

From First Contact to Continuity: Developing a Record-Informed Follow-Up Pathway in a Moroccan University Counselling Centre. *A Practice Report*

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Abstract

Continuity after first contact is a practical challenge for university student support services, particularly during the first-year transition. This practice report documents the development phase of a service improvement initiative in a Moroccan public university science faculty. Fully de-identified routine records from 240 first-year students were reviewed to identify how existing documentation limited interpretation of continuity after initial contact. Only 25 students (10.4%) had at least one subsequent recorded contact, and the archive did not show whether further contact had been intended. Recorded continuity varied most clearly by gender and age at first contact. The review informed a five-part, low-burden pathway: clarify the agreed next step, make the route back visible, offer consent-based check-ins, add minimal continuity fields, and review aggregate patterns. Designed for phased introduction through existing forms and communication practices, the pathway is intended to improve process clarity and generate interpretable service information without requiring resource-intensive case management systems.

Keywords: First-year transition; student success; counselling and guidance; continuity of support; service improvement.

Introduction

The first year of higher education concentrates several transitions into a short period. Students must adjust to new academic expectations, unfamiliar procedures, changing peer relationships and, in many cases, new financial, transport or housing demands. These pressures can affect participation, wellbeing and progression, making timely student support an important part of institutional practice rather than an activity separate from student success (Duffy et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2022). Counselling, guidance and related services can provide a low-threshold point for listening, clarification, referral and early assistance when difficulties begin to interfere with university life.

Initial access, however, does not establish that the pathway through support is clear. One conversation may be sufficient, may lead to a referral or may be the beginning of further work. When the next step is not explicitly recorded, the service can count that a student attended but cannot easily distinguish appropriate one-contact support from intended follow-up that did not



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occur. This ambiguity is especially relevant during the first-year transition, when students are still learning the purpose of formal support and may not recognise when or how to re-engage. Research on help-seeking consistently identifies gaps between experiencing difficulty, recognising a need for support and using available services (Anh et al., 2026; Begum et al., 2024; Ebert et al., 2019; Osborn et al., 2022).

Recent practice reports demonstrate that support pathways become more usable when institutions simplify access, communicate personally and translate routine information into service improvements. Huang and Clemson (2026) show how timely, personalised communication and straightforward routes for requesting help can encourage two-way engagement. Lowe and Wright (2024) show how an institutional audit can be converted into a transferable practice framework, while Wyatt et al. (2025) illustrate how service cases can reveal recurring barriers requiring a systematic response. Evidence from embedded university counselling services also shows the value of complete routine records for understanding provision and informing service development (Broglia et al., 2023).

This practice report documents the development phase of a service improvement initiative in a Moroccan university counselling and guidance centre. Routine first-year service records were reviewed to identify where the existing documentation limited interpretation of continuity after first contact. The resulting evidence was translated into a five-part follow-up pathway designed for introduction through existing service forms and communication practices. The report describes the pathway, its implementation requirements, its expected practice value and indicators through which its operation can subsequently be evaluated.

The Counselling Centre and the Continuity Challenge

The centre is located in a large public university faculty of sciences in Marrakech, Morocco, and has operated since 2009, according to institutional records. The faculty enrolls students in scientific programmes including physics and chemistry, life and earth sciences, and mathematics and computer science. First-year students may encounter demanding course structures alongside changes in the language of instruction, uncertainty about academic orientation, transport and housing pressures, and financial or family responsibilities. A student-facing point of guidance is therefore particularly relevant during the transition into university.

The centre functions as a low-threshold support point rather than an exclusively clinical service. Students present with academic and study-related concerns, administrative questions, personal or family pressures, financial or housing difficulties, health concerns and other issues affecting university life. Routine provision includes listening, guidance and referral. At first contact, staff record a primary concern and a limited set of student and study descriptors on standardised service forms; subsequent contacts are also recorded. The archive can therefore show how students first reached the service and whether another contact was subsequently documented.

The record structure is less able to show what the service and student intended to happen next. It does not contain a standard field indicating whether one contact was expected to be sufficient, whether another contact had been recommended or scheduled, whether a referral had been made or why a case ended. Contact count is consequently informative but incomplete. A one-contact record could represent successful resolution, referral, student preference or an interrupted pathway. The practical problem is not low repeat attendance in itself, it is the absence of a simple way to interpret continuity after the first conversation.

