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Document Number	031	Document Revision	D	Date Issued 7/10/15

**SECTION A : GENERAL INFORMATION**

1	Document category	Policy		
2	Approved by	COI		
3	Minimum list of document users to be notified upon release of document update	Principal & CEO, Deputy Principals, Registrar, Directors, Deputy Directors, Deputy Directors Programme Management		
4	<b>Document change history</b>			
C	<b>DCN #</b>	<b>Date released</b>	<b>Change originator</b>	
	008/2014	23/2/15	Vassallo Marthese	
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Updated last paragraph of section 13.				
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	50/2015	7/10/15	Bartolo John / Vassallo Marthese	
	<b>Change history</b>			
1. General update of document. 2. Introduction of new role of Student Advisor 3. Included reference documents.				

**PLEASE READ BELOW BEFORE REFERRING TO THIS DOCUMENT**
**Instructions for document users with access to College SharePoint System**

All MCAST employees can access current, controlled and approved documents related to the Quality Management System from the College SharePoint system URL  
<http://eportal.mcast.edu.mt/Main/Pages/DocumetControl>.

Document users who do have access to SharePoint are therefore encouraged **NOT** to retain printed hard copies of the Quality Management System documents.

If however a hard copy of the document is required, the user is to ensure that the printed document is the current revision.

**Continuous Improvement**

Procedures are meant to be 'living' documents that need to be followed, implemented and maintained. If the procedure does not reflect the current, correct work practice, it needs to be updated! Contact your Document Controller on Ext 7121 **today !**

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## 1. Philosophy of the Unit

The Counselling Unit is in line with, and supports, MCAST's mission statement as it focuses on the needs of individuals in the College by providing them with personal counselling and other interventions related to personal wellbeing.

The Unit acknowledges that this can be facilitated by various disciplines within the therapeutic field. These include counselling, psychotherapy, or other forms of psychological support. All practitioners<sup>1</sup> within the Unit are committed to respecting all therapeutic disciplines and approaches by viewing them as equally effective in this line of work and by collaborating with each other.

By establishing a safe and supportive environment, counselling helps individuals recognise unhealthy patterns, explore new ways of being, change dysfunctional ways of relating, and affirm aspects of themselves which they undervalue. This process encourages personal growth leading to a more productive, self-enhancing, and fulfilling life.

Through this personal development, individuals are in a better position to achieve educationally and to bring positive benefits to their current or future workplace, which is the aim of the College.

## 2. Description of services and responsibilities

All students and staff may avail themselves of the services offered by the Counselling Unit free of charge.

Students and staff have the right to be treated as unique individuals who choose to develop at their own pace, irrelevant of their age, race, creed, gender, sexual orientation, social class, ability, or any other form of diversity.

Students and staff are entitled to a high quality counselling service which:

- is client-focused;
- is growth oriented and offers understanding in a therapeutic and non-judgemental environment;
- is delivered by appropriately qualified practitioners in a safe environment; and
- assists clients through the therapeutic process.

The range of services and responsibilities undertaken by the Counselling Unit include:

- one-to-one or group counselling sessions by appointment;
- consultations with lecturing staff to support students when they need;
- planning and facilitating pro-active sessions through group-work, workshops, and seminars;
- family/couple sessions when necessary;
- liaising with and referring to internal and external agencies, professionals, specialists, etc.;
- provision of a range of information on a wide variety of topics available in printed format and/or on the College website;
- liaising with the other sections of the Student Support Services when necessary;
- liaising with senior management, academic or administrative staff when necessary;

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'practitioner' in this policy refers to any person offering a service linked to the personal therapy being offered by the unit. This includes all counsellors, the student adviser, and other posts that may be created as the need arises. The word 'counsellor' refers to those individuals who are providing the actual counselling service to the clients.



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- organising staff development seminars;
- establishing evaluative procedures about client satisfaction and conducting research relating to the service being offered by the Unit;
- maintaining appropriate levels of external supervision; and
- participating in regular in-service consultation, ongoing training, and professional development;

Counselling is to be carried out in an appropriate, safe, and confidential environment. Whenever possible, students or staff should arrange their counselling appointment in their free time. Counselling sessions will usually last 50 minutes and clients will normally attend on a weekly or fortnightly basis for a number of sessions. However, these parameters can vary depending on the client's needs.

Practitioners will develop and maintain an effective network of external referral agencies and refer students as necessary.

### **3. Contacting the Counselling Unit**

Clients may either contact the Unit directly or they can be referred by staff, parents, other students, external agencies, or other professionals. Guidelines on how to refer are provided in the relevant procedure.

### **4. Location where counselling is held**

Sessions are to be held in an environment that is conducive to counselling. This implies that a private and warm environment needs to be created. In order to ensure this, care must be taken to decorate the rooms accordingly and to ensure that the rooms used are sound proof and are located in a quiet part of the premises. The rooms should be large enough to allow for at least three individuals to be comfortably seated. The main offices of the practitioners are at the Main Campus in Paola but they will go to Satellite Institutes if clients prefer to meet them there. When delivering sessions at anyone of the Satellite Institutes, it is the responsibility of the Director of the Institute to provide a room within the Institute which is suitable for counselling.

### **5. Ethical conduct**

Practitioners providing a service in the Counselling Unit are bound to adhere to the ethical framework of their respective professions.

### **6. Conflict of interest**

Conflict of interest should be avoided. It is the responsibility of the practitioner not to create dual relationships with clients, being students or staff. Practitioners need to consider the implications of their involvement in activities other than counselling sessions where their clients are concerned as this may damage the therapeutic relationship e.g. when the grading of a student's academic work is concerned; when disciplinary action against a student or a member of staff is concerned. Practitioners need to



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consider the limitations they will be creating with regard to client-intake before involving themselves in other activities.

## 7. Accountability

In the interests of maintaining a professional standard of service, the Counselling Unit offers a transparent procedure for the investigation of complaints regarding practitioners' conduct. If there are any concerns about the conduct of a practitioner, clients are encouraged to initially address this with the practitioner concerned. If this route is not satisfactory, then contact with the Director of Information and Student Support Services, or the Deputy Principal of Academic Operations and Student Services, or the College Principal needs to be done. MCAST authorities will investigate and process the matter according to MCAST protocol.

## 8. Quality of service

At the end of every academic year and when concluding counselling, clients will be asked to complete a 'Counselling Feedback Sheet' at their discretion. The feedback gathered from these feedback sheets will enable practitioners to have a better understanding of the clients' expectations, perceptions, and effectiveness of the service.

In order to better evaluate the service offered by the Unit, it is also necessary to collect non-identifying data. This consists of statistical information related to the overall running of the unit. This data will be kept in a safe and secure location.

## 9. Management of caseload

It is imperative that practitioners maintain high professional and ethical standards in their work. In order to do so, practitioners need to manage their weekly amount of contact hours which should not exceed 20 hours. In determining the above, consideration needs to be given to the severity of the cases, the degree of managerial, administrative, and reception support, other work done by the Unit, and the role and responsibility of the practitioner. The last factor is particularly relevant in the case of the senior counsellor.

As a general rule, the client will initially be offered a number of sessions, although in some cases a one-off session may be sufficient. At the end of these sessions, the counsellor and the client will review the situation and determine if the client would benefit from further sessions, a referral, or concluding counselling.

The counsellor is bound to inform the Director of Information and Student Support Services of clients who manifest a serious risk of posing grave harm to self or others. The counsellor is also bound to discuss referral of such clients during their own supervision. If the threat is imminent, referral to an appropriate service or mental health professional needs to be done as soon as possible, if this is deemed the best course of action. It is the counsellor's responsibility to ensure that any referral is adequately discussed with the client. It may also be necessary to work closely with the concerned professionals in the management of the case.

