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GENERAL INFORMATION

1	Document category	Policy		
2	Approved by	Col		
3	Minimum list of document users to be notified upon release of document update	All staff and students.		
4	Document change history			
	G	DCN #	Date released	Change originator
		047/19	30/9/19	Agius Albert
		Change history (Section/change details)		
		Included cross-reference to Manual of Procedures.		
	F	DCN #	Date released	Change originator
		006/19	29/4/19	Dr Falzon Rose
		Change history		
Replaced 'Student' and 'Staff' with Client, where applicable.				

Instructions for document users with access to College Website

All MCAST employees can access current, controlled and approved documents related to the Quality Management System via the College website www.mcast.edu.mt.

Document users are 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 before use 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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Note 1: The procedure below is replicated in the Manual of Procedures, Chapter 3, paragraph 1

Note 2: In this document, where applicable, staff and student/s will be referred to as 'Client/s'

1. Philosophy of the Department

The Support Services Department 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. Both students and staff (thereafter referred to as 'client/s') can avail themselves of the services provided at the department.

The Department acknowledges that this can be facilitated by various disciplines within the therapeutic field. These include counselling, psychotherapy, or other forms of psychological support. All practitioners¹ within the Department are committed to respect all therapeutic disciplines and approaches by viewing them as equally effective in this line of work and by collaborating with each other so as to create a multi-disciplinary team approach. Due to the relational nature of the work, it is of utmost importance that all the staff within the department value collegiality, respect and a positive working ambiance as this will in turn permeate and affect the professional quality of the service given.

By establishing a safe and supportive environment, counselling and therapy help 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 personal and professional 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 clients may avail themselves of the services offered by the Support Services free of charge.

Clients 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.

Clients are entitled to a high quality counselling/therapy 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 Support Services Department include:

- answering to referrals;
- carrying out of intake sessions;

¹ The term 'practitioner' in this policy refers to any person offering a service linked to the personal therapy being offered by the department. This includes all counsellors, and other practitioners that may be included as the need arises.

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- assignment of client cases to the appropriate practitioner;
- case meetings and discussions as appropriate;
- one-to-one counselling/therapy sessions by appointment;
- group counselling/therapy sessions when the need arises;
- family/couple sessions when necessary;
- keeping an up-to-date record system as required by the department;
- consultations and liaising with Institute Student Support Services Coordinators (ISSSC);
- consultations with lecturing staff to support students when they need;
- liaising with senior management, academic or administrative staff when necessary;
- liaising with other MCAST services when necessary;
- liaising with and referring to external entities; agencies, professionals, specialists and other such services as required;
- organising staff development seminars;
- establishing evaluative procedures about client satisfaction and conducting research relating to the service being offered by the Department;
- planning and facilitating pro-active sessions through group-work, workshops, and seminars;
- provision of a range of information on a wide variety of topics available in printed format and/or on the College website;
- maintaining appropriate levels of internal and external supervision;
- participating in regular in-service consultation, ongoing training, professional development and departmental meetings;
- compile audit reports and other documents as required by the department.

Counselling/therapy is to be carried out in an appropriate, safe, and confidential environment. Whenever possible, clients should arrange their appointment in their free time if the practitioner is available. Sessions will usually last 50 minutes and clients will attend regularly or periodically as required for 10 sessions. Following these 10 sessions, the practitioner and client re-evaluate the therapeutic process and either have a closure session or extend therapy in cases where more sessions are needed. If a client misses 3 sessions in a row without any reason, the counselling/therapy process is automatically terminated.

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

3. Contacting the Support Services

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

Reference Document:

Doc 044: Support Services Guidelines

4. Location where sessions are held

Sessions are to be held in an environment that is conducive to counselling/therapy. This implies that a private and warm environment needs to be created. In order to ensure this, care must be taken to

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decorate the rooms accordingly and to ensure that the rooms used 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 however practitioners may also carry out sessions at the Satellite Institutes. When delivering sessions at a Satellite Institute where there is no designated therapy room, it is the responsibility of the Director of the Institute to provide a room within the Institute which is suitable for counselling/therapy.

5. Ethical conduct

Practitioners providing a service in the Support Services 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. Practitioners need to consider the implications of their involvement in activities other than counselling/therapy 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 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 Support Services Department 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 a meeting is to be requested with the Director Student Support Services. The College Principal and CEO is to be informed by the Director Student Support Services if the client did not inform the Principal and CEO directly. 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/therapy, clients will be asked to complete a 'Student Feedback Form' 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 Department, it is also necessary to collect non-identifying data. This consists of statistical information related to the overall running of the department. This data will be kept in a safe and secure location. A report from these statistics may also be compiled.

9. Management of Caseload

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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 except in extenuating circumstances. 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 Department, 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 10 sessions, although in some cases a one-off session may be sufficient. At the end of these sessions, the practitioner and the client will review the situation and determine if the client would benefit from further sessions, a referral, or concluding counselling/therapy.

