UUSU Advice Bureau Internal Protocols, Policies and Procedures

October 2018

Contents

Brand

It is agreed the advice services offered by the Ulster University Student's Union is officially called the Ulster University Students' Union Advice Bureau, the Advice Bureau, herein. It is likely that it will also be more commonly referred to as 'the bureau'.

Personnel

The Advice Bureau is led by Student Advice and Welfare Coordinator responsible for one Caseworker, both of whom are employed on a full-time basis.

Audience

Ulster University has a student population of more than 24,000. This is a diverse group from a range of multi-cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. The Ulster University has four campuses: Magee, Belfast, Jordanstown and Coleraine. The Bureau will also be open to associate students studying in partner colleges for academic matters.

Aims and Objectives

The primary goal of the Ulster University Students' Union Advice Bureau is to enhance the student experience by providing independent, impartial and unbiased advice, guidance and support to our students that is both free and confidential. We aim to empower our students with practical and realistic solutions to their presenting and priority issues. Our intent is to strengthen and professionalise the current advice structure within UUSU through the Student Advice and Welfare Coordinator and a Caseworker, both of whom have working knowledge of the NI advice sector and experience in providing advice in various settings and guises.

Scope and Values

The primary aim is to be able to represent, empower and support ALL our students with academic issues and to provide support and signposting for a range of welfare issues.

We will support and assist our students on a variety of issues including:

- Examination appeals
- Disciplinary issues
- Course Issues
- Housing and accommodation

We will have a visible presence across all campuses and will strive to be accessible to every student demographic. We will offer confidential, independent, impartial advice that is free and unbiased. Our goal is to enhance the student experience with a holistic approach to advice, support and empowerment, provided with empathy, integrity and professionalism.

Social Policy

The Advice Bureau has the core purpose of supporting students and helping to resolve their issues. In addition, we will gather information on policies and practices affecting students, and where necessary enable Student Officers to implement a review of these policies and procedures to ensure uniformity and consistency. For example, where policies are interpreted and implemented differently across University Faculties.

Records will be kept ascertaining trends, and when appropriate, UUSU will lobby the relevant body responsible for policy to encourage uniformity or procedural amendments.

If a student case is used, names and any identifying features will not be used. Where trends and patterns appear, this will be used to lobby the relevant body responsible for policy to encourage uniformity or procedural amendments.

Plan and Vision for Year One

The Advice Bureau will have two full time members of staff; the Advice & Welfare Coordinator and an Advice & Welfare Caseworker.

The recruitment and selection of the UUSU Student Advice and Welfare Coordinator will be completed by early June 2018, with the Caseworker in post in time for the commencement of semester 1.

The core purpose of the Advice Bureau is to support and represent students with academic issues, and to assist with welfare issues where capacity within the team allows. UUSU will implement relevant and robust policies to ensure high standards and the implementation of a professional service. The Advice Bureau will be led by a professional advice team who bring with them a wealth of knowledge, experience and skills gained through experience of the advice sector.

Consistent cross campus coverage is imperative. It is envisaged that Magee and Coleraine Campuses will be managed primarily by the Coordinator with the Caseworker covering Jordanstown and Belfast. The overriding aim is to ensure full accessibility to all students with each campus having equal representation and support when required. This approach offers flexibility and coverage will eventually occur depending on where demand is most required for the effective use of resources.

Initially, each of the four Campuses will be covered on a specific day to identify need and to provide a professional, appointment-based structure, Monday to Thursday. The support function will be active from Monday to Thursday, with Friday reserved for administrative purposes, to ensure case records are maintained in a timely and accurate fashion.

It is envisaged that the Advice Bureau will be fully operational, with a visible presence on each campus from September 17th, 2018.

Targets

A 72 -hour turnaround will be achieved from the initial student contact to then accessing a face to face appointment or to receive email advice or telephone advice after completion of a Confidentiality Agreement. This is based on normal office hours, Monday to Friday 8:45 to 5:00 pm (4:00 pm on a Friday).

Campaigns throughout the year will be launched to promote specific areas where trends are identified amongst the student population and this will be followed-up in partnership with VP for Campaigns and Communications.

Each student contact will be recorded in line with Data Protection and GDPR requirements on the case recording system for safeguarding, accuracy and quality.

Case recording, and data management must be up to date to avoid inaccuracy of data capture. The Coordinator and Caseworker will be expected to have their case records on the system no later than the close of business every Friday, or earlier when possible.

Client Groups

- ALL current students registered at Ulster University irrespective of campus, including satellite campuses.

- Prospective students of Ulster University who have a conditional/unconditional offer of a place at Ulster University.
- Recent graduates of Ulster University with an ongoing case, that is a case which originated prior to their day of graduating.
- Recent graduates of Ulster University (i.e. within six months of the day they graduated);
- Concerned relatives, friends and teaching staff who seek advice relating to a student when the student cannot attend for advice in person (e.g. if they are in hospital). Any agreement to offer advice to a concerned third party must comply with GDPR, Data Protection and UUSU policies pertaining to this, as well as have the written consent of the individual concerned. Without these conditions being met, the Advice Bureau will not be able to comment on the case or individual in question.
- Associate students.

Accessibility

The Advice Bureau is open to ALL students.

No student should experience any obstacles in accessing the Advice Bureau. The service should be visible and promoted across campus' and digital media.

The UUSU website and social media platforms will have direct links for students to request an appointment. Advice Bureau sta will be contactable via telephone in working hours. All contact points for the Advice Bureau staff will be made available on both the UUSU website, social media platforms and to SU personnel.

Advice sessions will be carried out in the Advice Bureau offices, or private meeting rooms. If the student prefers or suggests an informal setting such as on-site coffee shop, this can be facilitated. Students will be able to access advice and support via face to face sessions, telephone, email and with the possibility of facilitating drop in's as demand and diary's permit.

Arrangements for attending the service will be publicised widely on campus and online and may fluctuate to suit student demands.

Advice Quality and Standards

Secure case recording systems are in place for the accurate recording of student data and issues. This information will be secured under the General Data Protection Regulation 2016, as described in the UUSU Privacy and Confidentiality Policies. Effective and efficient case recording also serves to safeguard the personnel providing the advice. If the student is required to seek third party support, the organisation that the student has been signposted towards must be recorded. It is up to the student should they wish to inform the UUSU Advice Bureau of any future/further outcomes.

A review and support system exist for the Caseworker monthly to discuss the following:

- Case load management
- The sharing of 'best in class' practice
- Training needs
- Welfare changes
- Procedural changes
- Social policy issues
- Any other areas influencing staff or the bureau

In addition to this structured supervision system, the Coordinator will be accessible to the Case-Worker to deal with any issues that may arise during a student interview or urgent casework process. This is most likely to be via telephone communication due to the logistical coverage of 4 campuses. In the event of a non-advice emergency, such as a student taking sick during the session, there will always be a member of SU staff within close proximity.

The Student Advice & Welfare Coordinator will randomly select a sample of personnel cases per month to review for quality control purposes. These case reviews will serve to identify if there are any knowledge gaps. The Coordinator will also carry out practical observations for the same purposes. If areas of learning and development are required, this will be managed between the Coordinator and the Caseworker. If similar gaps appear or present themselves on a frequent basis, monthly case reviews and practical observations will increase with relevant learning support provided. The Membership Director will perform this same function to support and review the Coordinator.

This also serves the purposes of effective and efficient customer service and satisfaction. Our Complaints policy sets out the process if a student is unhappy with the service provided.

Primarily the Advice Bureau is tasked with academic advocacy in matters relating to appeals and disciplinaries. Further to this the UUSU Advice Bureau will advocate, advise and guide on issues such as Social Security Benefits (ESA, PIP etc), Universal Credit, housing and accommodation. The UUSU Advice Bureau will not give debt advice in any circumstance, it will however signpost to appropriate, regulated, and wherever possible not for profit organisations.

Referrals and Sources

For the integrity of the UUSU Advice Bureau, information used to assist student issues will be collected from reputable and trusted sources only. These will include buy may not be limited to examples such as, nidirect.gov, nus.org.uk as well as the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG).

When the Advice Bureau must signpost a student to a third-party organisation for further or additional support and guidance, in no circumstance will the referral be made to an organisation that could potentially profit or gain financially from any such referral. This is to strengthen the scope and values of the service in terms of being true to the principles of being unbiased and impartial. Referrals will be made to other advice agencies throughout the NI advice sector such as, Citizens Advice Bureau, Advice NI and Step Change.

A specific policy on signposting and referring is attached.

Training and professional development

Knowledge levels of the Coordinator and Case-Worker will be kept up to date by attending relevant training by recognised and reputable organisations within the NI advice sector. Membership of CPAG and Housing Rights allows personnel to be informed about any policy/legislative changes and allows them to be kept up to date across best practice within the advice sector.

Conflicts of Interest

UUSU Advice Bureau personnel will be requested to declare all outside interests they may hold as these could be construed as a potential conflict of interest. These will be audited or brought to the attention of the Membership Director to consider how to address the conflict.

Donations

All donations to the UUSU Advice Bureau will be recorded for transparency and reported to the Membership Director and UUSU President. Any decision on what to do with these gifts should be taken by the UUSU President on a case by case basis.

Case Recording Policy

Case recording is an essential part of the advice-giving process. The Advice team are expected to write up cases no later than the Friday (or last working day of that week) or on the day immediately after each advice session where possible.

A good case record will achieve the following:

- Provide a clear record of the case – including the relevant background to the case, advice provided, and action taken or planned;
- The case record must be enough in that it could be picked up and continued to be applied by another adviser, and avoid any duplication of work or conflicts of messages;
- Help ensure that deadlines are not missed;
- Help to identify advisers' training or development need;
- Provide essential evidence where the Advice Centre is asked to defend a complaint or claim, or where the Advice Centre is required to attend court. Therefore, it is vital that all relevant paperwork or evidence is added to AdvicePro;
- Provide a clear record for the client which can be transferred to third parties where permitted and within the framework of Data Protection, Confidentiality and GDPR guidelines;
- Demonstrate the quality of advice that has been provided to assist file reviews, quality assurance measures and other review processes;
- Provide the basis for non-personal specific statistical information for stakeholders including Senior Management, Trustees and the University;
- Be used to provide non-personal specific social policy evidence.

What needs to be recorded

- Evidence that the adviser has explored all relevant aspects of the enquiry, and how these will be addressed, including if secondary issues need to be discussed at a further interview;
- The background to the enquiry and the client's goals and personal circumstances which may influence the case, or the advice given;
- Evidence of any research undertaken, tools used, plus how particular sources were relevant to the case and how they were applied and explained to the client;
- Relevant information, references and/or links;
- Evidence of the options discussed; any limitations and consequences, what rights and responsibilities the client has, potential outcomes and how these are relevant to the client's personal circumstances;
- Support or actions agreed and who these are assigned to and by when;
- Details of any deadlines and how these were discussed with the client. This is particularly important where the initial enquiry involves academic appeals, benefits or employment;
- Details of any signposting or referral;
- Reference to relevant referrals policy or list in shared drive;
- Social policy issues should be recorded where appropriate.

What makes a good case record?

Brief notes containing the most important points, separated into clear paragraphs or bullet points – they do not need to be written in 'essay' style but should be full enough for easy reference and understanding. The notes should include only information relevant to the case and not have any opinion within them. Although it is beneficial to refer to a client's emotional state if they make comments that could affect the advice, support or referrals offered, so for example, if the student displays anger or aggression towards the advisor, this should be recorder on the case note and should be discussed with the advisor's line manager if necessary.

There are references/links to the information sources used to develop wider rationale and context.

If the client is sent a confirmation email/letter of advice, this should be uploaded to the case record and there should be references to letters sent or received and what action was taken, or advice given as a result

What should be avoided in case records

Clients are entitled to see a copy of their file; therefore, case notes must only contain facts, not opinion or conjecture. There should not be any detail on personal feelings or opinion of the adviser.

It should rarely be necessary to cut and paste significant amounts of information from the relevant source as this does not demonstrate an understanding of the issues or how the guidance was applied to the individual client. References to information sources are enough. Information should not be duplicated, and rambling, unstructured sentences and paragraphs should be avoided.

Case Management Policy

Case Origin

From the outset of the case, advisers must be mindful of the Conflict of Interest Policy. Clients will be informed that the service is free and independent – referring to the Core Values and Objectives of the bureau and the Confidentially Policy. Advisers should ensure clients are kept fully informed about the management of their case. This will include explaining any limits to the advice/signposting that can be given. The adviser should ensure that the client is made aware of any costs involved in a proposed course of action, for instance any court costs. Where the bureau's ability to act is limited because of resources- if there are insufficient advisers to represent a student at a disciplinary hearing for example - the adviser will explain these limits and where possible will signpost the client to a relevant alternative service.

Future Action

Where action cannot be taken immediately on a case and/or some form of follow-up is required later this should be recorded on the client's case sheet. If an adviser has agreed to act on behalf of a client, they should record this in their own diary and check that they have carried out the work within the promised timescale.

Examples of follow-up action include:

- Chasing up replies to letters written on behalf of clients.
- Researching into the client's query and contacting them with the findings as and when the follow-up action has been completed.

Informing Clients about Progress with their Case

The adviser must inform the client of any progress with their case, or if the case has been completed including where there is no possible support possible or where no advice can be given because all possible alternative avenues have been explored. The preferred method of contacting the client will be agreed at the outset of the case and will usually be by telephone, email, or letter. The adviser should inform the client of progress within the timescale promised. If the adviser wishes to make changes to proposed action already agreed with the client, they must contact the client to ensure that the revised action is acceptable. Case outcomes will be recorded on Advice Pro and client informed.

Confirming Action in Writing

Advisers will not routinely confirm advice or action in writing but may do this in several circumstances.

Examples include:

- When the Bureau is representing a client;
- When the Bureau consults outside agencies on a client's behalf;
- When there is a need to notify the client of deadlines, or a hearing date;
- When the advice is complex or covers several options;
- When the client has specific needs that would benefit from a written explanation.

Where the Advice Bureau's ability to act is limited because of resources, for instance if there are insufficient advisors to represent a student at an appeal, the advisor will refer to the Signposting and Referrals Policy and seek guidance from Managers. A copy of all written communication, including emails, should be kept on the case file.

Case records on Advice Pro

When writing up case notes, advisers must refer to the Case Recording Policy. A case record should always be written in the following cases:

- Where the student may need follow-up assistance
- Where detailed information is given
- Where there could potentially be a need to refer to the advice given
- If any contact with the University or an outside agency has been made

All cases should be recorded on Advice Pro immediately after the advice session or as soon as is practical. Copies of documents should also be attached.

Obtaining the Client's Contact Details

The student’s unique ‘B number’ will be used to access name and contact details and should be obtained when a case note is written. However, advisers should be sensitive to the desire for privacy and if there are indications that the client is reluctant to divulge their personal details, anonymous advice sessions should be considered.

To ensure a high-quality feedback loop, it is important and necessary to have contact details if follow up work is being carried out or if the information is required to ensure accuracy; e.g. whether the client wants the staff to negotiate on behalf of them. If the client is still reluctant to disclose personal information the bureau should make a note in the casefile of the client’s wishes under a ‘did not consent’ note.

Consent form

If a file has been set up for a client then they should sign a consent form, confirming that they give permission for their details to be kept by the Advice Bureau for the agreed period as per said consent.

Authority to Act

A separate Form of Authority will be given to the client to sign, where appropriate, to enable advisers to act on a student’s behalf. A separate form will be written for each third party.

Signposting and Referrals Policy

Signposting

The definition of Signposting refers to the process of providing details of an agency more appropriately placed than ourselves to assist a client. Signposting gives the client responsibility for contacting other organisations to help them resolve their problem.

Signposting will be appropriate if the client does not fit into the Advice Bureau's client group or if they seek help that is outside the scope of the Advice Bureau (e.g.: judicial review, immigration or debt advice).

Signposting may also be appropriate when an existing client presents with an additional issue that is outside the scope of the Advice Bureau's work. Advisers are most likely to signpost at this stage.

Referrals will only be made to approved organisations and who are not for profit organisations.

Referrals

Referrals refer to the process of contacting other agencies on a client's behalf to arrange advice and support for them that the Advice Bureau cannot offer.

A referral usually involves the adviser contacting the organisation to arrange an appointment and making any other necessary arrangements to ensure that the case continues smoothly. The referral process will consider the ability of the client and the requirements of the referral agency before taking any action.

The Advice Bureau may refer clients to external agencies (outside of the University Services) or internal agencies (within the University services) if necessary.

Internal/external agencies may refer to the Advice Bureau. The Advice Bureau will accept incoming referrals if a client fits into the client group and the Advice Bureau's scope of work. There is no formal requirement for incoming referrals to be introduced to the Advice Bureau by the referring agency – a signpost to the service is enough.

The need for referral will usually arise when the Advice Bureau has an established relationship with a client and the adviser believes that the Advice Bureau cannot offer further help in a matter.

If any case records are to be transferred to the referral agency, then a request must be made directly by the client or from the agency with an acceptable form of authority signed by the client.

General Guidance for the Advice Bureau team on signposting and referrals

Prior to signposting or referring individuals to other agencies, the Advice Bureau will listen to the client's enquiry to ascertain the type of assistance required and will provide immediate support if the need should arise. The information gathered will help to identify an appropriate alternative source of support taking into consideration the advice needed, the preferred advice medium (e.g. telephone or face-to-face advice) and the ability of the client, for example, if they feel confident following issues up alone or if they require full advocacy.

Advisers will explain the need for the referral to the client and explain what they should expect from the agency they have been referred to. Where possible they will be given literature and contact details on the service. The adviser will review the referral procedure for the referral agency and follow accordingly.

Below is a list of examples of referral/signposting agencies that would be appropriate for the Advice Centre to use. Please note that this is not an exhaustive list.

DEBT:

- Step Change
- National Debt Line
- Citizens Advice Bureau
- Christians Against Poverty

HOUSING:

- Housing Rights
- NI Housing Executive
- Citizens Advice Bureau

GENERALIST ADVICE:

- