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# Supervised Student Counselling Practice Placements

## What is a student placement?

A student counselling placement is a supportive structure for students to gain experience with extra support and supervision from training providers, practice supervisors, their placement provider and peers. It is a chance for them to put into practice the learning from a COSCA Validated Course or equivalent and develop their counselling skills. COSCA strongly discourages students from practising without the support of a placement provider i.e. in private practice, and these hours will not count towards placement hours for the purposes of course completion.

In the context of student placements, clients are deemed to be those who have independently approached the placement provider and are allocated by that provider to a suitable student. Family members, peers or anyone previously known to the student are not acceptable as clients and are considered a conflict of interest.

Students should not be required to set and confirm initial appointments with clients, nor manage cancellation or confirmation of appointments with clients, out with their placement times. All client contact with students should be conducted via the practice placement provider. Clients should not have access to contact details for students out with session time, except in exceptional circumstances. Counselling is not considered



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by COSCA an emergency service and clients should be directed to other means of support, not their student counsellor.

Clients should be assessed by a person, preferably an experienced counsellor (but at a minimum a qualified counsellor), who has been trained in assessments. Students should not be carrying out initial assessments. Students should be assigned clients based upon that assessment (bearing in mind that clients don't always disclose everything in an initial assessment) depending on their competency.

Competency does not need to be solely based upon counselling training. The student may have previous experience in working with a particular client group, they may have taken part in additional training or additional training may be provided by the placement provider. The emphasis should be on student competency with the support and guidance of their training provider, supervisor and placement provider. If there is a concern, at any point in the counselling relationship, that the student is unable to work with what the client is bringing, the student should be supported by the placement provider, supervisor and training provider to determine whether this is within the competency of the student and to refer on if necessary. It is a delicate balance between supporting the student to leave their comfort zone to develop their skills and putting pressure on them to work with experiences they feel unqualified to work with safely and effectively.

Clients should be seen in the ratio of online to face to face they are taught on their course. Many COSCA Validated courses are now offering training in working online as part of their in person courses and so it is expected that they would be competent to work both online and in person. This should be



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confirmed with the training provider in the four-way contractual agreement (see below) before the start of the placement.

The client contracts with the organisation first and foremost. It is the organisation's responsibility to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the client. This should preferably be in writing, clearly communicating what they have to offer, including any limitations and managing client expectations e.g. number of sessions offered. The student should check with the client that the client contract is understood before the start of counselling. Students shouldn't make changes to the contract without full consultation and agreement with the placement provider organisation.

Fees may still be collected for the work of students, but the client must be informed that students, and not qualified counsellors, are providing their counselling. COSCA considers students to be able to offer high quality counselling once they have achieved their readiness to practice statement. It may help for this to be emphasised to clients and to highlight the extra supports a student will have in place to be able to work to this high standard.

Student's expenses can be re-imbursed, but they are not expected to have paid positions. They can be offered remuneration, but this is not usually done.

### **When should students apply and what do they need beforehand?**

Students should start looking for a placement as soon as possible once they have been accepted on a course (as it can take time to foster a good



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working relationship with a suitable placement provider), with the proviso that some placement providers do not accept students in their first year. However, COSCA considers students able to work with clients as soon as they have been issued a readiness to practice statement by their training provider. Year of study is not necessarily the determinant of competencies, qualities, experience, fit with provider etc. In addition, practice placements can provide additional training to work with specific client groups.

Students are not required to have had a supervision session before commencing, although this is recommended (students are only required to meet the 1:6 ratio for COSCA Validated courses). Some level of contact is required between the supervisor and supervisee, however, before commencement of the placement, to confirm the supervision requirements and the suitability of the supervisory relationship. Internal supervision may be offered, but it would need to meet the course's and COSCA's criteria for supervisory approval and the supervisor would need to be independently engaged with the four-way contractual agreement.

Supervisors must have substantial counselling experience and will normally have completed counselling training to diploma level and be a COSCA Accredited Counsellor, a COSCA Practitioner Member, or equivalent. Supervisors should have completed recognised and appropriate training in supervision, such as a COSCA Validated Counselling Supervision Course or equivalent, and preferably share areas of interest with the student.

Supervision may be offered in person or online, in accordance with COSCA guidelines on the use of technologies. If practice supervision is to be



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delivered remotely, students should meet in person initially, where feasible, with their counselling supervisor prior to working remotely with them. In all cases it is strongly recommended that students have opportunities to meet with their supervisor (or a second supervisor) in person to recognise the differences in working both in person and online. Students are also required to seek approval in advance from their training provider for the remote delivery of their practice supervision as they must ensure that the identified technology is conducive to participants receiving supervision that meets ethical and legal requirements and standards.

Once students have met an acceptable level of experience on their course, they will be provided with a readiness to practise statement from their training provider. This should be requested by the placement provider before confirming their placement offer.

Students must have insurance for every placement and this can be purchased themselves or provided by the placement provider(s).

COSCA also recommends that all students have an up to date (within 5 years of issue) Protecting Vulnerable Groups (PVG) scheme membership as it is not always possible to predict if a client may later become or reveal to be a protected adult under the definitions of the PVG scheme. It is not legally required if the student will definitely not come into contact with children or protected adults. The need for an up to date PVG should ultimately be determined by the placement provider and will need, by law, to be in place if they are likely to come into contact with a child or a protected adult. A protected adult is someone aged 18 or over who:

- is homeless



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- is receiving a health or community care service
- needs assistance with the activities of daily living
- has experienced, is experiencing or is at risk of experiencing domestic abuse
- has an impaired ability to protect themselves from physical or psychological harm, because of a physical or mental disability, illness, infirmity or ageing

See <https://www.mygov.scot/pvg-scheme> for more information.

Students on placement outside of Scotland will require to comply with the respective legislation of that country in respect of disclosure checks.

### **What makes a suitable placement?**

A COSCA Validated diploma in counselling course will require from a student on placement(s) a minimum of 100 client contact hours to be completed within 18 months of the end of the taught course hours. This can be gained from one or multiple placements. Other COSCA Validated courses may have different requirements.

The placement should be able to offer a mix of both long (i.e. more than 12 sessions) and short-term experience (i.e. 1 to 6 sessions), a dedicated support person, someone available for consultative support while they are working (ideally in person, but, if this is not possible, remotely), the opportunity to record sessions for their case study and any other



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requirements of the training provider, discussed beforehand and forming part of the four-way contractual agreement (see below).

The clients should be adults unless the student's course specifically trains them to work with those under 16 years of age, they have significant experience working with children and/or they have had additional training.

If the organisation offers a specialist service, they are still suitable to offer a Supervised Student Counselling Practice Placement. However, extra training should be given by the specialist organisation to ensure that the student has enough tools to be able to work with that specialist need and to have the confidence and training to refer on when necessary. The training provider should be made aware of this extra training and what will be required of the student.

The placement does not necessarily have to be provided in Scotland, as COSCA recognises that students often travel to Scotland for the high-quality training that is offered. The same requirements are expected unless there is different legislation in that country, for example the PVG disclosure system. This needs to be thoroughly researched and established, forming part of the four-way contractual agreement, before the start of the practice placement.

COSCA recommends some form of group supervision, to provide both peer support for the student and placement provider oversight of the student's progress. Group supervision can also be used to meet COSCA's 1:6 requirement, where there is a qualified supervisor facilitating the session and the time is split evenly between the number of participants. For example, an hour of facilitated group supervision with six participants





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would result in each participant gaining 10 minutes of supervision. However, a group of up to four students can claim 50% of the time together. So, an hour of facilitated group supervision for a group of four participants would enable a student (not a qualified counsellor) to claim half an hour of supervision.

Students should be integrated within the placement provider's organisation, but not be allocated to perform non-counselling related tasks such as reception or office administration.

Students should be encouraged and enabled to interact with other students, qualified counsellors and other relevant personnel to learn and to share experiences, but also to gain support and understanding from those also working within the organisation.

Careful attention must be paid to possible conflicts of interest where a student is already engaged by the placement provider as an employee or volunteer, especially if that organisation is also a training provider. Consideration must be given, in advance of the placement, to what would happen if one or more of those roles are removed, for any reason, and the student wishes to continue in the remaining roles. For example, if the student does not complete their training, are they still comfortable working for the organisation in their previous role? An external placement may be advisable to maintain reasonable boundaries so that their work and training are not mutually dependent.





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## **Application process**

Placement organisations should be looking for students on a counselling course of an appropriate level: COSCA Validated or equivalent.

Any advertising should be clear and consistent and where a diverse group of prospective candidates can be expected to see it.

The application process should be used to determine if the student is a good fit for the organisation and should be conducted in a collaborative and supportive way. Every care should be taken that the process is fair, reasonable and non-discriminatory. This should include establishing the student's availability and any reasonable adjustments that can be made to make the role as accessible as possible while maintaining the high standards provided by COSCA Member Organisations.

There should be a clear job description setting out what is expected of the role and this should be provided to the student. Students should be assessed in any interviews or workshops against these criteria, and only these, to ensure standardisation across the application process. All interviews or workshops where students are assessed should include at least one qualified counsellor.

## **Four-way contractual agreement**

Once the student has been accepted by the placement provider, they must agree in writing with the student, training provider and supervisor in a four-way contractual agreement the responsibilities of each. Clear lines of communication should be fostered among all parties for the support of the



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student. It should be understood that if any party, including the student, feels that the student needs extra support, they are able to contact the other members of the contract.

Students are required by COSCA Validated Training Courses to have a supervision ratio of 1:6 (one supervision hour to every six hours of practice). If other courses have additional or different requirements, this needs to be included in the four-way contractual agreement.

It is recommended that there is ongoing communication regarding the impact of the student's workload, other work and family commitments, multiple placements etc. in conjunction with the training provider and supervisor.

If any member of the contract no longer is willing, able or in operation to keep up their part of the contract, the whole contract is considered void. A new four-way contractual agreement must then be signed and all four roles must be represented.

A separate contract should be completed for each placement.

The four-way contractual agreement is the minimum amount of contact COSCA would expect to see between a student, supervisor, training provider and placement provider. COSCA would hope that this would only be the start of building that collaborative relationship and not the only contact between those involved.



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## Induction

This should be comprehensive, but not punitive. The student should feel a part of the organisation and be given the opportunity to observe (but not be required to participate) in other parts of the placement provider organisation.

Students should be given access to and keep a record of all the policies and procedures relevant to counselling within the placement provider organisation, as well as any that are provided for the wellbeing of both student and client e.g. health and safety procedures. They should be given the opportunity to ask questions. They should also be included in any notifications or consultations of updates or changes.

Students should be inducted in the placement provider organisation's methods of secure record keeping. Records, notes etc are the property and ultimate responsibility of the organisation. Students will need access and will contribute to them as part of their placement, but it is the placement provider's ultimate responsibility to ensure that they are held securely and destroyed in line with the placement provider's policies and procedures.

Students should be introduced to other students, counsellors, administration and management and be informed of opportunities to interact with other counsellors formally at training and meetings and informally in break rooms and events.

They should be given the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the practicalities of the premises and how they are expected to conduct themselves within it.



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Induction should be complete before the student has their first counselling session.

Students should be given clients in a stepped approach (i.e starting with one client and building up to a full case load), taking care to only add additional clients when the student has the competency and capacity to do so.

## Endings

The student and the placement provider should agree at the start of the placement how long the opportunity is offered for and what will happen with both the student and clients when they end. This can be because the student has completed the course and is fully qualified, they have decided to broaden their experience and work elsewhere, the placement provider is no longer able to offer the student the placement or they have been unable to complete the training course.

Students are expected to work with the placement provider to manage the ending of their counselling with the specific clients assigned to them, set out in the four-way contractual agreement (see above). This could be continuing to see the clients until the agreed number of sessions has been completed, working with the client to facilitate a transfer to another counsellor or whatever has been agreed by the student, supervisor, training provider, placement provider and client as best for the individual client.



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If this ending is unexpected this should follow the process already in place for when a counsellor leaves an organisation unexpectedly, for example due to ill health.

A placement provider may offer the opportunity to continue, as a fully qualified counsellor, after the placement has ended. Possible working or volunteering opportunities and their requirements should, if possible, be discussed when the placement is first offered.

## **Concluding remarks**

COSCA recognises that being involved in the training of the next generation of counsellors requires a great amount of commitment, work and investment (both in time and money) by counselling organisations offering Supervised Student Counselling Practice Placements. Students need extra support, supervision and guidance that would not necessarily be required by qualified and experienced counsellors. However, the contribution of students to organisations should not be underestimated, but celebrated due to the many benefits that they bring. Regularly welcoming students with up to date training and new ideas can add an energy and vibrancy that it would be difficult to gain elsewhere. The process of inducting students to an organisation's policies and procedures can encourage reflection on current practices. Counselling students, properly supported by the placement provider, supervisor, training provider and peers, can be a great asset to any counselling organisation.