The practitioner is bound to inform the Director Student Support Services or the Senior Counsellor in the former's absence, of clients who manifest a serious risk of posing grave harm to self or others and other crisis situations. The practitioner consequently needs to take the appropriate action and intervene according to the discussion with any of the former. The 'Crisis Report Logging Sheet' needs to be duly filled in, signed and handed over to be attested by the Director Student Support Services and filed for accountability purposes. The practitioner 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 practitioner'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.

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 Department. The initial session is held with the appointed practitioner or personnel designated to the intake role, who fills in the registration form both manually and on the database and a counselling/therapy agreement is explained to the client. The registration form and the counselling/therapy agreement are to be passed on to the Senior Counsellor at the earliest. The latter will review the intake cases, consult with the Director when necessary and assign cases to the relevant practitioners. The relevant registration process is followed accordingly. It is ultimately the responsibility of the Senior Counsellor to allocate new cases and see that each request has been dealt with. In the absence of the Senior Counsellor, a designate practitioner will be appointed by the Director. If none of the practitioners are available for an appointment, clients will be put on a waiting list.

As regards consultations regarding the concern over a student by a member of staff with a practitioner, the member of staff concerned will discuss the case with the Senior Counsellor, Director or any available practitioner. Following a referral if any, the former procedure will be put in place.

If clients request a particular practitioner, ideally the intake session will be conducted by the said practitioner. In case of a crisis, any of the practitioners available have a responsibility to respond to this crisis and inform the Director Student Support Services, Senior Counsellor or in the absence of both the Principal and CEO. 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 practitioners has been reasonably contacted during MCAST working hours. The client will continue to be attended to until the crisis is suitably taken care of, even if this means that the practitioner overstays the hours of work. However, if a crisis occurs and

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is referred after MCAST Support Services working hours, the practitioners cannot be held accountable to intervene as above described.

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11. Change of practitioner assigned

In some instances, a client may wish to change practitioner. In this case the client is to be strongly encouraged to return to the initial practitioner to discuss such a change. If they still wish to change, a closure session is recommended. Following this, the first practitioner needs to discuss with the client whether there is any information that needs to be passed on to the new practitioner. If the duty of care indicates that it is more beneficial for the client that certain information is passed on to the new practitioner, 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.

In particular circumstances either for the beneficence of the client or due to the practitioner experiencing serious professional dilemmas, the practitioner may formally request not to continue sessions with the client. The practitioner is encouraged to discuss these dilemmas and request with the external supervisor, following which, this request will be approved or otherwise by the Director Student Support Services.

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 Support Services. The practitioner will contact them upon returning to work to give them a new appointment. When a practitioner is away for a long period of time, clients are to be offered the possibility to be referred to another practitioner so as to continue their therapeutic work.

13. Confidentiality

The service offered by the Support Services Department 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/therapy.

Confidentiality will be explained to all clients during their intake session.

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

In exceptional circumstances, the practitioner 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 practitioner will seek to obtain the client's consent, unless the law specifies otherwise. If the client disagrees with the disclosure but the practitioner still believes that the disclosure is necessary, the practitioner should always attempt to inform the client that the disclosure will occur and with whom. Such cases are to be treated as crisis

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situations and the practitioner is to follow the same procedure as explained in section 9 entitled 'Management of Caseload'.

The practitioner and any records maintained by the Support Services Department may be subpoenaed by a court of law.

If practitioners receive a request from any other domain for information about a client, no information can be provided by the Support Services without the informed consent of the client. In all cases the Support Services need to discuss any such requests with the Principal and CEO.

14. Internal letters of recommendation

Practitioners are authorised to write internal letters of recommendation equivalent to 'medical certificates' on behalf of clients whose personal extenuating 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 or request. The Director Student Support Services needs to be copied in when such recommendations are made.

If the practitioner has been working with the client for some time and is therefore aware of the nature and severity of their difficulties, writing a letter may well be appropriate. Sometimes the practitioner 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 clients understand that decisions about course-work, assignments, or examinations rest with academic staff, and that the practitioners do not act as advocates in academic disputes. Hence, in cases where a client imagines that a letter from the Support Services 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 client to take to the appropriate member of staff or the practitioner, who retains a copy of the letter, can send it directly to the person concerned.

When clients contact the Support Services Department to obtain a letter and it is clear that they do not want to engage in counselling/therapy, the practitioner is unlikely to be able to fully assess how the client's personal difficulties are affecting their work. In this case, the practitioner may decide not to undertake to write a recommendation letter for clients who attend on a 'one-off' basis. However, the practitioner 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 support services offered for two concluding sessions. During these sessions, the practitioner will provide suggestions of alternative sources of help if the individual wishes to continue with counselling/therapy. It is only in exceptional cases, and at the discretion of the practitioner's professional capacity following approval from the Director Student Support Services, that longer-term work is pursued with an ex-client. The

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Director Student Support Services also needs to be informed of any referrals to external agencies or professionals.