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## 10. Management of appointments and allocation of cases

Initial contact needs to be made with all potential clients within 1-2 days of their referral to the Unit. The initial session is held with the student adviser where a registration form is filled in and a counselling agreement is explained. The student adviser will pass on the registration form and the counselling agreement to the senior counsellor. The latter will coordinate with the other counsellors to distribute the cases. It is ultimately the responsibility of the senior counsellor to allocate new cases and see that each request has been dealt with. If none of the counsellors are available for an appointment, clients will be put on a chronological waiting list through an intake register which will be kept in a safe and secure manner.

If clients request a particular counsellor, the initial contact session can be made by the preferred counsellor. In case of a crisis, counsellors can see the client directly without having to go through the student adviser. In case the crisis presents itself with the student adviser, the latter needs to notify the counsellors at the earliest possible. As long as a situation is deemed by the practitioners to be an emergency, the client will be seen to on the day once one of the counsellors has been reasonably contacted during MCAST working hours.

## 11. Choice of counsellor

It is up to the discretion of the client to choose the counsellor of their liking. If the chosen counsellor is unavailable, the client will be given the option to either wait until the counsellor can see them, or be assigned to another counsellor.

If the case is an emergency and the preferred counsellor is not available, the client needs to be informed that another counsellor will contact them. In the rare eventuality that none of the counsellors are available, the Director of Information & Student Support Services should be contacted. The next in line would be the Deputy Principal of Academic Operations and Student Services and then the College Principal. In all of these cases, the client can still be referred to the counsellor of their choice after the initial crisis session if they still wish.

In some instances a client may wish to change counsellor. In this case the client is to be strongly encouraged to return to the initial counsellor to discuss such a change. If they still wish to change, the first counsellor needs to discuss with the client whether there is any information that needs to be passed on to the new counsellor. If the duty of care indicates that it is more beneficial for the client that certain information is passed on to the new counsellor, this needs to be done in the most respectful manner possible. Every attempt needs to be made to always discuss the passing on of such information with the relevant client.

As regards consultations (regarding the concern over a student) by staff with a counsellor, it is the choice of the member of staff concerned to discuss the case with a counsellor of their choice. If the student agrees on a referral, then they have the option to start counselling with a counsellor of their choice.

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## 12. Cancellation of appointments

Practitioners should avoid cancellation of appointments as much as possible. Where this is unavoidable, clients should be notified as early as possible, preferably a day or more in advance. In the event that the practitioner is on sick-leave, clients are to be immediately contacted and informed by a team-member from the Student Support Services. The practitioner will contact them upon returning to work to give them a new appointment. When a counsellor is away for a long period of time, clients are to be offered the possibility to be referred to another counsellor so as to continue their therapeutic work.

## 13. Confidentiality

The service offered by the Counselling Unit is confidential.

The ethical frameworks of the relevant professions in this service require that practitioners offer the highest possible level of confidentiality in order to respect the client's privacy and create the trust that is necessary for counselling.

Confidentiality will be explained to all students during their initial session.

Confidentiality during counselling sessions should be maintained at all times. Unless the client gives their consent, the counsellor will not pass on to a third party any information regarding the client.

In exceptional circumstances, the counsellor may take the decision to breach confidentiality with or without the client's consent if necessary, where in their professional judgement:

- a) there is a risk of the client seriously harming themselves or being harmed;
- b) there is a risk of another person being seriously harmed; or
- c) there is a risk of a serious crime being committed.

In the case where disclosure is deemed to be the best course of action, the counsellor will seek to obtain the client's consent, unless the law specifies otherwise. If the client disagrees with the disclosure but the counsellor still believes that the disclosure is necessary, the counsellor should always inform the client that the disclosure will occur and with whom.

The practitioner and any records maintained by the Counselling Unit may be subpoenaed by a court of law.

If practitioners receive a request for information about a client, no information can be provided by the Counselling Unit without the informed, written consent of the client.

## 14. Letters of recommendation

The counsellors are authorised to write letters of recommendation equivalent to 'medical certificates' on behalf of students whose personal circumstances are affecting their work. These letters are usually submitted to support an application for an extended deadline, for stipend related matters, or for any other form of appeal. The Director of Information & Student Support Services needs to be copied in when such recommendations are made.



