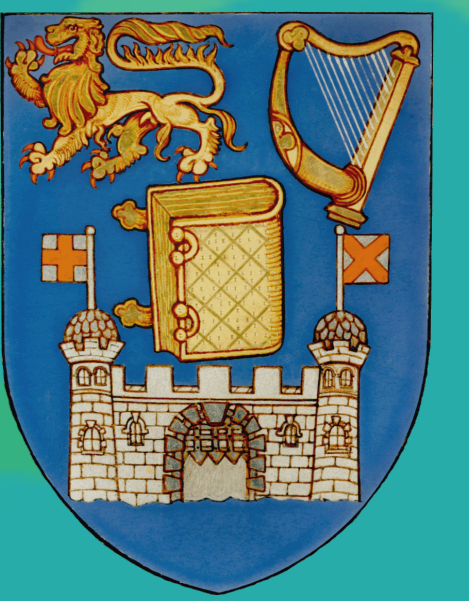


Asperger's Syndrome in the Unilink Service, Trinity College:

A description of the service's key features and the satisfaction of its service users.

O'Connor, K.; Quinn, S.; Gleeson, C.I. & Nolan, C.

University of Dublin, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland.



Overview

Trinity College, like other third level institutions, has seen a rise in the number of students accessing the university with disabilities, including mental health difficulties.

In response to a need to provide practical support for students with mental health difficulties, the Unilink Service was established in 2004 by Clodagh Nolan, a lecturer in the Discipline of Occupational Therapy. Unilink supports students in managing the day-to-day things that they need and want to do, both academically and socially, in order to achieve their full potential, complete their studies, and go on to become productive members of society (Nolan, Quinn & Gleeson, 2009). Unilink is a collaboration between the Discipline of Occupational Therapy and Trinity College Disability Service.

The Asperger's Syndrome (AS) strand of the Unilink Service evolved as the number of students with Asperger's Syndrome rose dramatically over the past four years (see Table 1). To date, a total of 29 students with AS, have availed of Unilink.

Table 1: Numbers of students with AS attending TCD across time

Year	Males	Females	Total
2009-10	19	1	20
2008-09	13	1	14
2007-08	5	0	5
2006-07	3	0	3

As a college bound student with AS enters into the academic and social world of third level education, they are presented with a myriad of challenges to tackle and master. Therefore, they have unique needs and require specialized and individualized support in order to manage these challenges to succeed in the college environment.

