

Tomorrow's workplace counsellors

Norman Claringbull investigates the possibility of creating a new, knowledge-based specialism

For workplace counsellors, indeed for all talking therapists, 'times, they are a'changing'.

Statutory regulation seems inevitable and probably due by 2011/12¹. The Government's investment of £170 million for therapies recommended in the NICE Guidelines is likely to accelerate the conquest of the therapeutic world by evidence-based practice. Therapists' outdated 'single school allegiances' are dying out as modern research increasingly tells us that no particular therapy model works faster, better or cheaper than any other²⁻⁴. The impacts of these powerful 'mega-drivers' seem certain to fuel an unstoppable revolution in the counselling profession and an inescapable transformation in the educational needs of its practitioners. Workplace counselling cannot isolate itself from these forces and it is equally likely to undergo a parallel upheaval as it too is compelled to reinvent itself.

One major revolutionary change that is almost certain (and arguably long overdue) will be the

evolution of counselling into a degree-based profession. So, if gaining a degree is an essential first professional step, then clearly entry into one of counselling's specialisms, including of course workplace counselling, will probably require postgraduate level education. In other words, workplace counselling is likely to evolve as a Master's level professional specialism! Could figure 1 be the future training path for tomorrow's workplace counselling specialists?

The logical educational outcome of counselling finally emerging as a modern, degree-based profession is, that in common with the career paths of all other professions, fledgling counsellors will first have to acquire a generalist knowledge of their 'trade' and an entry-level professional status before going on to qualify in specific counselling professional specialisms via further career development training. Later research⁵ indicates that within the Employee Assistance Providers (EAP) community there is a strong demand that

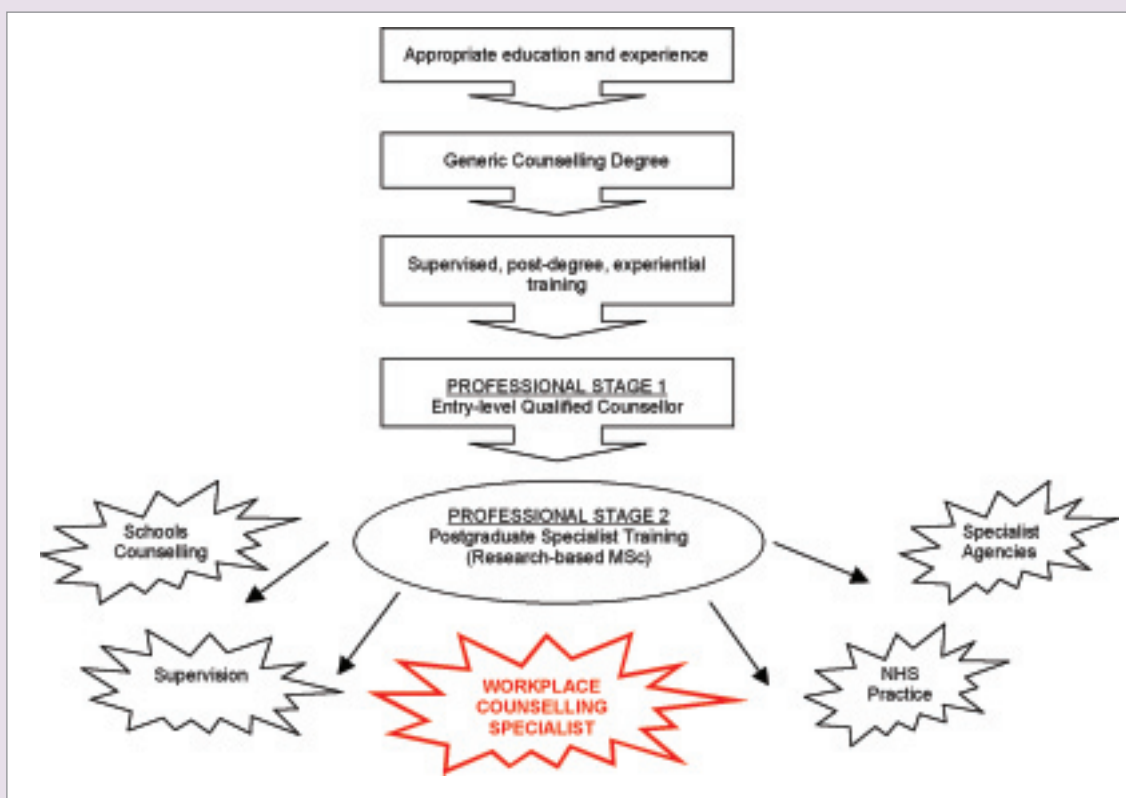


Figure 1: Becoming a counselling specialist

Norman Claringbull leads the postgraduate counselling studies programme at the University of Southampton where he researches the training of specialist workplace counsellors. Currently he is also writing and editing a new book series for tomorrow's graduate-level professionally regulated counsellors.

