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What Is So Special About Student Counselling? A Foucauldian Analysis of Discourses Shaping Practice in UK Embedded University Counselling Services

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ABSTRACT

Background: An extensive theory-based clinical literature related to the UK student counselling sector belies a deficiency of empirical research investigating UK Embedded University Counselling Services (EUCS). Although research attention has recently been re-focused on the sector, its concern with standardised outcome measurement, while important in justifying the value of such services, may fail to elucidate any unique features of counselling practice in this setting.

Aims: This research aimed to provide a framework for understanding the influence of the HE institutional context on counselling practices and investigate how practitioners construct the role and functions of their work in an EUCS setting.

Method: Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with six student counsellors working across different UK EUCS, and the transcripts were analysed using Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA).

Analysis: The study identified four dominant discourses: academic achievement, life-stage, mental health crisis and professional counselling practice, which were seen to influence the counsellor role as they manifested through a series of subdiscourses, such as the precedence of educational attainment, loco-parentis, risk vulnerability and flexible practice subdiscourses.

Conclusion: The analysis suggests that student counselling is broadly constructed as a time-limited psychosocial intervention which aims to facilitate academic engagement while attending to the perceived developmental needs of student–clients in a highly flexible manner. This may contrast with the expectations of student–clients themselves as well as other stakeholders, especially at a time of perceived mental health crisis within the student population. Implications for practice, supervision and training are discussed.

1 | Introduction

Although UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are required to provide students with mental health support, there is no compulsion for them to provide a professional counselling service (Lewis and Stiebahl 2025). The ubiquity of such services would, however, suggest that counselling is considered an important resource for HE students, and such services frequently act as a primary source of support for students experiencing emotional distress (Harrison and Gordon 2021). As some institutions have chosen to outsource student counselling to external providers, the future of individual UK Embedded University Counselling Services (EUCS) is not certain (Lightfoot 2018).

Historically, there has been a limited amount of empirical research conducted within the UK student counselling sector (Murray et al. 2016). Attempts to rectify this have been progressing (Broglia et al. 2018, 2021; Scruggs et al. 2023; Barkham

Summary

- Student counsellors provide specialist support which emerges from the context of practice but EUCS (in their current form) do not provide the structured treatment interventions offered by NHS mental health services and should not be considered a substitute for best treatment practices in those areas. Clear messaging and advocacy about the professional remit of the sector to all stakeholders is imperative.
- Support structures, including specialist supervision and adequate clinical governance structures (appropriate triage—clear referral pathways—crisis intervention protocols etc.), are required to support student counsellors with their increasingly complex caseloads. These should aim to enhance the flexibility of clinical practice, as part of the specialist skill set of student counselling practitioners, but not add undue additional burden to their workload. Universities must acknowledge their duty of care to both distressed students and the professionals they employ to support them and demonstrate this commitment through adequate resourcing. There is a role for professional bodies to take a stronger stance and advocate for their memberships in relation to these issues so that practitioners are able to fulfil their professional and ethical responsibilities.
- Historically, student counsellors have been left to follow their own interests when choosing CPD activities (Turner 2022). The sector has generally sidelined research informed practice, relying too heavily on acculturation through exposure to the HE organisational context. This situation is no longer tenable or ethically defensible and a shift to research informed counselling practice in the EUCS sector is long overdue.
- A variety of professional groups now work within or alongside EUCS and it is important to foster good working relationships and understanding between different types of practitioners. Historical divisions within the UK counselling professions themselves have led to inadequate systems of cooperation between professional bodies which must now find ways to be less partisan and support their member practitioners to cooperate with others, perhaps more widely sharing research and best practice guidance.

et al. 2023) but only a small subset of studies have used qualitative methodologies or paid attention to practitioner experiences and perspectives (Wheeler and Hewitt 2004; Randall and Bewick 2016; Harrison and Gordon 2021; O'Donnell et al. 2024).

For over a decade, it has been reported that EUCS are being overwhelmed by a high level of referrals and the presentation of increasingly complex mental health problems among the student–clients whom they serve (Mair 2015; Thorley 2017; Lewis and Stiebahl 2025). There is evidence to suggest that those outside of the UK student counselling sector may have a limited understanding of the nature of counselling practice in EUCS. For example, those responsible for mental health services provided within the National Health Service (NHS) may assume that these services provide equivalent treatment interventions to those delivered in the healthcare sector (Taylor 2020).

Experienced practitioners within the sector generally reject such ideas and have emphasised that mental health support services within HEIs cannot be considered a replacement for the care and treatment services that the NHS should provide to young adults with mental health problems (Caleb 2014). Concurrently, student counselling is promoted as an area of specialist professional practice in its own right, distinguished by the requirement for practitioners to have a practical understanding of the organisational context of their work (BACP 2016, 2017).

The idea that the organisational context influences counselling practice is not contentious in itself (Wheeler and Hewitt 2004). Indeed, this influence has long been highlighted as an ethical dilemma for student counsellors across the clinical literature (May 1999; Tarren 2015). However, while the qualitative research mentioned above has elucidated practitioner experiences, it has not sought to explicitly investigate the organisational or institutional processes which influence counselling practice in this setting.

