 4. Many honours students experience increased academic pressures and transitory stressors relating to graduate employment. Experts have criticized that many UK universities exclusively aim mental health interventions and policies at first-year students.

First-year students benefit from activities such as guaranteed places in student halls of residence and the promotion of mental health services (The Insight Network, 2019). The findings of this study confirm that there is a need to direct the same level of mental health support to students in later years, as they more frequently engage with student counselling services.

5.4 Utilization by Ethnicity

We aimed to investigate whether the utilization of student counselling services in Scotland differs for students from different ethnic backgrounds. Data on the total number of students who received counselling by ethnicity in the academic year 2020-21 was available for six universities. Due to differences in the categorisation of ethnic minority groups we were unable to provide an analysis for disaggregated ethnicity data. Hence, we focused our analysis on two groups: students from white ethnic backgrounds and students from ethnic minority backgrounds. Our main findings were:

* 13.6% of students enrolled at the surveyed universities were from ethnic minority backgrounds. Overall, 24.5% of students in counselling were from ethnic minority backgrounds.
* At 4 universities, ethnic minority students were overrepresented in counselling.
* At 2 universities, ethnic minority students were underrepresented in counselling.

Table 6. Students Receiving Counselling By Ethnicity in the Academic Year 2020-21

	White	**Non-White**
Student population by ethnicity (total numbers)	74,917	11,816
Student population by ethnicity (in %)	86.4%	13.6%
Students receiving counselling by ethnicity (total numbers)	4,246	1,381
Students receiving counselling by ethnicity (in %)	75.5%	24.5%

The finding that ethnic minority students are overrepresented in Scottish University Counselling Services is perhaps unsurprising. There is some evidence that ethnic minority students are at an elevated risk of experiencing mental health problems. Many ethnic minority students experience racism and discrimination at university and

in society (Arday et al., 2022, Virdee et al., 2020). One in four ethnic minority students in the UK has reported experiencing racial harassment at university (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2019). Repeated exposure to racial discrimination is associated with detrimental long-term effects on the mental health of ethnic minority members (Arday, 2018; Wallace et al., 2016). During the COVID-19 pandemic, studies among UK university students showed that belonging to an ethnic minority was associated with higher probable depression and anxiety (Carr et al., 2022). University Counselling Services in Scotland should therefore especially cater to the needs of ethnic minority students, for example by hiring more ethnically diverse counsellors.

It is important to note that there are significant limitations associated with the findings presented above. Most universities do not calculate data on the utilization of counselling services by ethnicity, hence our data is incomplete. Further, the categorisation of students into a white ethnic group and non-white ethnic group is problematic both in theory and practice. In practice, this classification fails to account for differences between students from various ethnic minority groups. It is possible that students from some ethnic minorities are overrepresented in counselling, while other ethnic minority groups might be underrepresented. Therefore, our findings on the use of counselling services among students from different ethnic backgrounds should be interpreted with caution.

6. ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

The Scottish Government has taken an active role in tackling the student mental health crisis in Scotland through funded initiatives. This chapter starts by giving a progress report on the use of governmental funding for additional mental health counsellors at Scottish universities. Second, we review Government funding for Think Positive, a project aimed to improve student mental health support across Scotland. Third, we summarize the response of the Scottish Government to the Covid-19 pandemic. Lastly, we comment on government plans to develop a new Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

6.1 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.

Our FOI data shows that all surveyed universities have appointed new counsellors using Scottish Government funding. Overall, the Scottish Government reports that 48 mental health counsellors have been appointed by universities using Government funding (as of April 2022). Most universities have appointed additional full-time counsellors. Several universities also reported using Scottish Government funding to increase the hours and working weeks of part-time staff, for instance to meet student need over the summer break. In addition, some universities reported using Government funding to fund counsellors within Peer Support services and Rape and Sexual Assault Centres.
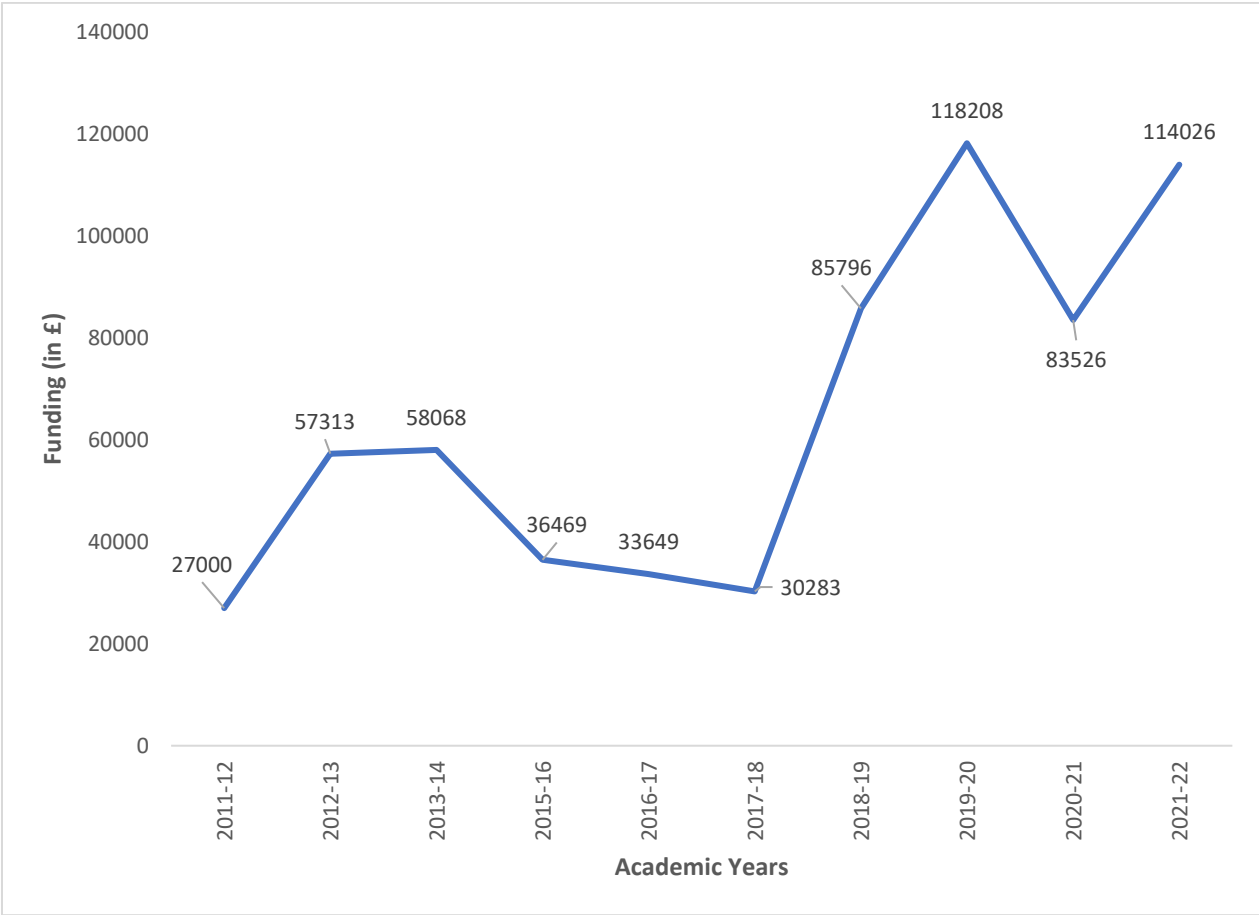
6.2 Think Positive