‘Within the EAP community there is a strong demand that workplace counselling should become a knowledge-based, regulated, advanced professional specialism’

workplace counselling should become a knowledge-based, regulated, advanced professional specialism. This research found the EAPs believe that:

- workplace counselling should move towards becoming a postgraduate-qualified specialism
- there is both a practice need and a potential employment market for properly trained, postgraduate level, workplace counselling specialists
- both external EAP agencies and in-house EAP counselling service managers would have much greater confidence in practitioners who held a recognised postgraduate qualification in workplace counselling
- organisations recruiting workplace counsellors would specifically be attracted to graduates of the Master's-level, practitioner training programmes.

The knowledge base for workplace counselling specialists

If workplace counselling is to emerge as a knowledge-based, postgraduate counselling specialism, then clearly such an evolution would be greatly facilitated if a suitably designed workplace counselling MSc programme, one with its own specialist discourse, could be established. At first sight, the process of devising such a new MSc appears to be straightforward and devising a suitable curriculum might simply be a mechanistic process that merely adds together sufficient M-level educational ‘bolt-ons’. Two guidelines already exist to help academics select which ‘bolt-ons’ to include:

- 1 The QAA⁶ Master's level descriptions demand that students completing Master's courses must acquire: ‘systematic understanding ... critical awareness of current problems ... forefront of academic discipline ... professional practice’.
- 2 My own study⁷ of the employee assistance agencies found that advanced professional-level

training, as set out in the following knowledge and skills clusters, would greatly increase the marketability of future workplace counselling specialists:

- cluster 1: organisational awareness, dynamics, systems and issues; understanding the world of work; awareness of different and differing workplace cultures and environments; putting counselling into context
- cluster 2: ethical issues/dilemmas around the three-way contract; understanding the dual client-employer relationship; confidentiality and data protection; employer best practices (HR, employment law, discipline etc)
- cluster 3: client assessment; mental health assessment; risk assessment; risk management
- cluster 4: critical incident work; time-limited therapy; mediation work; stress analysis.

However, constructing learning products in higher education arguably should be more than just the result of routine pedagogic ‘spadework’. Acquiring educational ‘bolt-ons’ alone merely extends knowledge, it does not develop the advanced thinking and problem-solving skills demanded of the true professional in any calling⁸. For example, it has long been argued⁹ that there are significant educational, intellectual and professional benefits in inculcating transdisciplinary critical reflexivity¹⁰ as an essential factor in specialist-level knowledge acquisition, intellectual debate and discipline-centred discourse. Therefore, it is possible that counselling specialists would better achieve a higher professional status if they acquired both advanced factual knowledge and new, transdisciplinary ways of knowing. This is necessary because all high-level professional practitioners, including workplace counselling specialists, will often be required to devise innovative solutions to unique problems¹¹.

Because professional practice at this level is often multidisciplinary, it is also likely that counselling specialists will be required to participate in, and to critique, debates within their original calling's discourse and within other relevant professions. This apparent need for workplace counselling specialists to acquire advanced levels of knowledge-based advanced analytical ability, which Ryle¹² calls ‘the distinction between knowing how and knowing why’, fits well with the QAA Master's level descriptors which require postgraduate students to:

- display mastery of a complex and specialist area of knowledge skills
- employ advanced skills to conduct research or advanced technical and professional activity

■ accept accountability for related decision making including using supervision.