Political and social changes, such as the expansion of Higher Education and the introduction of tuition fees, have significantly changed UK HEIs over the last 30 years (Barden and Caleb 2019). More recently, student mental health has risen to the top of the HE agenda, becoming a focus for both research and intervention. As HEIs increasingly employ additional mental health professionals to support their students, those now employed as student counsellors in EUCS are no longer working in isolation (Brown 2016; Hughes and Spanner 2019).

Mair (2015) suggested that one effect of changes such as those above is that student counselling, over time, has become an intrinsically different intervention and argues for the need to understand how practice is influenced by the current environment. In a similar vein, prominent voices in the sector have highlighted the need for practitioners to reflect upon what they do and why, in this evolving landscape (Pointon 2014).

EUCS have evolved over many decades in response to their individual institutional contexts. Despite this pattern of differential development, membership of national networks and professional bodies, such as the national networking group Heads of University Counselling Services (HUCS) and the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy University and Colleges division (BACP UC), tends to influence local policy and decision making. Historical accounts presented within the literature suggest that service evolution has been driven by modality considerations (such as practitioner preference for specific theories of counselling), ideologies around the role and value of counselling activities both in HEIs and society at large, and the perceived needs of the student body within individual institutions (Bell 1996, 1999, 2014; Mair 2015).

A BACP commissioned scoping review of research relevant to UK counselling in Higher and Further Education (Connell et al. 2006) proposed adopting quantitative research methods

linked to the 'evidence-based practice' and 'practice-based evidence' knowledge paradigms in order to strengthen the sector and legitimise its position in the culture of the HE environment in which it operates. Despite this call, little progress was made until relatively recently (see Barkham et al. 2019) and a research programme was initiated—The Student Counselling Outcomes Research and Evaluation (SCORE) consortium—which has been successfully carrying this agenda forward (Broglia et al. 2021).

This research agenda is clearly important, within an evidence-based knowledge paradigm, to establish data sets with robust utility and to justify professional practices. However, the reliance on quantitative measurement tends to emphasise the uniformity and equivalence of student counselling with counselling interventions provided in healthcare settings and fails to elucidate what is different or 'specialist' about them.

The current study thus sought to add to the existing research by investigating the links between student counselling practices and the HE institutional context of this work, moving beyond perceptions of practitioner experiences to an analysis of how they construct the role and functions of their practice. The hope was to increase awareness of the discourse/s influencing practice in the sector, promote effective messaging about counselling in EUCS and encourage practitioners, as well as those responsible for employing and supporting them, to reflect upon the nature of their work.

1.1 | Theoretical Framework

An important aspect of rigour involves demonstrating methodological and theoretical coherence which provides a strong conceptual framework for a clearly stated research question (Morse 2018; Johnson et al. 2020). In *Psychotherapy in Everyday Life*, Dreier (2008) describes a framework for understanding counselling as a 'social practice' as well as developing a critique of the realist assumptions inherent in mainstream psychotherapy research (see Dreier 2008, 3–20). Social practices can be thought of as behavioural patterns which enable members of a group (in this case, the professionals who practise counselling in EUCS) to create, distribute or manage a particular resource, ostensibly professional psychological help, due to their connection to specialised knowledge and shared meanings (Haslanger 2018).

Eisenberg (1988) argued that, over time, the ideas of a professional group tend to disseminate into the wider culture and shape how particular professional practices are understood. For example, the beliefs and values which professionals share with other members of their community, through a process of mutual influence, come to determine not only what those professionals do but also what they think they are doing. We can see them as fulfilling assigned social roles embedded in the rationale of their professional discourse and ideology. From this perspective, both the counselling practitioner and the counselling client come to occupy socially constructed roles.

From the theoretical and epistemological positions adopted in this study, we can assume that 'actors' in this context will be drawing upon discourses which connect to wider texts (manifestations of these discourses) which are located in the broader historical and social context (Phillips and Hardy 2002). The participants can be thought of as providing a link to the discourses operating in the sector. It is therefore possible to conduct a macro-level analysis, identify specific discourses implicated in the construction of student counselling and consider how these discourses influence the thinking and practice of counselling professionals (Langdridge and Hagger-Johnson 2013).

The status of social constructionist thought and discourse analysis as a method are, of course, ongoing matters of debate (Willig 2024) which also define the limitations of this research project. The decisions for adopting this approach are outlined below and important epistemological issues are highlighted at key points. There is a particular onus on the reader, with this research approach, to critically appraise the utility of the analysis as it would be theoretically inconsistent to present it as a definitive version of reality.

Constructionist research from a Foucauldian perspective aims to show, through the deconstruction of texts, how discourses are implicated in presenting us with a particular way of seeing the world (Burr 2015). A full Foucauldian analysis is additionally concerned with the historical development and evolution of discursive formations over time (Parker 1992). Such a breadth of analysis is clearly beyond the scope of this paper. Here, the analysis presented focuses on highlighting the discursive resources accessed by a number of student counsellors when speaking about their work, a consideration of their implications for practice and their potential influence on practitioner subjectivity in the EUCS context. It constitutes one level of a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis which has value on its own for the ways in which exploring such processes can enable us to extend or develop new discourse/s which have greater utility (Gergen 2015; Willig 2024).

2 | Methods

2.1 | Methodology

Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) was chosen as it attends to the discursive construction of social practices, paying particular attention to the discursive resources available within a particular context (Langdridge and Hagger-Johnson 2013). Importantly, for this study, FDA allowed for consideration of the relationship between discourses and institutions, the history of particular discourses, and how they change over time.

2.2 | Participants and Data Collection

This study was granted ethical approval by the University Research Ethics Committee at London Metropolitan University. Data were gathered by conducting semi-structured interviews through a secure video conferencing platform with six qualified counselling professionals (counsellors, psychotherapists or psychologists) currently employed in a UK EUCS for at least 2 years.

The recruitment procedure involved using a list of all UK universities to search for their counselling services online. Those with an EUCS portal were contacted directly with a polite request to cascade the study recruitment materials. Secondly, an email was forwarded by the BACP research committee to the BACP-UC mailing list (JiscMail) with the same recruitment materials attached. Participants completed consent forms prior to interview and received debriefing information afterwards.

FDA, in common with other approaches to Discourse Analysis, is not concerned with data homogeneity nor is the sample size related to 'generalisability'. It is generally advocated in the literature that a small number of participant interviews (usually four to six) can produce an adequate amount of discursive material in relation to a particular object. Decisions about 'sampling' are concerned with what data is available and its applicability to the research question at hand (Potter and Wetherell 1987).

From a constructionist perspective, there is no typical 'sample' which can be thought of as representing a wider social reality and, likewise, concepts such as validity and reliability do not make sense when asserting that there is no 'real' social world to discover beyond the one which is constructed through discursive processes. A constructionist research position maintains that there are multiple possible readings of a situation, thus denying the possibility of reproducible results (Phillips and Hardy 2002). Foucault advocated that the aim of data (textual) analysis is not to understand what individual people think or how what they say represents their thought (i.e., the experience of an individual subject). Rather, the aim is to consider (and theorise) the discursive processes which lie behind and organise their thinking (Foucault 1975). From this perspective, subjectivity emerges from the action of discursive formations in relation to the constructed object.

For this research, the data of interest is the actual language used to construct the role and functions of professional counselling activities in an EUCS context (here 'student counselling' is the constructed object) rather than the individual characteristics of those generating that language (Potter and Wetherell 1987). The aim was to conduct a wide-ranging discussion of the topic under consideration in order to produce rich enough texts for analysis.

The interview schedule consisted of five core questions: How do you think the students you work with view the role of the professional counselling provided within their university? How is your counselling work influenced by the university environment? How do you think the student counselling service fits into the wider structure of the university? Are there differences, in your opinion, between counselling work in a HE setting and counselling work in other contexts? What might counselling professionals need to understand when coming to work in this setting for the first time?

A Socratic interview style was adopted to elicit enough useful discursive material to facilitate an understanding of the ways in which the speakers constructed the object of the study investigation (student counselling in an EUCS context). Examples of which include variations on questions, such as: What makes you say that? What experiences lead you to think that? Any more thoughts on that? What would be an example of ...? What would ... say about that? Each interview took between 50 and 60 min and was then transcribed verbatim with notations about emphasis, body language and tone.

Figure 1 is derived from a critical literature review of the historical development of student counselling in the UK and the research conducted within the sector up until this point (Oliver 2024). It shows the potential location and levels of discourse from which participants could be expected to construct the role and functions of their work (see Section 1.2 Theoretical Framework). Higher Education is overtly politicised and its institutions are directly subject to societally organised power structures (e.g., through government policy directives; the professional bodies that regulate counselling professionals, etc.) which are also influenced by discourse/s prevalent in the wider sociocultural context.

The demographic characteristics of the participants were collected and noted (partly to orient the reader of the research and increase relatability by humanising the texts and to aid the reader in their critical judgement by providing a sense of the participant's experience/acculturation to the EUCS context). This particular research question did not examine participants' positionality within their work context (though this, of course, could be relevant to other research questions). Additionally, participants were given pseudonyms rather than letter or number identifiers to enhance readability. The only inclusion criteria were that the participants were working as student counsellors and had been doing so within an EUCS team (i.e., not as an individual practitioner) for a minimum of 2 years (in order to assure a level of acculturation to the environment) which was current enough at the time of the research. The contextualising demographic data gathered from participants at the interview stage is presented below in Table 1.

3 | Analysis

There is no standard way of conducting FDA, but guidelines developed by Parker (1992), Langdridge and Hagger-Johnson (2013) and Willig (2024) were consulted and combined to facilitate a systematic but flexible procedure for the coding and analysis of the interview texts. This commenced by identifying discursive formations which could be related to the implied role and functions of counselling practice within the EUCS setting. These were then grouped thematically in order to theorise dominant and subdiscourses before considering their potential effects and subject positioning. Preliminary ideas were discussed with practitioners experienced in the field in order to facilitate the reflexive process through feedback discussion. Table 2, below, presents a summary of the analytic results.

As will become clear below, discourses do not exist without context, and it is always the relationship between discourses in particular contexts that makes them meaningful (Phillips and Hardy 2002). The individual discourses identified in the analysis are connected to preceding, concurrent and emergent discursive themes (related to student counselling, Higher Education and mental health) in the wider sociocultural context, as well as those which develop within individual institutions.

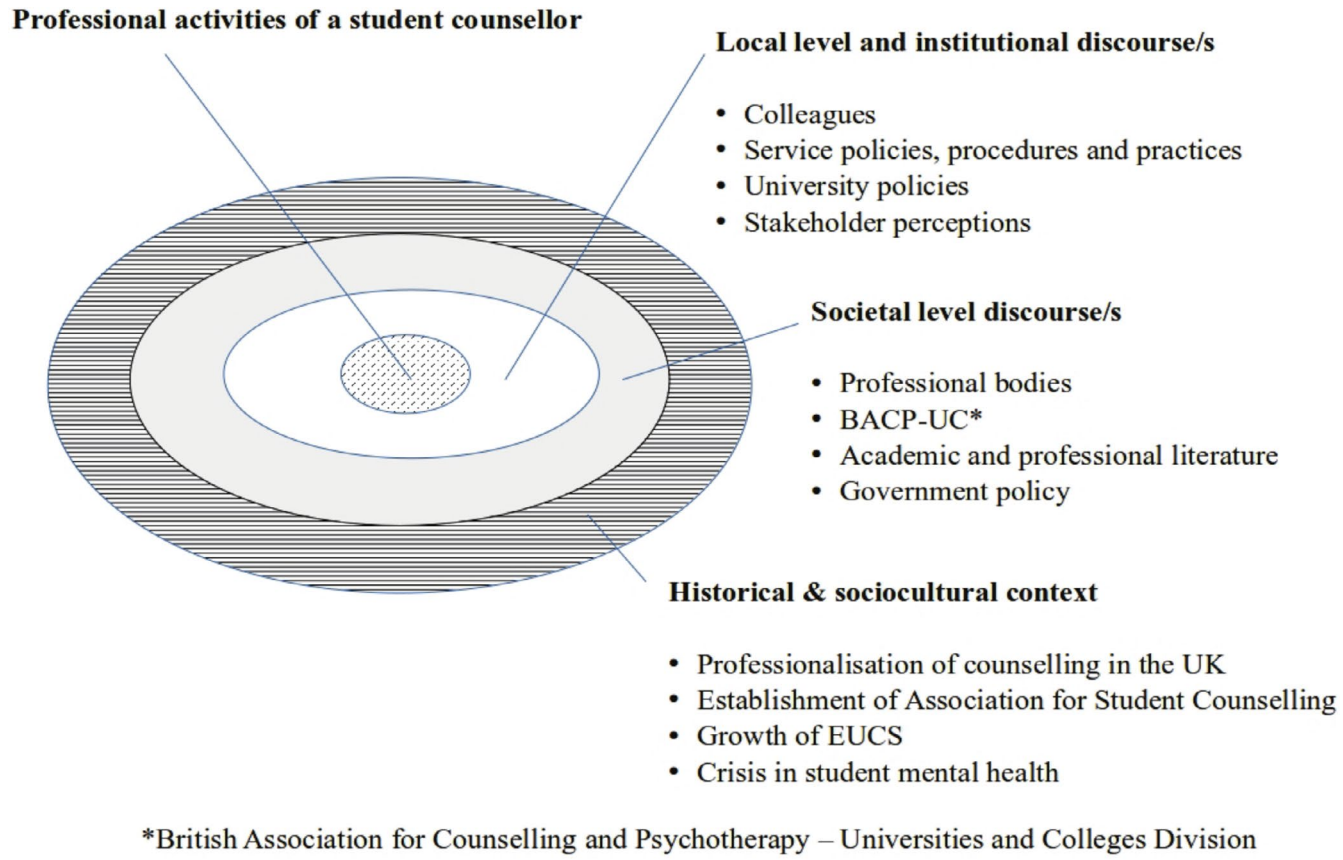

FIGURE 1 | Connection between discourses and counselling practice in UK EUCS setting.

TABLE 1 | Description of participant characteristics.

Participant pseudonym	Professional background	Age	Length of experience in the EUCS sector	Main counselling model	Size of current HE institution[a]
Adam	Counsellor/ Psychotherapist	45–54	5 years+	Psychodynamic	20,000
Lizzy	Counselling psychologist	45–54	5 years+	CBT	22,000
Paul	Psychotherapist	35–44	2 years+	CBT	10,000
Luca	Psychotherapist	45–54	5 years+	Person-centred	15,000
Janine	Counsellor/ Psychotherapist	45–54	5 years+	Psychodynamic	33,000
Uma	Psychotherapist	55–64	15 years+	Integrative	17,000

[a]Approximate rounded figures.

3.1 | The Academic Achievement Discourse/s

This fundamental area of discourse reproduces a social world in which academic achievement, within educational systems and institutions, is closely linked to perceptions of an individual's success. EUCS are situated within HE institutions in support of their mission to facilitate academic success and negate failure. The precedence of educational goals subdiscourse emerges from this context of practice and may conflict with the therapeutic remit of a EUCS and the training of the individual practitioner:

> The job of the university is education … it's students getting degrees … you know … that's what the business of the university is about … it's not about providing mental health support.
>
> (Adam, L206–208)

This, in turn, can shape counselling practice through the focus of in-session work:

> I'll help think through some of the academic implications of how the institution works … [yes] …

TABLE 2 | Overview of dominant discourses and constituent subdiscourses with data examples.

Academic achievement discourse		**Life-stage discourse**	
Precedence of educational attainment subdiscourse	'really the degree or the course... influences everything you do so much in the consulting room...and you know...it's all going, broadly speaking, towards that goal' (Uma, L27–29)	Developmental subdiscourse	'you know eighteen to twenty five is particular... life experience issues around... entering adulthood, leaving behind adolescence, all of the developmental stuff that goes with that...' (Adam, L231-232)
Shared pastoral care subdiscourse	'part of my job is helping them see where all the other different types of support are, and help link them up with the appropriate people' (Lizzy, L65-69)	Loco-parentis subdiscourse	'so parents have an expectation that the university's going to take care of their children'. (Luca, L231)

Mental health crisis discourse		**Professional counselling practice discourse**	
Complex needs subdiscourse	'one of the things that surprises me about working in this field is how complicated and severe the presentations are that we see' (Lizzy, L6-7)	Managing expectations of mental health treatment subdiscourse	'they treat it exactly like they might in the NHS they come and they're just like I have all these problems and they're not expecting even necessarily that I will erm refer them' (Lizzy, L21-23)
Risk-vulnerability subdiscourse	'so it always feels like someone's got eyes on that student, to make sure that they're okay, you know' (Paul, L320-322)	Flexible practice subdiscourse	'I can understand there probably is a demand, in some ways, for that flexibility or that ability to work longer, or just to have that one-off' (Paul, L81-84)

> with the student, to try and help them ... because I do feel a big part of the role is about helping with academic risk.
>
> (Adam, L315–317)

Here, Adam construes a 'big part' of his role as mitigating academic risk and, by implication, facilitating students to succeed in their educational attainment goals. Throughout the interview texts, this subdiscourse creates a subject position whereby the role and functions of counselling practice are explicitly linked to and subordinated to the primary educational tasks of the institution.

The shared pastoral care subdiscourse shifts the emphasis back towards supporting an individual's emotional and welfare needs but maintains a focus on the student–client as a learner in an educational setting. It seems to shape the role of the counselling practitioner as a cooperating member of the wider university staff team.

> people come to you with issues that are maybe more properly dealt with by a GP ... disability ... with advice ... or whether it's ECs [Extenuating Circumstances] type stuff ... they come to you and they don't want to go to all these different people sometimes [yes] ... but part of my job is helping them see what I do and what I can do is like this ... and help them see where all the other different types of support are, and help link them up with the appropriate people.
>
> (Lizzy, L61–69)

Lizzy here, for example, describes needing to support people who have arrived in the wrong place and constructs her role as ascertaining their needs and signposting them to other teams or individuals who carry out specialised functions within the institution.

Her language, as she recalls the moment these different sources of support, conveys a sense of the ad hoc nature characteristic of a pastoral care role (Jones-Davies 2019) and later she makes this explicit when she contrasts these kinds of in-session behaviours to 'normal' counselling work:

> it's a bit more from that pastoral role or from like, okay look, this is what you need to do, you need to go

> here and do this, you need to go there and do that, in a way in which we wouldn't tend to normally do as counsellors
>
> (Lizzy, 210–221)

Students experience a unique journey through a HE institution and more so as they encounter difficulties in their personal and academic lives. They may need practical support with navigating the institution as much as needing to process their emotional responses in the face of difficult life experiences. For the student counselling practitioner, this necessitates a flexibility of approach which may lead to tension in relation to what we can think of as traditional discourses of counselling practice (especially those which attempt to hold a firm therapeutic frame). It is important to acknowledge that this may lead practitioners to feel increased uncertainty about what it is they are doing. As Adam poignantly states later in his interview:

> and then I feel I'm almost becoming, far more, an academic mentor or something like that and that's the stuff where I get to think ... is this counselling? I'm not sure it is.
>
> (Adam, L261-263)

3.2 | The Life-Stage Discourse/s

This discourse constructs a world where being a student in HE is considered a crucial transitional experience, especially for those attending at the age of 18–19 years old. The constituent subdiscourses link to wider sociocultural ideas around human development and becoming an adult member of society.

> there's a lot that's going on at the age that they are, financially it's independence, it might be being an international student, away from home and finding places to belong, or you know, there's just so many different issues that can crop up erm ... you know, along with your general mood and anxiety.
>
> (Paul, L366–369)

Here, Paul draws from the developmental subdiscourse when he describes supporting important life-stage transitions alongside the function of addressing the 'general mood and anxiety' problems which also require support.

This subdiscourse constructs the counselling role as helping student clients to navigate difficulties in their social and emotional lives which they are not yet able to manage on their own. Janine explicitly draws from this subdiscourse as she attempts to articulate the role and functions of her counselling practice in a EUCS setting:

> Researcher: Can you say a bit more about that cause I'm wondering if that might be different ... to say, your other work?
>
> Janine: Yeah ... well I think they want help within the institution ... sometimes but not always ... [okay] ... so I think some students come with a clear view that they want help, as a student, they might be struggling with work or, you know, they might be ... if they're new students, first years, they might be struggling with being away from, from home. So I think some students, it's about the student experience ... but I wonder if increasingly, it's not ... really about the student ... it's about mental health ... it's about, you know erm ... you know, it's about the developmental stage that they're in, it's, it's about adolescence ...
>
> Researcher: What, what makes you think that, that there's a change?
>
> Janine: Erm ... I think the change is perhaps more in my expectation than reality. So perhaps when I became a student counsellor I thought it was going to be more about being a student and then, quite quickly, it was about being a young person erm ... yeah ... so I feel like I'm almost contradicting myself as I'm, as I'm thinking through but I hope that's okay ...
>
> Researcher: It's really interesting (nodding).
>
> (Janine, L42–61)

In this excerpt from her research interview, Janine deploys the developmental subdiscourse to bring together aspects of the student counsellor role in a way that suggests that practitioners need to simultaneously help individuals navigate their student experience and facilitate preadult psychosocial development. It relates to the loco parentis subdiscourse, which creates a potentially more challenging subject position for practitioners in the EUCS context:

> so parents have an expectation that the university's going to take care of their children ... and the university has an expectation that the children ... that the adults get on with ite and manage themselves ... and that doesn't always happen.
>
> (Luca, L231–234)

Luca here describes a dynamic which positions the counsellor as a recipient of parental responsibility through the perceived expectations of parents and the lack of autonomy apparent in a hypothetical student–client. The language he uses, 'parents', 'children', 'manage themselves', moves it beyond the developmental subdiscourse and potentially sets up a reciprocal subject position for the counsellor, which positions them with responsibility for a student–client who needs more active care-taking or guidance.

From a wider cultural perspective, it has been proposed that the changing economic impact of course fees has led to greater

parental involvement in the HE process generally. Barden and Caleb (2019) argue, for example, that as HE has come to be viewed as an expensive financial investment, parents (or parental figures) have become increasingly involved in all decisions, from the choice of university to the management of university life.

3.3 | The Mental Health Crisis Discourse

These discursive formations are particularly powerful in the HE institutional environment at the present time and easily identified within the wider sociocultural context. The mental health crisis discourse constructs a worldview in which students and young people generally are viewed as struggling with significant levels of mental illness and psychiatric disorder. The subdiscourses related to it, through their influence on perceptions of student–clients' mental health needs, shape the role and function of practitioners as primary treatment providers or potential gatekeepers to a wide range of mental health services; neither of which activities are likely to be within the remit of the services in which they work.

> you get to the point of assessment and realising that this person's got quite err, complex needs or quite complicated circumstances.
>
> (Paul, L242–243)

> when people are severely severely unwell [yeah] you're like okay, they really need to be hooked in with serious mental health and wellbeing services erm ... and they won't really go do something else, while they're still sort of seeing you, but you know that you're really doing the work, you're kind of still in that, sort of, holding, kind of thing with them.
>
> (Lizzy, L306–311)

Paul and Lizzy both draw here on the complex needs subdiscourse and also highlight a potential dilemma for student counselling practitioners. In Paul's statement, he implicitly constructs student counselling, within his service, as only suitable for some types of problems, that is, not for those with 'complex needs'. Then, in Lizzy's statement, she explicitly constructs a 'holding' function which emerges as a consequence of this dilemma. It is not clear from the text what Lizzy means by 'serious mental health and well-being services' but it is likely she is referring to secondary care statutory mental health services which have been under considerable pressure and are, at the present time, difficult to access (Gilbert 2015). The pressure experienced by EUCS practitioners, in this situation, may be considerable especially as it interacts with the risk-vulnerability subdiscourse.

> I do think ... particularly around suicidal risk erm but also displays of distress ... students get sent or advised to go for counselling ... I think academics and other staff within the institution don't know what to do with that and feel quite scared by it and hope that we can contain that and ... fix it ... actually.
>
> (Adam, L93-97)

> I think sometimes we see such high levels of risk. I wasn't necessarily prepared for that. a lot of risk, a lot of self-harm a lot of, just like harmful behaviours and suicidal ideation and I don't think that the institution really understands the complexity of the work we do sometimes.
>
> (Lizzy, L368–372)

Speaking from within this subdiscourse, Adam describes a process whereby 'scared' staff members usher distressed students towards the counselling service. In doing so, he constructs the role of the counsellor as a first responder to potentially 'dangerous' emotional distress with an EUCS providing a soothing or containment function for both the individual student and the wider staff team within the institution.

The threat of suicide and self-harming behaviour loom within Lizzy's statement as she also makes a link between her role and the institutional context. The emphasis on the lack of understanding from the wider institution in both statements is interesting as it evokes a sense of institutional helplessness about what to do when students are expressing emotional distress, especially when this distress is perceived as extreme.

The consequence could be a shunting of these difficulties to the counselling service, but perhaps without due consideration being given to the context of an individual's problems and the inherently stressful nature of the academic environment to which they may be reacting. When deployed uncritically, this subdiscourse offers students a subject position lacking in any personal agency, mirroring the helpless subject position it offers to the institution.

Two significant institutional critiques highlight the need to critically appraise and deconstruct the mental health crisis discourse and its manifestation in the subdiscourses described above. Firstly, Ecclestone and Hayes (2019) argue that therapeutic ideas have filtered into popular culture and have come to dominate social thought and policies. They express particular concern about how this ethos has come to dominate the education system, including UK HEIs.