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If the counsellor has been working with the student for some time and is therefore aware of the nature and severity of their difficulties, writing a letter may well be appropriate. Sometimes the counsellor might be the person who offers to write a supporting letter, as the client may not be aware of the system or may be concerned about 'making excuses'. When writing such letters, a balance needs to be struck between the need for confidentiality and the need to convey information that will be useful for the receiver. The client concerned needs to be consulted regarding the content being revealed and will be asked to give their written consent.

It is important that students understand that decisions about course-work, assignments, or examinations rest with academic staff, and that the counsellors do not act as advocates in academic disputes. Hence, in cases where a student imagines that a letter from the counsellor will sort everything out, they should bear in mind that this is not necessarily the case.

Once written, the letter can be given to the student to take to the appropriate member of staff or the counsellor can send it directly to the person concerned. The counsellor should retain a copy of the letter.

When students contact the Counselling Unit to obtain a letter and it is clear that they do not want to engage in counselling, the counsellor is unlikely to be able to fully assess how the student's personal difficulties are affecting their work. In this case, the counsellor may decide not to undertake to write a recommendation letter for students who attend on a 'one-off' basis. However, the counsellor will use their discretion to decide whether or not to write the letter as there may be exceptional circumstances where it is appropriate to provide one.

## **15. Management of clients who have graduated and/or resigned**

Clients who have graduated or resigned from the College may continue to avail of the services of the Counselling Unit for two concluding sessions. During these sessions, the counsellor will provide suggestions of alternative sources of help if the individual wishes to continue with counselling. It is only in exceptional cases and at the discretion of the counsellor's professional capacity that longer-term work is pursued with an ex-client. In the latter situation, the Director of Information and Student Support Services needs to be informed.

## **16. Management of clients during the summer period**

While the Counselling Unit continues to operate during the summer recess, the service provided at that time will be on a limited basis.

## **17. Annual reports**

An annual report will be submitted according to the demands of senior management.

## **18. Training and continuing professional development**



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Practitioners need to be provided with continuing professional development as required by their accrediting bodies. It is the responsibility of the College to ensure that they are provided with the necessary time and funds to attend such training. Requests are to be submitted to the Director of Information and Student Support Services.

## 19. Supervision

Practitioners are required to attend consultation with an external supervisor of their own choice for a minimum of 1.5 hours per month. External supervisors need to be approved by the Director of Information and Student Support Services. Supervision is to be funded by the College given that it is intrinsic to the work of a practitioner. Occasionally there may arise situations where a practitioner might require additional supervision sessions, such as where clients are particularly at risk. In such cases, the supervision fee should also be provided by the College.

## 20. Record keeping

The following records are required to support practitioners in their activity. All these documents are the property of MCAST Counselling Unit.

Documents A-E listed below are confidential. It is the responsibility of the relevant practitioner to keep such documents in a safe and secure location. In case information is taken outside premises, this needs to be discussed with the Director of Information & Student Support Services, and can only be used for the reason it was intended for. In the case of notes being kept on a portable device, it is the practitioner's responsibility to ensure that these notes are protected in an adequate manner when outside MCAST premises. Any violation of this is deemed as a serious breach of confidentiality.

### ***A – Referral form***

This form is to be filled in by any member of staff who wishes to refer a student to the Counselling Unit. An electronic version of the form is preferable, and should be sent to [counsellors@mcast.edu.mt](mailto:counsellors@mcast.edu.mt). The referral form is to be kept by the assigned practitioner and a copy of it is to be given to the senior counsellor.

#### **Reference Document**

Doc 207 : Counselling Services Referral Form

### ***B – Client registration form***

During the intake session, a client registration form will be filled in for all clients and will be kept by the assigned counsellor. A copy of it will be filed with the senior counsellor.

#### **Reference Document**

Doc 208 : Client Registration Form



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### ***C – Counselling agreement***

The counselling agreement will be discussed and signed by both the client and the practitioners. A copy of the agreement will be given to the client while the other copy will be retained by the assigned counsellor.