So how can we enhance the learning of these new-style specialists? What do they need to know? How do they need to know it? Gibbons et al¹³ have suggested a bifurcated model of types of knowledge. They argue for a mode 1 type (codified or systematic) and a mode 2 type, (tacit, imaginative and innovative). Imparting mode 1 knowledge to counselling students is relatively straightforward and would clearly be an essential element in their undergraduate education. Equally it should be a function of delivering the extended/advanced-knowledge 'bolt-ons' demanded by Master's-level counselling specialists and their likely employers. However, for postgraduate counselling specialists (in any therapeutic specialism) mode 2 is likely to be more important. This is because, as Gibbons et al¹³ argue, mode 2 knowledge is:

- transdisciplinary: integration of problem-solving skills
- contextual: based on applications
- heterogeneous: multi-sourced; multidisciplinary
- socially accountable and reflexive
- quality controlled by both peer review and social acceptability.

It is therefore arguable that educating tomorrow's workplace counselling specialists, who will already be competent generalist counsellors, will require training programmes that do more than simply enhance their professional performances. It will be necessary to move beyond merely training a new breed of high-performance 'super-counsellors' and to move beyond providing what Jary and Parker¹⁴ have called the 'McUniversity', one that serves up easily digestible, standardised, bite-sized 'education burgers' to performance-bound 'customers'. Merely mastering the internal discourse of a profession (mode 1 knowledge) is insufficient because, as Skelton¹⁵ suggests, true high-level professional specialists are able to operate independently of their original disciplines, (transdisciplinarity), and are personally/ professionally reflexive and therefore able to critique both their own work and that of others. This suggests that the true professional specialist emerges as the ability to acquire mode 2 knowledge is developed.

A proposed workplace counselling MSc

The following specialist workplace counselling MSc (three years part-time), available for adoption

by higher education institutions, is designed to meet all the educational demands so far discussed. Currently no equivalent programmes exist. It is the product of extensive research and its underlying purpose is to produce workplace counselling specialists who operate at advanced levels of criticality and transdisciplinary professional learning by enabling them to develop an extensive mode 2 approach to learning.

Entry requirements

- a) honours degree in counselling or psychotherapy plus
- b) entry-level counselling qualification – (professional body accreditation; HPC registration etc)

Year one

Students acquire additional counselling knowledge and skills (mode 1 knowledge) and start to acquire mode 2 knowledge by placing this learning in context and critiquing current research. Successful students may either proceed to year two or exit with a postgraduate certificate in workplace counselling.

Year two

Here, the emphasis is on transdisciplinary approaches to workplace counselling practice (mode 2 knowledge). The focus on a transdisciplinary approach starts to evolve more overtly in year two because the research unit and the professional practitioner development units are best taken in conjunction with students from other specialist counselling programmes (schools; supervision etc). In this sense, 'transdisciplinary' mostly means 'trans-psychotherapy specialisms'.

The reflective practice and collaborative practice units are best taken in common with students from other relevant disciplines (social work; nursing; family therapy etc). During these last two units students would be especially encouraged to develop/enhance their abilities to critically reflect on themselves, the knowledge base of their own discipline and the practise/knowledge bases of other disciplines. In other words they are being encouraged to move towards what Gibbons et al¹⁴ have called a 'meta-disciplinary approach'.

Successful students may either proceed to year three or terminate with a postgraduate diploma in workplace counselling.

Year three

In year three, the students will reinforce their mode 2 learning by undertaking a major piece