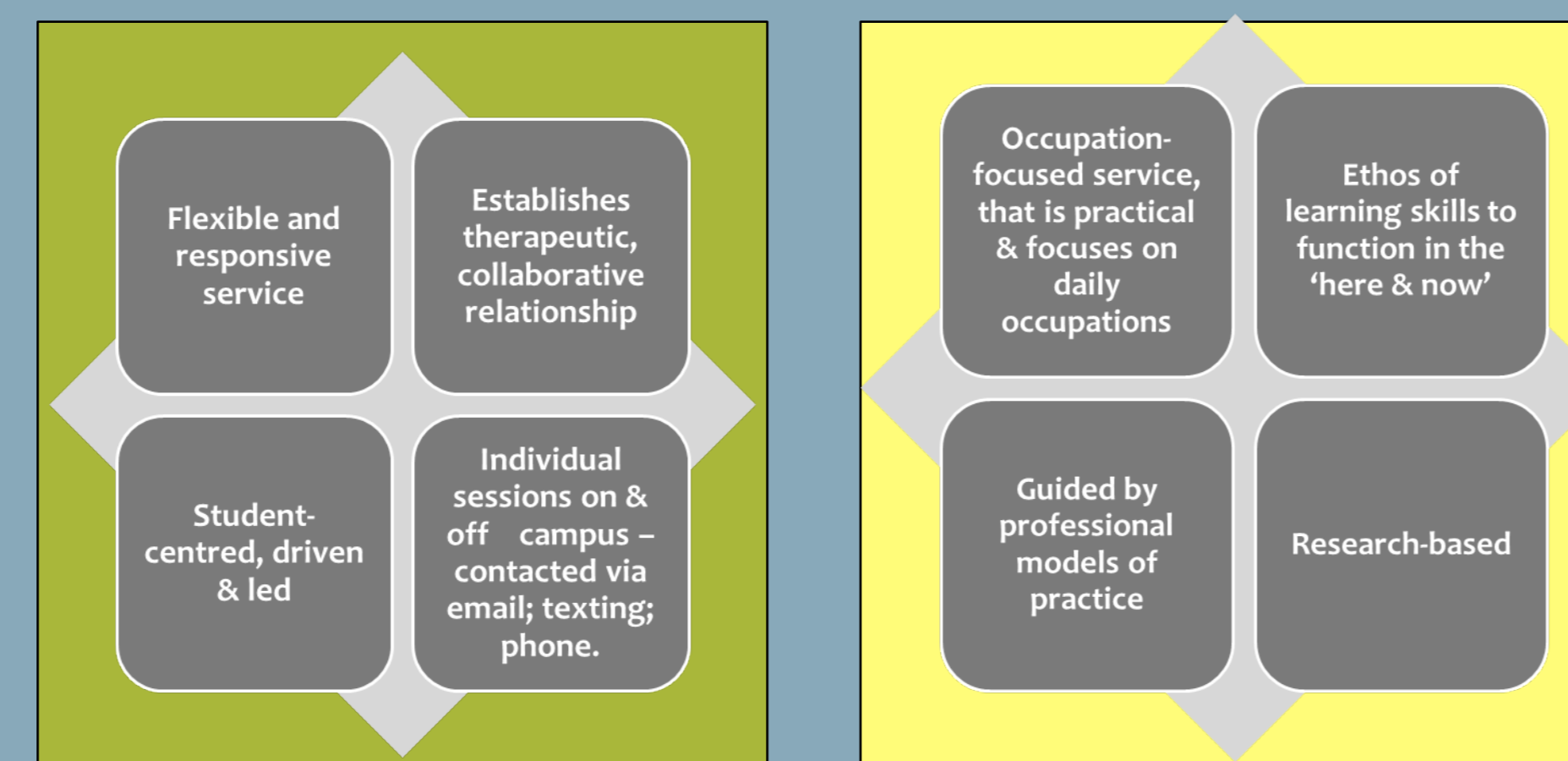
Attributes of Unilink

The Unilink service is staffed by qualified Occupational Therapists. Christiansen and Baum (2005) maintain that Occupational Therapists have a unique perspective - one of enabling people to engage in occupation (activities) when health conditions, social conditions or disabilities impair or threaten their ability to do that which is important and has meaning for them.

The primary approach to working with individuals focuses on their role and occupation as a student within a university environment. Students are encouraged and facilitated to identify, examine and address their individual goals in the areas of academic achievement, personal development and effectiveness, communication and self-management (Nolan, Quinn & Gleeson, 2009).

Therapists and students collaboratively work together to identify difficulties related to their student role and develop practical strategies to help manage these concerns in order for students to fulfill their true potential as students.

Key features of the Unilink service are:



Methodology

AIMS:

- To explore students' use of the service in terms of frequency & methods of contact.
- To establish students' level of satisfaction with the service & to explore its strengths & weaknesses from the users perspective.

METHODS:

Information was gathered via two methods:

- An audit of anonymised student case files (n=29). This retrieved data on student-demographic details, and assessment and intervention related information.
- A client satisfaction survey of current students with AS (n=19). The survey employed a self-administered questionnaire which was designed specifically for use in this project and was completed by 12 students.

DATA ANALYSIS:

Quantitative data was coded and inputted into SPSS. Testing was primarily descriptive in nature.

Results

STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS:

Of the 29 students with Asperger's Syndrome (AS) who have availed of the Unilink Service over the past 4 years, the vast majority have been male (n=27) and more are students in the Faculty of Engineering, Mathematics & Science than in other faculties in college (see Table 2 for information on faculty affiliation).

Table 2: Distribution of students with AS across faculty

Year	Faculty of Arts, Humanities & Social Science	Faculty of Engineering, Mathematics & Science	Faculty of Health Sciences
2009-10	8	12	0
2008-09	5	9	0
2007-08	4	1	0
2006-07	2	1	0