16. Management of clients during the summer period

While the Support Services Department continues to operate during the summer recess, the service provided at that time, and particularly in August, may be on a limited basis for those on-going clients who need to be followed closely. All clients who still avail themselves of the service during each year's academic calendar summer recess will be asked to attend sessions at the Main Campus, Support Services Offices, Paola.

17. Annual reports

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

18. Training and Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

Practitioners need to be provided with CPD as ethically asked for by their accrediting bodies and as required according to the emerging needs of the department. It is the responsibility of the College to ensure that they are provided with the necessary time and funds to attend such training. Counsellors may also use their Work Resources Fund provision for this aim. Requests are to be submitted to the Director Student Support Services who may approve or otherwise after discussing such requests with the Principal and CEO. Support Services may oblige practitioners to attend training that is organised by the same department during working hours. This training may be delivered both by internal personnel and external professionals or agencies.

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 Student Support Services. Supervision is to be funded by the College given that it is intrinsic to the work of a practitioner. In exceptional cases 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 once approved by the Principal & CEO following consultation with the Director Student Support Services. The department provides 'line management supervision', as well as 'peer supervision' and practitioners are obliged to attend these as requested by the Director Student Support Services.

20. Record keeping

Record-keeping is required to support practitioners in their activity. All these documents are the property of MCAST Support Services.

All forms, agreements and statistics, manual and/or online, that particularly refer to clients are confidential. It is the responsibility of the relevant practitioner to keep such documents in a safe and secure location.

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Practitioners will keep brief and anonymous notes about the sessions in accordance with the Data Protection Act and the relevant ethical frameworks of their professions. Such notes are kept in a secure Online Database accessed only by the Director, Senior Counsellor and practitioners. These are provided with individual usernames and passwords. When hard copies of the notes are kept, these are to be filed in a safe and secure place and will be destroyed 5 years after the last session unless the client is still a student at MCAST. In case a practitioner leaves employment, these brief notes will be passed on to the Director or Senior Counsellor and the same care and protection is given.

In case information is taken outside premises, this needs to be discussed with the Director Student Support Services or the Senior Counsellor, 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. All client case notes are to be solely used for the purpose of accountable work-related record-keeping. Any violation of this is deemed as a serious breach of work ethics.

Monthly statistics are to be kept by each practitioner. Totals are to be handed every month to the Senior Counsellor or inputted in the relevant database by not later than the 10th day of the following month.

21. Trauma situations, tragic accidents and death of members of staff, students or their close relatives

The Support Services Department is to be notified through a referral form by MCAST administration or by the administration of the relative Institute or College of any known trauma situations, tragic accidents or death of any member of staff, student, or their close relatives.

The role of the Support Services at this traumatic time is primarily to provide psychological first aid so as to support and assist the client/s concerned. It is recommended that this support is availed of immediately. Consequently, the clients may seek further support when they feel it is timely to do so, which may be weeks or months later, through counselling/therapy at the Support Services.

22. Placements and observation sessions for trainee practitioners

MCAST Support Services values the concept of giving the opportunity to trainees to gain their experience through placements. At the discretion of the department, it will be decided whether at any stage of the year trainees from diverse disciplines can be given this opportunity.

Requests for training placements and observation sessions are to be made in writing and addressed to the Director Student Support Services. Trainee applicants are then invited for a selection meeting and both the chosen trainees as well as their department will consequently be notified. Prior to commencing client work, the trainee needs to hand all mandatory documentation filled in by the trainee and other signatories to the Director Student Support Services or the Senior Counsellor.

Acceptance of trainees both for observation and placement purposes needs to be done with the clients' benefit in mind. In no case should trainees be accepted for observation or placements if Support Services Department deems that this will not be beneficial for the client.

On approval, the trainee will meet the Senior Counsellor or designate person to discuss and acquaint themselves with the service and its procedures. The trainee is expected to adhere to their profession's ethical standards. They are also required to abide by MCAST Support Services Policy and MCAST Support Services Information and Guidelines, copies of which will be accessible to the trainee. The

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trainee will also fill in all the necessary record-keeping forms as requested by the department and will safeguard all documents as stated in this policy.

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

It is the responsibility of the Director 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 and to ensure that the room is left in an orderly state ready for use by the next practitioner and client.

23. Trainees on observations or practice 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; and
- number of client contact hours carried out to date under supervision if any.

The practitioner assigned with the trainee 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 practitioner 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 practitioner.

The cases referred to the 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 Support Services Department and every effort should be made to primarily safeguard the client. It is up to the designate practitioner to ensure that the trainee is setting up and attending the necessary meetings, especially to have their work monitored by the former. MCAST Support Services 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/therapy with one of MCAST's practitioners 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.

Respect for all practitioners within the Department by the trainee and for confidentiality regarding MCAST and Department matters is required at all times during and after placement. Due to the relational nature of the work, it is of utmost importance that the trainee within the department values collegiality, respect and a positive working ambiance as this will in turn permeate and affect the professional quality of the service given by the other practitioners in the Department. All other matters regarding guidelines for trainees are found in the relevant trainee documents.