

## Ask Aberdeen Episode 17 Transcript

**Georgie** I'm Georgie.

**Michaela** And I'm Michaela,

**Georgie** and we're here to tell you about the University of Aberdeen,

**Michaela** in each episode, we will discuss frequently asked questions about topics such as applications

**Georgie** go abroad.

**Michaela** Student life.

**Georgie** Sports and Societies,

**Michaela** Budgeting for Uni and

**Georgie** life in Aberdeen.

**Michaela** We will be speaking to current Aberdeen students, those who really know what it's like to study and live here.

**Georgie** And we'll be getting exclusive tips from members of our amazing staff.

**Michaela** Join us for this episode of Ask Aberdeen.

**Georgie** So welcome back to another episode of Ask Aberdeen, I'm Georgie, and today we're going to be hearing about everything that is available to our students from the student support team. I'm joined by my colleagues, Jemma and Duncan. Jemma do you want to introduce yourself and what you do?

**Jemma** Yes. Hi, everyone. My name is Jemma Murdoch and I am the lead student support advisor here at the University of Aberdeen. So I'm responsible for the front line student support team dealing with queries on a whole range of issues, most of which will probably be covered in today's podcast.

**Georgie** Great thanks Jemma. And Duncan do you want to explain what you do?

**Duncan** Yes. Hi guys. I'm Duncan, I'm a student supervisor at the university. And we deal with a whole range of different issues via the student support email or if you call us up, you will be able to leave a voicemail and be able to speak to us. We'll call you back.

**Georgie** Thank you. We're going to start with something that people often ask us, which is can anyone use student support, who is it available to. Jemma can you explain how that works?

**Jemma** Yeah, absolutely. So we are here for all of our students and we're also here for prospective students as well. So a lot of students, before they come to the university, will be interested to hear about the support services that we can offer, particularly if they have specific needs if they're a carer or if they're a disabled student or they have their own

children, for example, they might want to know about the different support that we have available and funding. So we do interact with people as applicants and then we're available for all of our students. And students that are taking a break from their studies as well, are welcome to get in touch with our services. So we work with students regularly through their student journey to the point of graduation. And we also work very closely with staff across the university on student matters and really quite a lot with external organisations as well. But in terms of providing specific support, that would be for our applicants and our registered students.

**Georgie** Brilliant, so if applicants, most of our listeners are applicants, what's the best way that they can get in contact with you if they want to ask for advice before they start studying at Aberdeen?

**Jemma** So there's lots of different ways that they can engage with us. I mean, the thing that seems to be the most popular, the most common is email. So [studentsupport@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:studentsupport@abdn.ac.uk) but we also have an online contact form for our disabled students to let us know about their specific needs so that we can get back in touch with them there. And we are involved in a lot of the recruitment events, a lot of the open days and visits to the university. So if a student would prefer to actually speak to us face to face at one of these events, then they can look out for what's advertised on the website and then arrange to be able to see us when they are visiting Aberdeen. So there's a few different ways, but email tends to be the most popular would you agree Duncan?

**Duncan** Yeah, definitely. We get a lot of queries coming in about all the wonderful things the university does, and we try and help or point those questions in the right direction.

**Georgie** That's great. And something else someone raised was can students come to you at any point during their studies? They don't need to, for example, if they're dyslexic, they might not think to speak to you at first, but they might then decide in two years that they want help. Can they come to you at any time?

**Jemma** Yeah, absolutely. And I think that's a really, really good question. A lot of students, when they come to the university, are used to having support in place at school. But the style of learning is very different at university and they might find that they don't necessarily need support. And then later on in their studies, as things change, as they progress through their course or try a different course than they realise that the support would be quite helpful. The other thing to highlight is that our student support team are here to support students who are disabled, but also students who have health conditions and health conditions can fluctuate. So some of our disabled students haven't necessarily been disabled at the point of entry. So just to highlight that, yes, students can get in touch with us at any point during their studies in any of the ways that we've mentioned before. And sometimes it will be that a member of the academic staff or a friend might mention that the support's available and they realise, you know, actually I would really benefit from that. So different terminology is used when we talk about accessibility and inclusion. And I think that that could be quite confusing. Sometimes some students who have had support in place at school don't necessarily see themselves as a disabled student, particularly when it comes to specific learning differences like dyslexia. So it can sometimes take a little bit of time for them to navigate through that process at the university. But absolutely, we're here at any point during a student journey.