A feasible response must fit the operational reality of a service working with basic routine records and limited capacity for intensive case management. Experience from redesigned university counselling pathways suggests that improvements in accessibility and efficiency must also account for workload, record keeping, confidentiality and professional acceptability (Randall & Bewick, 2016). The pathway presented here therefore adds a small number of decisions and fields to existing practice rather than assuming that every student should enter long-term support.

Using Routine Service Records to Develop the Pathway

A practice-oriented review was undertaken using fully de-identified routine records generated between 2015 and 2018. The records were analysed as a bounded four-year service series within a common intake and recording structure. The review was not used to estimate the current prevalence of follow-up nor to conclude that the observed percentages remain unchanged. Its practical purpose was to examine a durable record design problem evident in the archive: contacts are counted, but the intended

pathway after first contact is not systematically documented. It is this information gap, rather than the historical contact rate itself, that the follow-up pathway addresses. The practical question of ‘what happened next’ remains, wherever student support services rely on basic contact count records, without a standard field for the agreed next step.

The review focused on first-year students for two reasons. Firstly, entry to university is an intensive transition period and, secondly, first-year students formed the largest group accessing the centre. Of 264 first-year records in the archive, 240 contained complete information for recorded continuity as well as all five of the first-contact descriptors, thus they were included in the comparative review. The remaining 24 records were excluded from these comparisons because one or more of the selected descriptors were unavailable. Recorded continuity after first contact was defined in two categories: no subsequent recorded contact (meaning one contact in total) and at least one subsequent recorded contact (meaning two or more contacts in total). The wording is intentionally descriptive. It reports what the service archive can show without assuming that every further contact constituted sustained counselling or that every one-contact encounter represented disengagement.

All five of the selected first-contact descriptors were retained because the information was available to staff at or around the initial encounter: recorded gender (man or woman, the categories available in the source forms), age at first contact (17–19 or 20 years and older), primary concern (academic or study-related; personal, social or basic needs-related), study pathway continuity (the same or a changed broad study track between upper secondary education and university) and place of origin (Marrakech or outside Marrakech). Frequencies and within-category percentages described recorded continuity. Exploratory Pearson chi-square tests examined whether continuity differed across the five descriptors; the comparisons were used for service reflection rather than individual prediction.

Institutional authorisation was obtained before data extraction. Under the applicable institutional and national arrangements, formal research ethics committee review was not required for secondary analysis of fully de-identified routine service records. Service staff removed identifying information before researcher access, only aggregate findings are reported and the review involved no new contact with students.

What the Records Showed for Practice

Of the 240 first-year students included in the comparative review, 215 (89.6%) had no subsequent recorded contact and 25 (10.4%) had at least one subsequent recorded contact. The service therefore documented initial access much more often than continuity beyond the first conversation. This was the central practice-related finding because the existing records could identify subsequent contacts. Recorded continuity differed most clearly by gender and age at first contact. A subsequent contact was documented for 16.8% of women and 1.9% of men, and for 19.2% of students aged 17–19 compared with 6.2% of students aged 20 or older. No clear differences appeared by primary concern, study pathway continuity or place of origin. These patterns supported a universal approach: every student leaves with a clear next step and visible route back, while further contact remains guided by student choice and the agreed plan (See Table 1).

Table 1

Recorded Continuity After First Contact by First-Contact Descriptor (N = 240)

Descriptor	Category	No Subsequent Contact, n (%)	≥1 Subsequent Contact, n (%)	$\chi^2(1)$, p
Recorded gender	Man (n = 103)	101 (98.1)	2 (1.9)	13.89, < .001
	Woman (n = 137)	114 (83.2)	23 (16.8)	
Age at first contact	17–19 years (n = 78)	63 (80.8)	15 (19.2)	9.62, .002
	20 years or older (n = 162)	152 (93.8)	10 (6.2)	
Primary concern	Academic/study (n = 186)	167 (89.8)	19 (10.2)	0.04, .849
	Personal/social/basic needs (n = 54)	48 (88.9)	6 (11.1)	
Study pathway continuity	Changed track (n = 87)	82 (94.3)	5 (5.7)	3.19, .074
	Same track (n = 153)	133 (86.9)	20 (13.1)	
Place of origin	Marrakech (n = 74)	65 (87.8)	9 (12.2)	0.35, .555
	Outside Marrakech (n = 166)	150 (90.4)	16 (9.6)	
Overall	All students	215 (89.6)	25 (10.4)	—

Note. Percentages are calculated within each category. A subsequent recorded contact means two or more contacts in total and does not necessarily represent a planned follow-up appointment or sustained counselling.