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 77% of all colleges, universities, and students' associations across 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 used funding to:

* Host a Wellbeing Day for students with a variety of workshops including a self-care group workshop and gardening workshop (The Glasgow School of Art)
* Recruit student consultants to collaborate with on issues relating to mental health and wellbeing (Open University in Scotland)
* Host a Craft Pottery event for students to help them de-stress during a key point of the trimester (Glasgow Caledonian University)

Think Positive also current offers an opportunity to students with lived experiences of mental illness to co-produce a National Student Mental Health Campaign. Students who will be in Scotland during 2022-23 are invited to meet in student campaign groups to decide what the Student Mental Health Awareness Campaign should focus on, it's aims and how it should be delivered. Further information on the impact of Think Positive can be found on their website: www.thinkpositive.scot.

Scottish Government funding to NUS *Think Positive* is allocated on a financial year basis (see Figure 10). In 2021-22, the Scottish Government allocated £114,026 for *Think Positive*. 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 2021-22

6.3 Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Scottish Government repeatedly announced additional funding for university mental health counselling services and the Think Positive project. In 2020, the Scottish Government allocated an extra £4.96 million to fund additional counsellors as part of the ongoing 2018 Programme for Government commitment to provide more than 80 additional counsellors in Further and Higher Education over four years. Additionally, as reviewed above, the Scottish Government also agreed to extend financial support for Think Positive.

6.4 Development of a New Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy

The Scottish Government is currently developing a new Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy. To ensure that the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy adequately addresses the needs of students, the Scottish Government has organised an engagement event on the 12th of September 2022 at Dundee University Students' Association to hear from students, further education providers and those who engage students. It is particularly commendable that the Scottish Government actively tries to incorporate the views of students with lived experiences of mental health issues when developing their strategy.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

In 2019, the HUCSS provided a comprehensive list of recommendations for the Scottish Government to improve the mental health and well-being of students studying at Scottish Higher Education institutions. We concur with their set of recommendations for the Scottish Government and refer to their report on *University Counselling Services in Scotland: Challenges and Perspectives* for further details. In this report, we provide key recommendations directed to all University Counselling Services in Scotland to improve their service provision.

1. We welcome the Scottish Government's and Think Positives active collaboration and incorporation of student views. Universities should try to leverage student voices and integrate them as much as possible in decision-making processes related to Counselling Services.

2. In 2019, the HUCSS showed that only five Scottish Universities were able to make direct referrals in to Early Intervention Teams. This figure has not changed, although two universities are in the process of establishing pathways. We agree with the HUCSS that all Scottish Universities should be able to make direct referrals in to Community Mental Health Teams for at risk students. We welcome the HUCSS suggestion to call on the Government to facilitate a joined up working between university support services and local primary care and mental health services.

3. Universities should clearly define their scope of service. If universities are only in a position to offer short-term counselling for students, they should aim to build referral pathways to off-campus mental health providers for students in need of long-term counselling.

4. Universities should continue to promote the use of digital mental health apps to university students in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, due to the limitations associated with mental health apps (see Melcher et al., 2022 for review), the available services should only be used to supplement traditional mental health services.

5. University Counselling Services frequently did not collect any demographic information on the characteristics of students who received counselling (e.g., students' gender, fee status, ethnicity, or year of study). This data can offer important indications on which student groups are not currently reached by counselling services and should therefore be routinely collected by all universities in Scotland.

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