

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

**STUDENT SUPPORT COMMITTEE**

**Minute of the Meeting held on 18 October 2021**

*Present:* Abbe Brown (Chair), Nick Edwards (Chair), Tim Baker, Martin Barker, Lyn Batchelor, John Cavanagh, Ivana Drdakova, Liam Dyker, Oghenamega Erivona, Grainne Ferrigan, Garry Fisher, Kerry Harrison, Charlotta Hillerdal, Ondrej Kucerak, Lucy Leiper, Wendy Lowe, Russell Moffatt, Jemma Murdoch, Mary Pryor, Karen Scaife, Duncan Stuart, Emma Richards, Steve Tucker, Jacqui Tuckwell, Melanie Viney, Burcu Yuksel, and Lesley Muirhead (Clerk) in attendance

*Apologies:* Heather Branigan (first hour of meeting), Jaye Carr, Katrina Foy, Iain Grant, Alison Jenkinson, Graeme Kirkpatrick, Heidi Mehrkens, Martin Mills, Julie Timms.

**Welcome and introduction of new members**

1.1 Nick Edwards (NE) and Abbe Brown (AB) opened the meeting and welcomed members, including new members, to the second meeting of the Student Support Committee (SSC).

**Approval of the minute of the SSC held on 2 June 2021**

*(copy filed as SSC/181021/001)*

2.1 Members of the Committee approved the Minute of the first meeting of the SSC held on 2 June 2021.

**Remit and composition**

*(copy filed as SSC/181021/002)*

3.1 Members of the Committee were asked to **note** the revised remit and composition of the SSC. The updated remit and composition was approved by Members of the Committee and this will now proceed to the University Education Committee (UEC) for formal approval.

**Action: Clerk**

**Update on Intercultural Communication, Disability Deep-dive and Open to All events**

4.1 Members of the Committee were provided with an oral update on Intercultural Communication, the Disability Deep-dive and Open to All events by AB. AB outlined the collaborative, broad-spread of work which has been undertaken by staff and students over the last year to embed inclusion into teaching at the University. A blog has been set up, Deep-dive events have been delivered by the Disabled Students' Forum and staff, and a further student led Disabled Students' Forum event will be taking place, supported by CAD. The aim of the Deep-dive events has been to engage directly with students and to educate

staff on the experience of disabled students. Other work undertaken has focussed on intercultural communication. This has been a collaborative project between staff and students. Dr Julie Ross, Academic Skills Adviser (Dyslexia and other Specific Learning Differences), is leading on condensing the valuable points raised from the events into a mind map to further develop the discussion and inform practice. Monthly Open to All events have been taking place to grow work on inclusion across the University. The focus of the last session was support for specific student groups such as estranged students and discussion around whether it is helpful to categorise students into particular groups. AB invited Members of the Committee to participate in the work and events and asked members to highlight any areas they would like to see covered. No questions were raised by members.

Recordings of the events are available at: [Events | StaffNet | The University of Aberdeen \(abdn.ac.uk\)](#)

### **Remit and composition of the Task and Finish group to carry out the pastoral review and update**

*(copy filed as 181021/003)*

5.1 Members of the Committee noted the remit and composition of the Task and Finish group (TFG) to carry out the pastoral review and discussed the paper from the TFG. The draft remit and composition of the TFG was shared with UEC following the last meeting of the SSC. Building on a suggestion made after UEC, a representative of the Widening Access Team should be included and Dr Sally Middleton, Access & Articulation Manager, will now be part of the TFG.

5.2 Thoughts and feedback were informally gathered over the summer months and the formal work of the TFG is now taking place. In essence the work over the summer involved two focus groups; one for staff involved in the provision of support to undergraduate (UG) students and one for staff involved in the provision of support to postgraduate (PG) students. The groups involved staff from a wide background, beyond the existing pastoral leads. Valuable feedback was obtained from the focus groups which will complement the work of the TFG going forwards. The TFG also conducted an online survey via Facebook organised by the Student Experience Team of PGT students. Over 100 responses were received. Very strong was feedback received indicating a wish for more formal pastoral support. Most participants indicated that they would like to participate in student focus groups. A PGT student is now involved in the work of the group. The TFG is currently surveying UG students about their thoughts on the Personal Tutor (PT) system; 200 responses have been received so far and the survey closes on 29/10/2021. The initial information obtained in the feedback provides confirmation that there are many different views and approaches around the delivery of pastoral support. The feedback also confirms the benchmarking that the TFG has undertaken looking across literature and liaising with colleagues at other institutions in Bristol, Swansea and Edinburgh. The TFG are considering the next steps and are proposing further separate focus groups for students and staff between now and the end of 2021 to stimulate further discussion and to draw on the action already taken; with a view to hold combined groups at a later date. Students who have replied to the surveys will be invited to participate. Staff will initially be asked to complete an online survey. The aim is for this to be an open review and to involve as many people as