From Evidence to Practice: A Five-Part Follow-Up Pathway

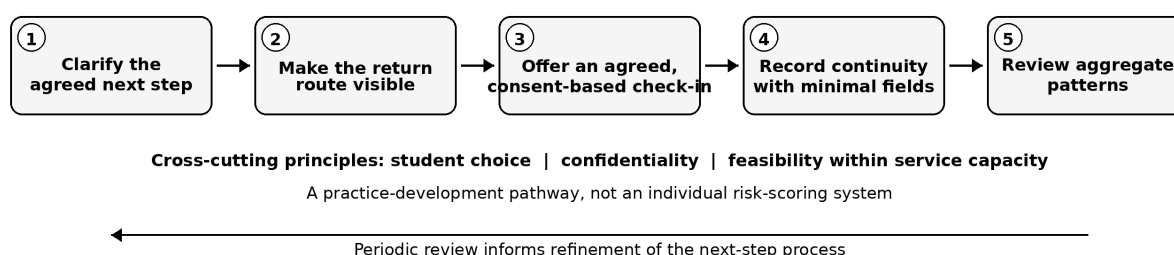
The review identified a continuity blind spot rather than a simple attendance problem. This report documents the development of the pathway: identifying the continuity problem, mapping the information gaps in the existing record and specifying the minimum practice changes needed to make the pathway after first contact visible and reviewable. The next stage is its phased introduction and evaluation within routine service provision.

The five components of the follow-up pathway were developed by mapping evidence to current practice, rather than by constructing a generic counselling model. Because contact count does not capture agreed follow-up plans the first component clarifies the next step. Because the record does not show whether students knew how to return, the second makes the route back visible. Because an agreed but unrealised follow-up cannot be identified, the third introduces proportionate, consent-based check-ins. Because contact counts are difficult to interpret, the fourth adds minimal continuity fields. Finally, subgroup variation in recorded continuity led to periodic aggregate review as a way to examine accessibility without using demographic characteristics to determine individual follow-up. The service evidence therefore defined what the pathway needed to address, while the supporting literature informed how those responses could remain accessible, proportionate, confidential and feasible within limited service capacity.

The pathway is designed for introduction through existing forms and communication practices without the need for predictive software or a resource-intensive case management system. Its expected value lies in improving the interpretability and consistency of the service process: more first contacts with a documented next step, clearer routes for returning, more visible referral and follow-up status, and routine information that can support periodic service review (See Figure 1).

Figure 1

A Five-Part Pathway for Continuity After First Contact



Clarify the Agreed Next Step

Each initial encounter should end with a mutually understood next step. A simple field can distinguish four common outcomes: the immediate issue was addressed in one contact, the student may return if needed, another contact is recommended or scheduled, or referral to another service is the appropriate next action. This does not impose continued contact. It records the understanding reached at the end of the conversation and creates a meaningful basis for later review: the service can examine whether intended follow-up occurred rather than treating every one-contact record as equivalent.

Make the Route Back Visible

Students should leave the first encounter knowing whether they can return, how to do so and what a further contact might involve. A brief standard explanation can normalise re-contact without implying that the student requires additional or intensive support. Returning may be useful to review progress, clarify a referral or determine whether the initial guidance was sufficient. The route should be concrete and low-friction, with clear information about location, appointment procedures and the person or unit to contact. This follows practice evidence that support becomes more usable when communication is personalised and the process of asking for help is simplified (Huang & Clemson, 2026).

Offer Proportionate, Consent-Based Check-Ins

A check-in is most appropriate when further contact is recommended or agreed but no return is recorded by the agreed review point. The contact can be brief and neutral: a reminder of the next step, confirmation that the student can return and information about an alternative service where relevant. Consent for the communication route should be recorded at first contact. The aim is to reopen an agreed pathway, not to pressure the student. Individual follow-up should remain guided by the conversation, student choice, the agreed plan and service capacity.

Add Minimal Continuity Fields

Only a small extension to the routine record is required. In addition to contact date and primary concern, the service can record the agreed next step, consent for a check-in, the preferred communication route, referral status and a brief closure status where known. Tick-box fields with an optional short note are preferable to lengthy narrative requirements. This preserves staff time while making the archive more useful. It also prevents over-interpretation of contact count: two students with one recorded meeting may have had very different pathways if one concern was resolved and the other had an intended subsequent appointment that did not occur.