**Georgie** And Duncan, I'm sure you've had students who have come to you who maybe don't know if they qualify and don't know whether they're the right kind of student. But I

presume you welcome everyone. You're happy to chat to anyone and discuss what might suit them?

**Duncan** Yeah we're quite a friendly bunch. So we're more than happy to speak to absolutely any student who wants to come and just chat or wants to find out more about what support we can provide as a university. So I myself had dyslexia at school, but hadn't actually had an educational psychologist or anything. So I didn't actually get my support or anything in place until well into the second semester. So it was student support that actually helped me get that when I was a student.

**Georgie** And on that kind of basis of exam support and maybe in lectures and things for students that need it, what kind of things can you put in place that would help them, so the things they might have had in school?

**Jemma** Yeah, so when we meet with a student, the key focus is that it's a student led service. So we'll take a look at a student's evidence, discuss their experiences of study before they've been at the university with us. And some of our applicants have already had a period of study at college or university or they've come directly from school. So they'll be aware of the type of support that they've had. But I think the thing that I've mentioned before is key to note that the style of learning can be quite different. There's a lot more large scale teaching lectures. So actually the support that's been in place before is not always the best starting point. It's looking at the individual student's needs. But the type of thing that we will look at are things like extra time in exams, note takers, you know, there's lots of different things, depending on the individual student that we can help with. And we can make recommendations for different accommodation, for example, for our disabled students and employ campus assistance to help a student get around between classes. So it really does vary. And I think you've mentioned there yourself about the support you've had. You'll have seen that the support that we can offer to different students will vary completely.

**Duncan** So both me and my twin were actually students of the university and our provisions were completely different, even though we both had dyslexia. But he also had some other things as well. And we got different provisions. But both were specific to our needs and what we needed in our courses as well. So, yeah, the support is really great. And now being in the team and seeing how particularly disability advisers work with individual students shows a plethora of different support that we have.

**Georgie** I think as well from my experience when I was at uni, I wouldn't qualify as disabled in any way, but I used to have eczema on my hands so writing and exams was difficult and it was painful. So I went to them and didn't really expect anything. And they were really helpful when I got extra time and they let me use the computer and things like that. So I think the message to our listeners as well is to just ask for the help and support and you guys will be able to advise them if there's anything available, what you can do.

**Jemma** Yeah, absolutely and I think that it extends beyond, you know, medical conditions, mental health conditions and disability as well. If there's anything that's preventing you from conducting your studies in the way that you would hope to, any kind of barriers at all to your learning, whether it is that the circumstances at home don't make it particularly conducive to study, or your personal circumstances mean that you're working a lot more part time hours than you would expect. We can get financial support. So it isn't always just about the provisions and the extra time and the things that we can do for our disabled students and student support. We really are here to try and break down any barriers at all

that are in someone's student journey. So really, the key thing, as you mentioned there, Georgie, is to come and chat to us, to speak to an adviser. And it may be that we're just offering advice or we're offering practical support, things like our hardship funds or just listening or somebody to speak to in our counselling team. But it may be as well that our provisions and things that we can do to practically put support in place. So the key thing is really just to come and talk as openly as you can about your circumstances, knowing that we wouldn't discuss that with the academic teams either. So a conversation with the student support team does remain private within the department. And we'll make recommendations for support without necessarily giving details to anyone else about why we've recommended that support.

**Georgie** That's great. And you mentioned that hardship funds, that's obviously a different element, you're not disabled necessary to receive that. How does that work? Can you expand on that?

**Jemma** Yes, that's a huge part of the work that the student support team do within the department. We have hardship funding that comes from a variety of different sources. But the primary source would be the government discretionary funds. So that's available for students who are in receipt of the maximum student loan that's available to them. So UK funded students and if they find themselves in unexpected or exceptional financial circumstances, we encourage them to make an application to that fund. What we do say as well is that there will be other hardship funds available throughout the year for different students from different backgrounds, depending on the circumstances and the offering from the government at the time. But the key thing is that if any student find themselves in financial hardship, that they come and speak to the student support team and we'll do our best to help. And Duncan and I and our colleagues work on a range of sort of support for people in financial difficulty. But we also are really keen to help educate people on their finances, provide budgeting skills and workshops. And I know, Duncan, you did a talk just recently about money skills to new students.

**Duncan** Yeah. So and it went really well. It's nice to see students on campus and just different questions that we bring up and the students may not have thought about before coming or living on a budget. What does that mean? How do you sort all this stuff out? And we try and help educate students to do that, to live within their monthly budget. And we also try and show them where they might be able to receive money as well and help them with that as well.