possible. Following this, further plans will be developed which will be reported to Senate for an academic view in February 2022. This will also tie in with other TFGs, reporting to UEC and Senate by the end of academic year 2021/22 and will be reported back to SSC in December 2021. AB asked for comment from Members of the Committee.

5.3 Martin Barker (MB) highlighted the support available for PG Research (PGR) students; there are inconsistencies in what is being provided, there is not always enough support and demand is increasing. AB advised that the TFG are aware of these concerns, there is excellent support available but it may be varied. AB has spoken with the PGR Committee and plans are being made and discussion is ongoing. It is not included as part of this review but it does warrant further exploration. Lucy Leiper (LL) noted that this has recently been discussed at the PGR committee and it has been identified that effort needs to be focussed on clearly articulating the support available and who does what. It may be helpful to use consistent terminology for staff across the Academic Schools, where they have a role in supporting PGR students. This is not part of the current review and the PGR School do not currently have capacity to focus on this. It is on the radar of the PGR Committee. NE highlighted that resource to ensure that every student is effectively supported is currently being considered.

5.4 John Cavanagh (JC) highlighted that this sounds like a helpful process. JC noted concerns about engaging with students who do not engage with teams set up to provide feedback and with speaking to their PTs. How do we ensure that we engage with all students and not just students who tend to actively engage? AB noted that it is hoped that by using online surveys, this will enable all students to effectively engage and will complement the voice of AUSA. The TFG are pleased with the numbers of students completing the surveys but they will focus on trying to engage with all students. NE added that it is critical that we think of the students who do not tend to actively engage, when designing surveys. Ivana Drdakova (ID) noted that students usually talk to the representatives from AUSA, if they are not engaging directly in requests for feedback, and the AUSA are involved in the TFG.

***Action: AB to feedback to TFG***

### **Framework for Inclusion and Accessibility in Education**

6.1 Members of the Committee were provided with an oral update on the framework from AB. Colleagues from across the University have collaborated on this area and consideration was given to developing an Inclusion and Accessibility in Education policy. The process involved valuable discussion and it was agreed that this was a good idea but points were raised about what a policy would look like and how it would be operationalised and further discussion then took pace, including with School. It was determined that the best path forward would be for the Centre for Academic Development (CAD) to launch a framework, a sample of which will be provided to UEC.

6.2 The framework will over sit existing inclusion and accessibility checklists and training resources. It will provide a channel to share good practice on how to manage specific situations. It will be a live document and will be complimented by a series of events delivered by CAD; the first of which is hoped to be delivered in November and will include

staff highlighting examples of good practice, such as making changes to the provision of reading lists and issues relating to timetabling changes and how these situations have been managed. It is hoped that the Framework will enable us to learn together, to develop our practice and to provide reassurance.

6.3 The Framework will be available at: [Inclusivity and Accessibility | StaffNet | The University of Aberdeen \(abdn.ac.uk\)](#).

6.4 NE invited Members of the Committee to provide comments. No comments or questions were raised by members.

### **Feedback and surveys**

7.1 Members of the Committee were provided an oral update on feedback and surveys from Karen Scaife (KS), Student Engagement Manager. KS highlighted that student feedback is crucial to all activities of the University. The Student Experience Team have been working on a feedback framework over the last 2 years and the team are currently refreshing the framework. The aim is to put in place a degree of control over the amount of feedback and surveys we request students complete and also to close the feedback loop, so we make best use of the feedback received.

7.2 A key element of the work is developing a Feedback Action Group; the remit and composition of the group is currently being formed. This will replace the Student Survey Working Group. The new group will provide strategic guidance on how to gain student feedback and what we do with this information; a holistic approach will be taken and it will be ensured that feedback is linked to the correct departments so that it can be appropriately actioned and reported back to students, to ensure they are aware of the action that has been taken.

7.3 The Aberdeen Student Experience survey will be going live soon; this provides a bedrock of feedback from students and involves the collaboration of all departments across the University to address the results and implement change. A programme of feedback and action follows which provides the results to students.