Secondly, Furedi (2016) argues that both British and American universities have sacrificed maintaining a vigorous approach to academic freedom in favour of treating their students as vulnerable children. In a similar vein to Ecclestone and Hayes, he argues that an overemphasis on the safety and emotional wellbeing of students has led to a process of institutional infantilisation. He suggests that students are now treated as if they are not capable of carrying out the responsibilities associated with adulthood. Broadly speaking, both critiques propose that institutional processes are producing a diminished view of people and their capacity for resilience with particular implications for an individual's sense of personal agency (leading to vulnerable and helpless subject positions).

3.4 | The Professional Counselling Practice Discourse

This discourse, the final dominant discourse apparent within the interview texts, again emerges from the wider sociocultural context and creates a world where professional counselling is construed as a means for dealing with, or obtaining support for, a wide range of human problems and experiences. The subdiscourses identified here are important because of the way they shape student counselling practices in the EUCS context and the way these practices link to wider HE institutional processes.

The managing expectations of mental health treatment subdiscourse positions counselling professionals in EUCS settings as needing to mitigate the expectations of student–clients and other institutional stakeholders in relation to the effects of the dominant discourse described above. It constructs student counselling as a place for acknowledging and assessing problems, as well as serving a bridging function into more appropriate services.

> in my mind they ... they treat it exactly like they might in the NHS ... they come and they're just, I have all these problems .... and they're not expecting even necessarily that I will ... refer them ... sometimes they're just like 'okay here's my problem, like help me out (laughing)'.
>
> (Lizzy, 21–26)

Here, Lizzy is describing how the idea of counselling (and what it is for) is too general and somewhat misunderstood by student–clients presenting for the first time. This subdiscourse places the counsellor in a mildly defensive position from the outset, in a state of preparedness to manage any unrealistic expectations of the counselling process that may be present in the interaction.

> we get a lot of students who have perhaps had some therapy before, or some counselling or some CBT on the NHS before, erm ... and we have to be really explicit because we are a short-term service and there's only so much we can offer.
>
> (Paul, L23-25)

Drawing from the same subdiscourse, Paul again uses language which emphasises limits and boundaries which students do not necessarily expect. He advocates explicitness and emphasising the limits of therapeutic work which can be provided within this context in order to manage student–client expectations.

Although managing client expectations is important for all counsellors, Paul's statement suggests that this may be especially important when working with student–clients in an EUCS setting who may have been acculturated to unrealistic ideas about the role and functions of counselling in their wider sociocultural environment.

The flexible practice subdiscourse offers subject positions which support the practitioner in deviating from their original therapeutic training models, as well as promoting practical flexibility in matters such as contracting the number of sessions. Adam deploys this aspect of the professional practice discourse when he states:

> I think that is something that maybe traditionally trained therapists would need to learn ... that they need to ... be flexible with their model ... move beyond it ... and understand the context and the human experience of the students they're gonna meet.
>
> (Adam, L527-530)

He could be advocating the use of alternative models, but rather seems to be using it to justify practices that he perceives as deviating from standard therapeutic procedures more generally.

Paul (a less experienced practitioner in the sector) expresses his initial resistance to the subject positions offered by the flexible practice subdiscourse:

> I was, sort of, a little bit resistant to it, my supervisor was as well ... but ... you know ... I can understand there probably is ... a demand, in some ways, for that flexibility or that, you know, that ability to work longer, or just to have that one-off.
>
> (Paul, L81–84)

He seems to approach the flexible practice subdiscourse cautiously, perhaps because of the dictates of his training and the resistance of his clinical supervisor, yet understands how it works in this context. The interesting point is that this subdiscourse seems to challenge ideas about counselling practices as a direct influence of the 'demands' of the HE institutional context and its effects upon individual stakeholders.

4 | Discussion

The discursive formations identified within the analysis are located within the broader UK sociocultural and sociopolitical landscape. It suggests that perceptions of increasing demand and complexity in UK EUCS could partly be related to the interaction between an increasingly pressuring academic achievement discourse/s (see below), life-stage discourse/s which lengthen adolescent development and extend perceptions of responsibility to appropriate adult professionals, as well as a mental health crisis discourse which positions student–clients as an especially vulnerable group.

The broad manifestation of this discursive confluence can be seen in recent campaigning for universities to have a mandatory duty of care imposed upon them rather than the general duty of care prescribed by common law which began following the tragic death of a UK university student by suicide (ForThe100 2025). This has so far been resisted by the UK government as it would have significant implications for how universities support individual students. Practitioner researchers

have also raised concerns about the slide into viewing student counselling services as mental health treatment services for students with complex mental health needs, and the potential dangers of this move to both student–clients and practitioners (Totman and Loulopoulou 2024).

The influence of the academic achievement discourse upon counselling practice within HEIs, while superficially obvious, may nevertheless be underappreciated. HEIs generally provide the highest level of formal education, as well as conferring the skills needed by individuals to undertake professional roles within society. As such, they are inextricably bound with the distribution of knowledge, power and status (Côté and Furlong 2016), producing a competitive organisational culture. The analysis highlights the operation of discourse/s in the student counselling sector which seem specific to this context and implies that practices shaped by discourse/s in healthcare institutions may not be directly transferable to an EUCS setting.