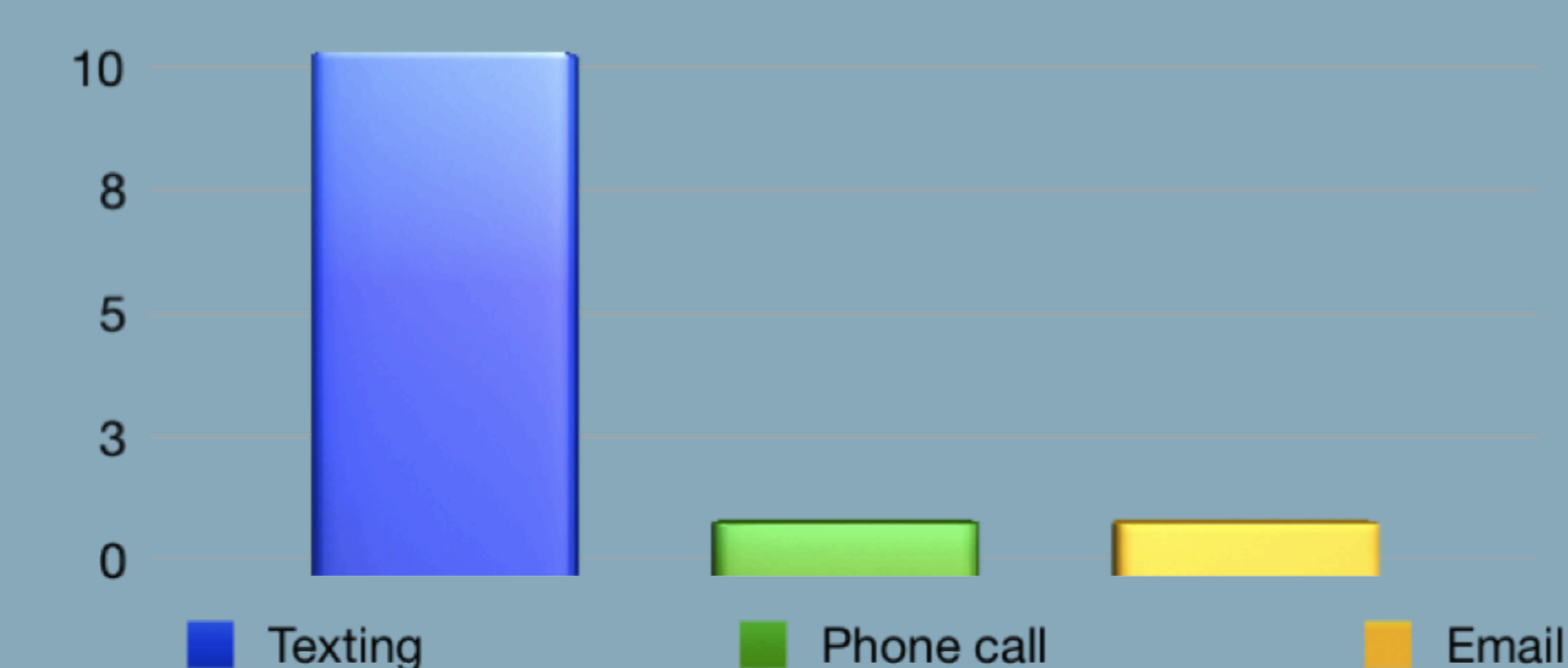
This may in part be due to the math and science courses on offer in this Faculty, as they tend to appeal to students with AS, as they are more factually based.

USE OF SERVICE:

The maximum number of Unilink sessions of any student with AS was 80 (mean = 18, SD =19.8). Twenty-one students out of the 29 showed a frequency of appointments as 'weekly'. This identifies one of the key characteristics of Unilink; students can avail of sessions on a needs based approach and can use the service for the full duration of their college course.

In an earlier study, the use of texting as a method of contact between student and therapist was found to be a strength of the Unilink service (Nolan, Quinn, & MacCobb, 2010). Texting is an integral aspect of student life and is a form of social contact for college students. The total number of texts sent by therapists within the service to students with AS over four years was 964; (mean = 33 texts per person; max. number of texts to any one student was 160). Texting with this group increased greatly in the last two years in particular. The statistics for other methods of contact with the service were: total number of emails was 280 and phone calls 212. Results from the student questionnaire showed that students with AS prefer texting than any other form of communication outside of face-to-face sessions, this is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: The students with AS (n=12) preferred methods of contact outside of sessions



Following analysis of the Trinity Student Profile (TSP); an assessment tool used to glean information on the student's university course demands and on their personal, environmental and occupational concerns. It was found that 15 of the 24 TSP's completed by the students with AS identified a difficulty with their communication skills and further identified it as an aspect to work on in sessions.

SATISFACTION WITH UNILINK SESSIONS:

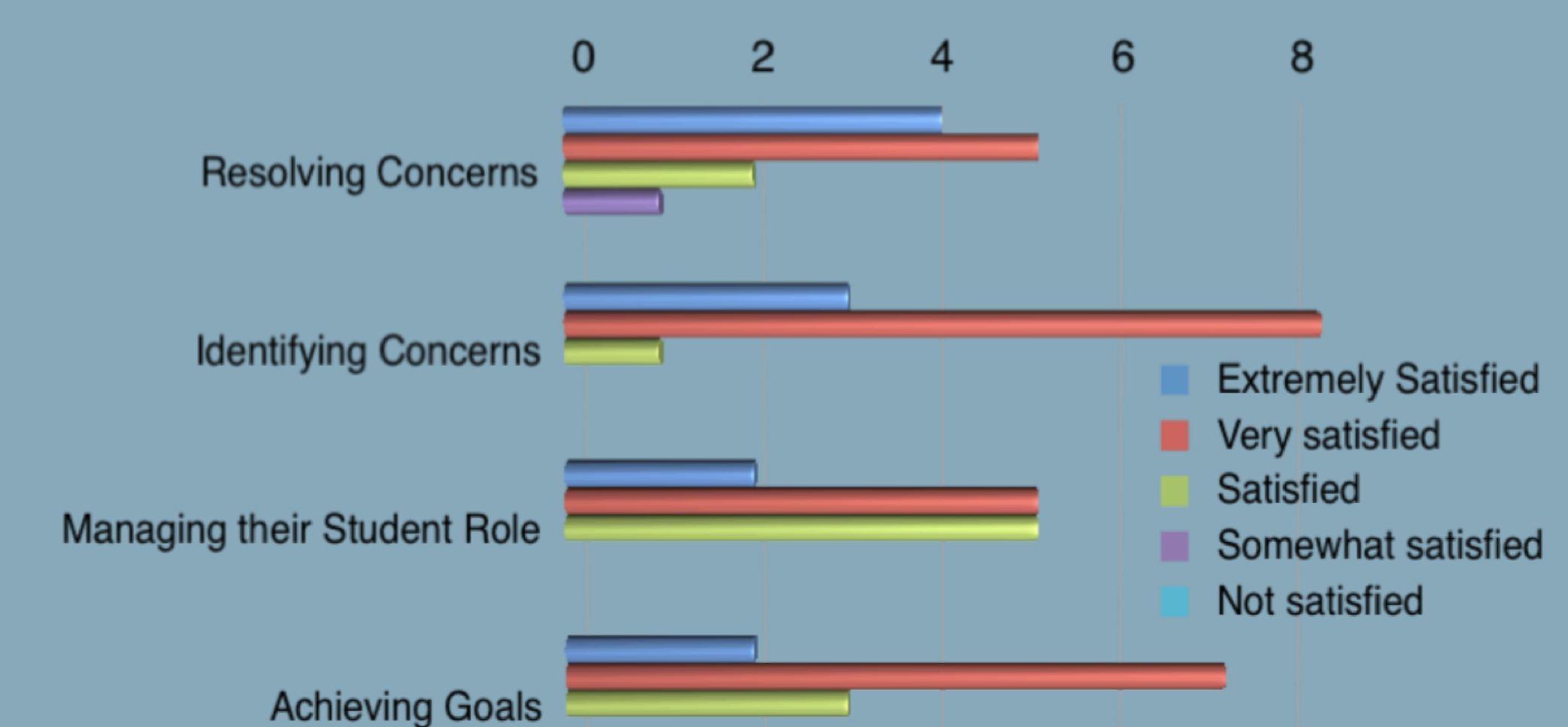
Eight of the 12 students who completed the questionnaire rated that they were 'very satisfied' with being able to identify their concerns collaboratively with the therapist in sessions. Students further commented on the questionnaire, how they benefited from the Unilink sessions; one student explained how Unilink provided the support and strategies in developing social skills;

"I became more outgoing and I have improved my communication skills'.

Ten of the 12 students stated that they applied intervention strategies practiced in sessions to their daily lives. One student for example describes how they applied goal setting skills to better manage their demands as a student;

"Setting goals has helped me have a clear plan of action for the week and helped me maintain a healthy balance between my academic, social and student life."

Figure 2. Student's level of satisfaction with how the therapist supported the students in Unilink sessions



Conclusion

It is evident from this research project that students with AS encounter difficulties in engaging with the different demands of college life; however further individualized supports such as Unilink can help to provide support and facilitate students' participation in all aspects of college life, and enable students to realise their abilities so that they can develop both personally and academically.

Continued evaluation of the Unilink Service is critical in order to provide a needs-based and evidence based practice for students with AS.

References

- Christiansen CH, & Baum CM, (2005). Occupational therapy performance: participation and well being. Thorofare, NJ: Slack.
- Nolan C & Quinn S. (2010). The Use of Mobile Phone Technology, in particular Text Messaging, as a means of maintaining communication and developing relationships with Third Level Students in the provision of a mental health service. Occupational Therapy in Mental Health, awaiting publication.
- Nolan, C., Quinn, S., & Gleeson, C. (2009). Report on the Unilink Service - An Occupational Therapy Mental Health Initiative. Five years on 2004 - 2009. Dublin: University of Dublin, Trinity College.