**Georgie** That's really great, I presume you maybe get more students who have once they've left university accommodation, who then struggle with finances and things when you have to pay your bills and your wifi and everything differently, is that something that comes up?

**Jemma** Yeah, absolutely, we talk about transition points from where, you know, when we're talking about students and coming to university is a huge transition and getting set up and organised and getting used to all the student loan functions and the different, you know, the different terms around student money. But you're right, a huge transition point is then leaving that kind of supported environment in the halls or the student accommodation and starting to think about having to budget for the things that might have been included in halls. One fantastic thing about all this is that you're paying for the full package. You don't often have to worry about these things. So, yeah, there's lots of support. And we work quite closely with our resident assistants to try to ensure that we are providing students

who are leaving our halls with a package of support that they can then take forwards into their new accommodation.

**Georgie** I think as well, we've done an episode where some of our students talk about their finances and how much does it cost to live in Aberdeen and what should you budget and things, so if any of our listeners are thinking that they want to know a bit more about finance and budgeting than there's a focus on that as a budgeting for uni life, so you can jump across and listen to that as well. Something else that the uni offers is the student helpline. Can you tell us a bit more about that, please?

**Jemma** Yeah, absolutely, so we have a student helpline which is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, it's run by an external company that work very closely with us to ensure that there is support round the clock for our students. So we do tend to advertise that for out of hours from 5pm through to 9am. and then right through the weekends and the university course periods as well, like the Christmas and festive breaks. And they're fully trained counsellors online at all times that a student can call to speak to if they are in crisis or just need to kind of talk through a scenario or a situation of pressing concern. They can also provide some consumer advice during the working days as well. So it's it's just really helpful, I think, for students to know that there will always be somebody available from an approved supplier at the end of the phone if they did need to speak to somebody out with the hours that the traditional support services are open. And the other thing to highlight as well is that for our students in our university and halls, our resident, assistants tend to work overnight. So they tend to work from 6:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. So that's another out of hours service that our students can rely upon for support.

**Georgie** That's brilliant, I think that's pretty nice that when the SU is shut and you can't go and speak to someone, there's always someone there to speak to anyway. So that's really good. And something else and Duncan, you maybe mentioned this already is if students are concerned about somebody else, can they come to you and kind of raise concerns about a friend or whoever it is?

**Duncan** Yeah, totally. So we obviously want to make sure that everyone is looked after in our community as a university. So if they're worried about friends or just want to talk about things are going on in their flat or anything at all, they can come to us, we can reach out to that friend. It could be anonymous, and we could just do a check and see if they're alright. They will try and just let them know what services that we have. So we would normally point out that we have the counselling services and we also have the chaplaincy team as well, as well as this university hotline that they can call as well.

**Georgie** Brilliant, and something else that I thought of is parents, I sometimes, I think, do parents ever call with concerns about their child. Are you allowed to talk to the parents about that child?

**Jemma** Yeah so we do receive quite a lot of communication with students parents. And we need to be clear that our students are adults and that under the regulations, the GDPR privacy regulations, we're not allowed to disclose information about our students to anyone that calls, whether that's somebody's friend or a family member that are getting in touch. But we're aware that it can be a really tricky transition for parents, and it could be really hard if a parent is quite far away or are worried. So, you know, our advisers will speak to any kind of external caller, whether that is a parent or a member of the public about their concerns and try to reassure them, give them some advice and support in terms of support services they can be contacting and different ways that they can escalate their concerns.

But the key thing for us is that any note of concern that we receive, regardless of who that comes from, we will ensure that we speak to the student, establish their health and well-being, and provide them with information about the support services that are available. And what we will then do is encourage the student to then speak to the person who has raised concern and to do that directly or in some cases, we will obtain consent from the student to speak to their parent or whoever has raised concerns so that we can kind of close that loop of concern, because we do appreciate that it's a worrying time for parents if they're not necessarily hearing from their young person or they have specific concerns. But it is important as well that we comply with regulations that mean that we can't provide specific details.

**Georgie** Yeah I think that's great. I think that's reassuring for parents that there's always someone who will go and check if they've got a genuine concern. So that's really great. Something else we offer is the counselling service. So Duncan do you know how that works and how the students kind of use that service if they need help.