The life-stage discourse is shaped by cultural ideas related to ageing and maturing and the scientific theories of Western psychology (Timimi 2005). The influence of psychodynamic counselling models within UK EUCS, while historically influential (Bell 1996), seems to have broadened in scope. The analysis highlighted processes which appear related to an organisational 'duty of care' towards its students (Jenkins 2015) and also a possible shift in parenting practices. Percy (2014, cited in Danchev 2016) has argued that those commencing university after completing formal education are now in a period of extended adolescence in comparison with people of a similar age in the past. The effect upon counselling practices is one of an enhanced responsibility towards student–clients who are not yet adults. In the UK, we see the sociocultural manifestation of this confluence in recent legal petitioning to create a statutory duty of care for students at UK universities (Universities UK 2023).

The mental health crisis discourse/s are located within the context of a significant increase in the recognition of mental illness in the UK which has been accompanied by an increase in the recognition of student mental health problems within universities (Stallman 2010; Auerbach et al. 2018; Barden and Caleb 2019). The idea of a crisis within young people's mental health is represented both within the professional literature (RCPsych 2021) and within a wide range of popular culture and media articles (Lawton 2019; Hall 2022; Sohn 2022). However, it remains unclear whether HE students are at greater risk of suffering from common mental health problems than the general population (Lewis et al. 2021).

A genuine concern for the young people studying within their institution, and an additionally perceived organisational risk of being sued for negligence, may lead to significant anxiety within UK HEIs. Others may thus experience a sense of relief if they believe that a difficult situation is being managed by mental health professionals. This 'containing' function of EUCS, while long recognised (May 1999), is likely under pressure as more students attend university acculturated in the language of mental health and with pre-existing diagnoses related to their emotional difficulties. In practice, this could lead, for example, to university staff feeling 'out of their depth' or 'not qualified' to support students expressing emotional distress using the language of mental health discourse/s.

Counselling has come to be seen as a primary treatment or intervention for mental health problems (NHS 2021). From this background, an EUCS may be positioned as holding the expertise in mental health within the organisational context, and there is potential for it coming to be thought of and treated as a crisis intervention service, which is contrary to how it is viewed from within.

The BACP-UC division is currently considered the main home for student counselling. However, while the BACP and its predecessor, the Association for Student Counselling, is undoubtedly central to the development of student counselling in the UK (Oliver 2024), the ownership of the sector by one professional body is likely no longer feasible. EUCS teams have evolved to employ a range of counsellors and allied professionals from a range of training and accreditation backgrounds. Practitioner psychologists and Cognitive Behavioural Therapists, for example, are not typically members of the BACP, being instead statutorily regulated or having their own professional bodies. This is also true for mental health workers and Psychological Wellbeing Practitioners who come to HE services from the NHS.

In professions which espouse the practice of collaboration in their work, it is interesting that this is not reflected in the systems of power which organise and support their professional activities. Unless individual practitioners (who are not BACP accredited) maintain multiple registrations and pay significant fees, there is generally no easy way for them to access BACP-UC resources. Cooperation in the areas of research and dissemination of good practice could benefit practitioners, student–clients and HE institutions alike.

Finally, although enough individuals volunteered to take part in the current research, it was perhaps surprising that the relatively extensive recruitment process did not yield more than eight potential participants. In addition to a general lack of responsiveness, there were negative responses to requests for participation. Curt emails were received explaining that the practitioners in particular services would be too busy to participate and at least one of the participants was prevented from participating during working hours. This perhaps speaks to the willingness or ability of student counselling professionals and those managing services to engage with research in support of developing the sector. It could represent a feeling of overwhelm in the profession or, at worst, a disinterest in or avoidance of research altogether.

5 | Conclusion

This research adds to previous qualitative studies concerned with practitioner perceptions of their services (Randall and Bewick 2016) and with their experiences of providing counselling within universities (Harrison and Gordon 2021) by explicitly linking the role and function of counselling practices with the organisational context. It corroborates research which highlights increasing demands and complexity in the student counselling sector. In relation to more complex presentations,

the discourse/s construct student counselling as a place for acknowledging and assessing problems as well as serving a bridging function into more appropriate services.

The flexible practice subdiscourse constructs student counselling practices as characterised by a high degree of malleability to match the needs of student–clients in relation to the dynamic HE institutional context in which they are situated. It offers subject positions which support the practitioner in deviating from their original therapeutic training models as well as promoting practical flexibility in matters such as contracting the number of sessions and behaviours such as providing in-session guidance.

Counselling practitioners are at particular risk of occupational stress and burnout (Posluns and Gall 2020). Given the changes evident within the student counselling sector, it is not at all clear that individual universities have evolved the necessary clinical governance structures and resources to fully support their embedded counselling services and the practitioners who work within them. Likewise, it is no longer appropriate for student counselling to be siloed within a particular professional body, as the practitioners employed in EUCS come from an increasingly diverse range of mental health and training backgrounds while sharing a commitment to providing the best support that they can to their student-clients.

Consent

The authors have nothing to report.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in London Met Repository at https://repository.londonmet.ac.uk/id/eprint/9730.

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