Review Aggregate Patterns for Service Improvement

Each semester or academic year, the centre can review a small set of aggregate indicators: the proportion of first contacts with an agreed next step, the proportion of recommended follow-ups completed, referral status where visible, response to consented check-ins and staff time required. Institutional records become most useful when they support reflective decisions about service design rather than remain purely administrative (Broglia et al., 2023; Lowe & Wright, 2024; Wyatt et al., 2025). Patterns should prompt questions about communication, accessibility and workload, not labels applied to students.

Table 2

How Evidence From the Service Review Informed the Follow-Up Pathway

Evidence or Information Gap	Pathway Response	Practice Rationale
Contact count does not identify what was intended after first contact	Clarify the agreed next step	Distinguishes appropriate one-contact support from intended continuation
The record does not show whether students knew how to return	Make the route back visible	Reduces uncertainty surrounding re-contact
No mechanism identifies agreed follow-up that did not occur	Offer proportionate, consent-based check-ins	Reopens an agreed pathway without imposing continuation
Contact records contain too little information to interpret continuity	Add minimal continuity fields	Makes routine records useful without creating excessive workload
Group-level differences can be observed but not interpreted through individual records	Review aggregate patterns	Supports equity-focused service reflection without demographic targeting

Implementation and Evaluation of the Pathway

Implementation can proceed in three phases. First, the centre can add the agreed next step and consent fields to its existing record and prepare a brief script explaining return options. Second, it can introduce check-ins where further contact was recommended, using one neutral message and one designated communication route. Third, staff can review the pathway after one teaching period to assess completion of the new fields, workload, student response and any adjustments required. A phased introduction protects service capacity and permits adaptation before wider use.

Expected impact should be assessed at the level of pathway clarity rather than repeat-contact volume alone. Useful indicators include the proportion of initial contacts with a documented next step, the proportion of agreed follow-ups completed, student-reported clarity about how to obtain further support, response to consented check-ins, referral follow-through where available and staff time required. These indicators recognise that one contact may be entirely appropriate and that the objective is a coherent pathway, not indiscriminate continuation.

Contact frequency is therefore a service indicator rather than an outcome in itself. One contact may represent appropriate resolution, information provision, referral or student preference, while a subsequent contact may serve different purposes. The pathway focuses on documenting what was agreed. Messages should use neutral wording, avoid revealing the nature of the concern and be sent only through a route the student has agreed to use. Students should be able to decline further contact without losing future access to support.

The pathway addresses a continuing operational question: what should happen after the first conversation, and how can that pathway be made visible with the information and staffing already available? Its phased introduction will allow the centre to examine documentation, follow-through, student clarity and workload over time.

Transferable Principles for Resource-Constrained Settings

The minimum requirements are modest: a basic first-contact record, a way to link later contacts, one field for the agreed next step, a secure and consented communication route, and periodic aggregate review. A service can begin by recording the next step, explaining how the student can return, documenting consent before any check-in, noting whether intended follow-up occurred and reviewing the resulting pattern once per semester. This sequence is feasible without a sophisticated analytics platform.

Institutions will need to adapt the pathway to their service mandate, staffing, referral network and data governance requirements. In some settings, follow-up may be undertaken by a counsellor, in others, by an adviser or social worker. The appropriate interval and communication route will also vary. Adaptation should preserve four principles: clarity, proportionality, student choice and feasibility within service capacity.

The demographic patterns observed in this review are context-specific and should not be interpreted as universal thresholds. However, the practice of using routine information to ask whether intended support pathways are visible and functioning equitably is transferable. The transferable question is not simply who returned, but whether the next step was clear, appropriate and possible.

Conclusion

Access and continuity are related but distinct dimensions of student support. In this Moroccan counselling centre review, only 10.4% of first-year students had a subsequent recorded contact, while the existing record cannot distinguish all appropriate one-contact encounters from intended follow-up that did not occur. The practical response is not to seek repeat attendance indiscriminately, but to make the pathway after first contact explicit.

The five-part pathway links an agreed next step, a visible route back, proportionate consent-based check-ins, minimal continuity fields and periodic aggregate review. Together, these elements offer a clearer and more inclusive support process that remains feasible where staff time and data infrastructure are limited.

Disclosure Statement

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Data Availability

The underlying records are not publicly available because they derive from confidential student support service files. Aggregate information may be considered on reasonable request, subject to institutional authorisation and applicable confidentiality requirements.

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