**Duncan** Yeah. So a person you can email the counselling team to make an appointment, their email addresses, counselling@abdn.ac.uk so they can be reached out. And what happens is you get an initial appointment, and you go to that appointment and then you talk through whatever you want to talk about. They kind of make some suggestions and some things to reflect on. And then if you want to have a follow up appointment, you then email the counselling service again. So it allows you to be seen quite quickly and reflect on it and then to go as many times as you would like without filling up the counselling block so as many students can go in and see the counselling team as possible.

**Georgie** And just to be clear to our listeners, I presume that's all completely free to our students as well?

**Jemma** Absolutely the counselling service is completely free of charge fully trained counsellors. And as Duncan says, the system that they work means that there is no waiting list. Currently, it's around about two working days to see a counsellor, so it's relatively responsive service.

**Georgie** That's great. That was another one of my questions, is there long waiting times and things to get support? But it doesn't sound like there is at all?

**Jemma** No, I think it can be a bit of an urban myth. I think that that was perpetuated in the media when talking about these sorts of services. But we're very lucky that the system works really well. So students can self-refer, arrange an appointment to see somebody relatively quickly. And if they need to or want to continue to speak to the counselling team, they can book unlimited numbers of appointments. But the counselling team will also work together with students to look at other support networks, referring to some other support services, or provide students with some self-help information and directive websites to really help them on their journey.

**Georgie** Brilliant. And if students happen to miss any lectures or even exams or things because of an illness or disability, how can the university support them in those instances?

**Jemma** So the support and the advice on that really depends on the level of study, but students are able to self-report their absences via their student hub, the online system, and then depending on their level of study or the length of absence, they may need to provide some evidence to support that. If it is a disabled student that we've already spoken

to, we may already have a provision for allowance for poor attendance in place, which means that the trigger point for that causing a concern to the university will be slightly longer. But the key thing is communication, just making sure that students know that it's absolutely fine to miss a class for genuine reasons or even to miss an exam. There will always be opportunities to make that up again, but they need to ensure that they're communicating either directly with their department or with the support services so that we can ensure that the correct information is popped onto the systems and to make sure that they get the opportunity to then take that time back.

**Georgie** Brilliant, and something I was thinking, as well as if we have any prospective students listening, you can always speak to the student support team as well at things like open days. So when it's on campus, you can go and meet them and have a chat about any of your personal circumstances, because I know a lot of people listening will be thinking about their personal situation, which can be very different to somebody else's. But we also have virtual open days at the moment as well. So you can always go and speak to student support and ask more generally from a parent's perspective or kind of ask really specifically what support is available to you. But if there anything else either of you wanted to add about the support we offer?

**Jemma** I think the key thing to highlight is just that the support services are all non-judgmental services. And we're not we're not here to direct students in a specific path. What we would really like to do is identify the student's individual needs. Talk about how that impacts on their studies and their life. And then we look at lots of different opportunities and groups to assist with, with any concerns that they have. And the support teams will work a little bit differently. And we all have slightly different responsibilities, but we work very closely together so that we can identify where another service might be more appropriate for our students. But the key thing is always just to ask for help. All staff at the university play a student support role, regardless of their specific job title, and any member of staff would be happy to try and help direct a student to the right team. So really, the key thing is communication and just making sure that if it is something, whether that's a long-term issue or something that comes up during the time that you were studying with us, there will be plenty of people around to help.

**Georgie** Yeah, very good advice. Did want to add anything, Duncan?

**Duncan** I just want to reiterate that we're always here to speak as a student support team, no matter how big or how small. If you feel you need or want to speak to. We are here and we give you a call and we just listen and we'll see how we can help. Or we can just listen to what you have to say. And we often find that quite a lot of students will have a phone call and be able to get something off their chest and be able to just get out of their head and then focus on what's going on ahead, basically.

**Georgie** Well, thank you so much, both of you, for providing your expertise on the area. And I'm sure that's reassuring a lot of listeners. You might have some of them contacting you with questions. So if our listeners do you have any questions? You can look on the website is probably the easiest way to get the contact details and then get in touch with our student support teams and they'll be able to help you. If you have missed any of the episodes that we've had so far, you can check them out wherever you are listening to this podcast or the university website and there was the ones about budgeting for uni and things like that, if you want to catch up on those. And we have some more episodes coming up. So thank you very much, to Jemma and Duncan.

**Amy** Thank you for joining us for this episode of the Ask Aberdeen podcast, if you would like to suggest the topic we should cover, please email us at [ukteam@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:ukteam@abdn.ac.uk). We would love to hear from you. To be alerted about new episodes, subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.