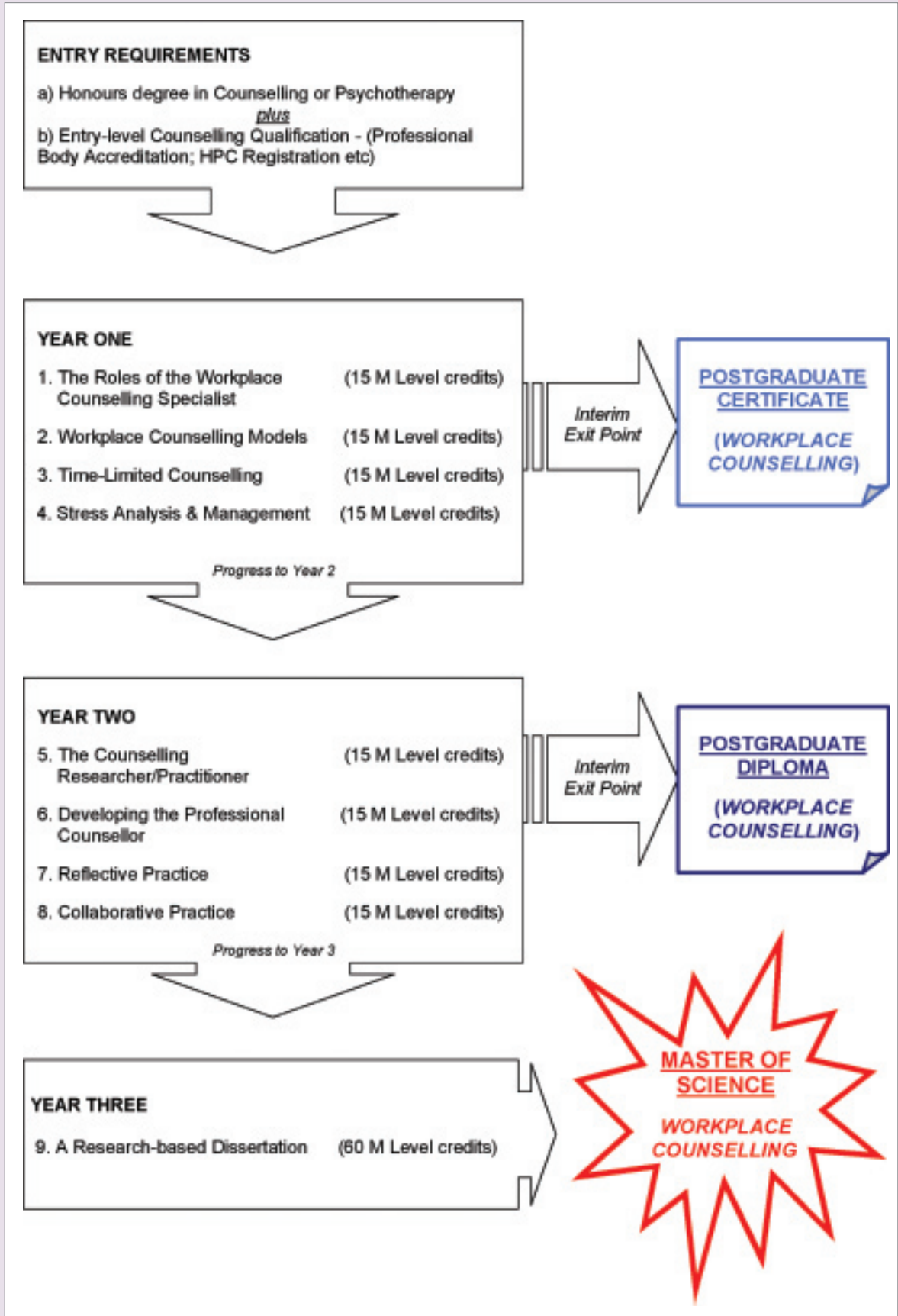


Figure 2: MSc workplace counselling – qualification route

of original research of publishable quality. The investigation must be innovative and creative, and show a high level of criticality. It is during this final year that the new MSc programme's contribution to the professionalisation of workplace counselling reaches its maximum. All the preceding teaching and learning is brought together in the research dissertation and in order to properly complete this task, the students must demonstrate that they are competent producers and users of mode 2 knowledge. Successful students will be awarded the MSc and will therefore have good reason to claim to be true professional practitioners who have achieved high levels of critical being.

Essentially, the research dissertation is a compilation of the knowledge gained on this MSc programme and it is also a foundation for ongoing, high-level knowledge gain. It is, in effect, a forerunner of future professional evolution. The manner in which a student completes the research dissertation will be a powerful indicator of that student's likely approach to continuing to develop as 'a lifelong learner'¹⁶ or as Eraut⁹ puts it, 'as a learning professional', one whose professional practice will often include encountering situations, problems and tasks that demand context-specific, innovative, discipline-free solutions.

Clearly, the new MSc programme is only a contribution to the professionalisation of workplace counselling because, by itself, it does not confer professional accreditation onto workplace counselling specialists. The ultimate 'official licensing' of counselling specialists is as yet a mainly un-debated issue. One way forward would be to establish advanced practitioner divisions under a general professional umbrella organisation. The point at which graduates of this postgraduate programme approach true professionalism is at the end of their studies when it is intended that they will have attained high levels of transdisciplinary knowledge and mode 2 knowledge and will have demonstrated this by successfully completing a research dissertation. ■

This article represents the views of the author and does not imply endorsement by ACW or BACP.

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‘One way forward would be to establish advanced practitioner divisions under a general professional umbrella organisation’

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Further reading

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