7.4 The Student Experience Team are hoping to set up a new initiative of “Listening Rooms” in which groups of students are placed in a room and are given prompt words to discuss. This encourages a flow of conversation about topics to inform what we are doing as an institution.

7.5 Tim Baker (TB) asked about how anonymity is dealt with regarding specific concerns for departments and concerns about monitoring student feedback on course related areas. KS explained that the work of the Feedback Action Group will be focused on non-academic feedback. Anonymity will be considered, as it is in current online feedback, where students can choose to provide their thoughts anonymously. We act on anonymous feedback but are unable to provide the results directly to students who have submitted the feedback. Information from course evaluation forms will be considered by the new group.

7.6 LL asked if it would be possible to have a PGR voice on the Feedback Action Group; KS confirmed that PGR will have a seat at the table.

7.7 Grainne Ferrigan (GF) asked how ad hoc feedback is built in to the process, such as feedback received via social media. KS advised that all channels are monitored. Social media is actively used to gather feedback using polls and posing questions in stories; these methods are proving to be very successful. The Student Experience Team is currently asking students for in person feedback in the food court. Student interns are participating in the 'Feedback Frenzy' to gather instant feedback.

7.8 LL raised that feedback from PhD students is often received around their experiences but they do not wish this to be shared/recorded due to the potential impact on the relationship with their supervisor and on future employment. KS confirmed that will need to be considered by the group. The group will be important to ensure that an institutional, coordinated approach to feedback is taken. Duncan Stuart (DS) asked what happens with the information shared with PGR staff. LL advised that staff listen to students and sign post them to relevant sources for reporting issues, such as Report and Support. NE added that the Report and Support online confidential tool is being reviewed and will be relaunched to provide a more focussed way to submit comments and issues to the University. KS noted that the group will try to reassure students about the safety of sharing their feedback and making it clear where the complaints process should be followed. JC added that the view that some feedback should go to the Police rather than through internal procedures, or for students to follow both options. He added that we need to be careful that we are not preventing students from engaging with the Police, when appropriate. NE advised that this will be part of the work that will be undertaken around gender based violence (GBV) by a strategy group in the coming year. The conduct codes will be updated for student misconduct and it will also be made clear what the University can deal with and how we can help facilitate Police involvement and the involvement of relevant external services. Clarity is required around who does what and where students can go for support.

7.9 AB highlighted the training available for first responders who can support students appropriately, including raising awareness of the Police and court processes which can be challenging. NE noted that further information and guidance for first responders will be included in the work of the strategy group.

### **Wellbeing Strategy**

8.1 Members of the Committee were provided a presentation on the Wellbeing Strategy from KS. The strategy has been approved and will be launched in wellbeing week commencing 25/10/21. It has been developed alongside the Mental Health and Wellbeing Policy and the Management of Work-related Stress Policy which were published in 2016, 2019 and were due for update. There have been many developments since the creation of the original documents with the appointment of the Head of Health, Safety and Wellbeing, a Mental Health Policy Adviser (not currently in post), and the establishment of a Wellbeing Team. A new post Student Support Adviser (Mental Health) is currently being advertised. The Mental Health Working Group has also been set up. Through the strategy, the

University will be supporting initiatives such as the University UK Step Change, Mentally Healthy Universities, and Universities Scotland Suicide Safer University Framework.

8.2 Wellbeing has been defined in the Strategy as “the state of being comfortable, happy or healthy”, it encompasses all areas of life. Central to the strategy is the recognition that we all have mental and physical health which can be measured on a continuum and depending on a set of circumstances, any individual at any time can move on the continuum.

8.3 The strategy takes a holistic view and approach to support our staff and students to maintain positive wellbeing and also to manage problems and to support the prevention of mental and physical ill-health through awareness raising and support.

8.4 The strategy was developed through consultation with both staff and students which highlighted feedback on what members of the community felt the University was doing well and identified areas for improvement. The consultation included focus groups, social media polls and speaking with key parties such as the Mental Health First Aid Network. Key areas identified for staff were work-life balance and leading by example, working with line managers to address this. A general consensus was highlighted that the University supports employee wellbeing well and this is something that the University aims to develop and enhance. There was a feeling that communication has been good particularly through the pandemic; however some feedback indicated that this does not always filter from managers to staff. As a result of the staff survey a Stress Management TFG was formed to look at the data and to develop a key action plan which will be incorporated in the strategy.

8.5 Most of the student feedback was obtained from social media, anecdotal feedback and speaking with service providers through the development of the Student Feedback Framework. The student feedback focussed on a feeling of happiness, contentment and feeling safe. These themes will run throughout the strategy. Positive feedback was received about the University support services and the welfare check ins conducted through the pandemic. The strategy will build on this feedback. A key area identified for development was encouraging selfcare; a key focus of the strategy will be to empower and enable students and staff to practice selfcare and to support them to manage their study/work life balance.

8.6 The strategic aims and key themes of the strategy were outlined: creating a supportive environment, an informed community, a positive culture, an empowering community and a healthy lifestyle.

8.7 NE highlighted a new initiative being launched this week by the University Counselling Service which will provide all staff members the opportunity of a 30 minute debrief with a Counsellor following an interaction/student situation which staff have supported, where they feel it would be helpful to talk over the situation. This will be offered within 24 hours of interaction. Further information will be provided in the staff e-zine and from Heads of School and Directors.

8.8 The keys to success have been identified as: exemplary leadership, intersectional development, community engagement, strong partnerships and continual feedback.

8.9 Key points of the year one action plan were highlighted such as the introduction and embedding of the Student Mental Health Agreement and auditing and enhancing wellbeing related training for staff.

8.10 Realising the ambition of the strategy involves caring for the wellbeing, health and safety of our diverse community and supporting all staff and students to achieve their full potential and becoming a leader in our sector in promoting health and wellbeing.

8.11 NE highlighted the variety of support available and that it can be challenging at times to know where to direct staff and students for appropriate support. The Student Support Management Team can offer sessions to staff around the structure of student support, the support that is available for students and staff, and to discuss key issues that are often identified within the student journey. School Administration Managers and Heads of School have been offered sessions for Schools.

8.12 NE noted that there are two new Student Support roles being advertised; one is a policy role within mental health and the other is a Student Support Adviser position to provide one to one support for students with mental health conditions and the management of crisis situations at the University, but also supporting staff and policy. A new intern will be starting within the Student Support Team, the Emily Drouet internship; recruitment for this role will be starting in November. This will focus on researching and reviewing best practice within the sector around student support which can then be used to inform to our practice.

8.13 LL noted that the plans look brilliant and asked how these interface with the work being undertaken around research culture, in terms of wellbeing, workload and inclusive environments. AB noted that this should be connected. KS will discuss this further with LL and the Interdisciplinary Director. LL advised that there is a TFG looking at research culture and how we support researchers. KS confirmed that research is written into the strategy.

***Action: KS and LL***

### **Postgraduate Research School**

9.1 Members of the Committee discussed the role and remit of the PGR School and its link with the SSC. Discussion was led by LL, Manager of Graduate School. How do we include supporting PGR students? A Bespoke approach is required. Consideration of the needs of PGR students should be anticipated and included when designing support structures and University activities.

9.2 Jemma Murdoch (JM) highlighted a common misconception that PGR students are usually more mature and understand the systems and processes of University life. It was also noted that systems and processes are built in such a way that they do not necessarily fit with research work; we often refer to study-related activities and not research-related activities. It is important to have the PGR School highlight and advocate for the needs of researchers.

9.3 Lesley Muirhead (LM) highlighted that it would be helpful to further understand the role of the PGR school, who should Support Services get in touch with in relation to PGR students. LL recommended linking with the PGR School and the relevant Academic Schools.

9.4 Martin Barker (MB) noted the importance of the role of the Supervisor and linking them in with discussions in relation to support.

9.5 Burcu Yuksel (BY)- noted the importance of this discussion to ensure that PGR students are supported and to inform the work of the Schools and services.

9.6 LL advised that PGR committee are having discussions and will link in with SSC and the School Research Committees.

9.7 NE highlighted that the key will be to remember to ensure that the needs of PGR students are considered in the work of the SSC, so this can be fed back through the relevant channels.

***Action: LL to feedback to PGR Committee***

### **Review of class representative structure**

10.1 Members of the Committee were provided with an oral update on the review from AB. Ondrej Kucerak (OK), Vice President for Education, will be leading a review of the class representative structure, supported by AB. This will focus initially on how class representatives are appointed, what their role is, how this varies across the Schools, any changes that could be made to improve the structure (considering best practice in the sector) and measures that could be made to enhance the role and enhance the student voice.

10.2 The details have been shared with the School Education Leads and AB is in the process of setting up one to one meetings for OK and AB with SAMs and School Education Leads to gather information. Wider work and consultation will then take place in phases where data will be gathered and students will be involved.

10.3 OK is working closely with the Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland (SPARQS) on the review. This work will have an academic focus. Further reports will be made to SSC on the progress of the review.

10.4 No questions were asked by Committee Members.

***Action: AB***

### **Monitoring and Engagement**

11.1 Members of the Committee were provided with an oral update on the plans for discussions of monitoring and engagement structures from AB. A first informal meeting took place today and a new TFG is being set up to explore monitoring engagement across the



University, focussing on UG, PGT, PGRT, online, on demand and students studying at the Qatar campus.

11.2 There are several strands to the work of the group; for example, there will be an operational focus looking at the workload of professional services, reviewing the current process and practice, looking at engagement outcomes, providing a safety net and considering flexibility for widening access students such as student carers.

11.3 There is currently a tremendous amount of good work happening in this area and the work of the group will provide an opportunity to explore what we want to do and what is the most efficient way of doing this.

11.4 Contact is being made with colleagues regarding participation on the TFG and the work of the group will feed into the SSC.

11.5 No comments or questions were posed by Committee Members.

**Action: AB**

### **Assessment timing and provision for disabled students**

12.1 Members of the Committee were provided with an oral update on assessment timing and provision for disabled students from AB. Members were provided with links to the guidance produced in relation to this:

<https://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/teaching/alternative-assessment-guidance-10462.php#panel13887> and [Current students | About | The University of Aberdeen \(abdn.ac.uk\)](#).

12.2 A plan has been developed to cover the timing for completion of assessments to ensure that sufficient time is allocated for all students and is inclusive measure. This covers short, timed assessments. In essence, double time is being offered for all students, unless a student would usually receive 100% extra time, in this event the student would be offered a further 30 minutes extra time per hour based on the initial time of the assessment.

12.3 LL asked about guidance regarding Vivas of PhD students. AB advised that this should be considered separately. MB highlighted that Vivas are open ended. LL recommended that consideration should be given to creating clear guidance for PhD students who require adjustments.

12.4 BY noted that the current online assessments and the timings of these are based on previously delivered on campus assessments. BY asked if online assessments continue, will we look at specific online arrangements which are not based on campus thinking but are specific to the online environment. AB advised that assessment methods need to be considered widely and noted that Kirsty Kiezebrink is currently looking into the rationale behind the time allocated to assessments. AB highlighted that we need to consider how we discuss additional time for disabled students as an individual reasonable adjustment and

when this will be applied (i.e. when an assessment is not inclusive). Should we still be defining assessments with reference to on campus or online?

**Action: AB and LL**

### **National Student Survey 2021 Comprehensive Analysis**

*(copy filed as SSC/181021/004)*

13.1 Members of the Committee noted the National Student Survey 2021 Comprehensive Analysis

13.2 AB highlighted that the University did very well and congratulated everyone.

### **Content Advice Guidance**

*(copy filed as SSC/181021/005)*

14.1 Members of the Committee noted the Content Advice Guidance.

14.2 GF asked if this guidance is going to be shared with marketing colleagues and will this be included in the prospectus. AB advised that this will be discussed with the Marketing and MyCurriculum Team and we will ensure that the guidance is published appropriately.

**Action: AB**

### **Arriving at Thriving report**

*(copy filed as SSC/180121/006)*

15.1 Members of the Committee noted the paper on the University's response to the Higher Education Commission's report "Arriving at Thriving".

15.2 No comments or questions were posed by Committee Members.

### **AOCB**

16.1 Members of the Committee did not raise AOCB.

### **Reflection on this meetings' discussion regarding equality, diversity, inclusion, health, safety and wellbeing.**

17.1 TB noted that the term mainstreaming was not mentioned in the meeting today. He asked where this lies in current thinking. AB asked about the definition of mainstreaming. TB noted that if students require particular support mechanisms, this is treated as the norm and baseline for all students. It was highlighted by members of the committee that the term inclusion is now used rather than mainstreaming, but they effectively mean the same.

17.2 MB noted that he is always reassured by the warmth and generosity of these discussions. He added that it is good to know that we have caring colleagues and students.

#### **Date of Next Meeting**

18.1 The next meeting of the Committee will be held on Wednesday 8 December 2021, at 2pm, by Microsoft Teams.