### ***D – Intake register***

All newly registered clients are to be listed in an intake register in chronological order.

### ***E – Case notes***

Practitioners can keep brief and anonymous notes about the sessions in accordance with the Data Protection Act and the relevant ethical frameworks of their professions. Such records are to be kept in a safe and secure place and will be destroyed 7 years after the last session unless the client is still a student at MCAST. In case a practitioner leaves employment, these brief notes will either be destroyed or passed on to another counsellor if so agreed with the client.

### ***F – Monthly statistics***

Monthly statistics are to be kept by each practitioner. Totals are to be handed to the senior counsellor or inputted in the relevant database by the end of each academic term at the latest.

#### **Reference Document:**

Doc 205 : Monthly Statistics Report

## **21. Tragic accidents and death of members of staff, students or their close relatives**

The Counselling Unit is to be notified through a referral form by MCAST administration or by the administration of the relative Institute of any known tragic accident or death of any member of staff, student, or their close relatives.

The role of the Counselling Unit at this traumatic time is to provide support and assistance to the client concerned. This support can be availed of immediately or when the client feels it is timely to do so, which may be weeks or months later.

## **22. Placements and observation sessions for trainee counsellors**

The MCAST Counselling Unit will consider its current stage as a developing service in deciding the number of trainees to accept.

Requests for training placements and observation sessions are to be made in writing and addressed to the Deputy Principal of Academic Operations and Student Services who will discuss the requests with the unit to explore the need and possibility of having trainees. Acceptance of trainees both for observation and placement purposes needs to be done with the clients' benefit in mind. In no case



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should trainees be accepted for observation or placements if the counsellor, in their professional opinion, deems that this will not be beneficial for the client.

On approval, the trainee will meet the senior counsellor responsible for coordinating trainees to discuss and acquaint themselves with the service. The trainee is expected to adhere to their profession's ethical standards. They are also required to abide by MCAST Counselling Unit Policy and MCAST Counselling Unit Information and Guidelines, copies of which will be accessible to the trainee. The trainee will also fill in all the necessary record keeping forms as requested by the unit.

It is the trainee's responsibility to ensure that all case notes are anonymised and kept separate from other personal data that can identify the client.

It is the responsibility of the Director of Information & Student Support Services to make the necessary arrangements regarding the location where the trainee will be seeing clients. It is the trainee's responsibility to book the room when needed.

### **Trainees on placement**

The following trainee details will be recorded:

- name and contact details of the trainee,
- the training course they are attending,
- duration of placement and trainee's availability,
- contact details of the person from the educational institution who is responsible for the trainee,
- name and contact details of supervisor (trainee is asked to present a written confirmation by the supervisor), and
- number of client contact hours carried out to date under supervision.

The cases referred to trainees will commensurate with their level of training and experience. Trainees agree not to manage any cases beyond their professional competence or which may demand more long-term care. The responsibility of the client remains that of the Counselling Unit and every effort should be made to primarily safeguard the client. It is up to the senior the counsellor to set up meetings with the trainees to monitor their work. MCAST Counselling Unit reserves the right to terminate the placement if there is serious concern about the work carried out by the trainee. This concern will be communicated in writing to the trainee, their supervisor, and the person responsible for them from the educational institution they attend. The client will be offered the option to continue counselling with one of MCAST's counsellors and extra care will be taken to minimize any negative effect that can result from this situation.

Any document which is the property of MCAST has to be returned to the senior counsellor on conclusion of the trainee's placement.

### **Trainees conducting observation sessions**

The following trainee details will be recorded:

- name and contact details of the trainee,
- the training course they are attending,
- duration of placement and trainee's availability, and



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- contact details of the person from the educational institution who is responsible for the trainee.

The counsellor is bound to explain the purpose of observation to the client and to ask for their consent. The client has every right to refuse. Once the client accepts, the counsellor will brief the trainee about the case and discuss any queries. During the first observation session with a new client, after the trainee is introduced to the client, issues of confidentiality will be dealt with. Following the session, the trainee is encouraged to discuss and clarify their observations with the counsellor.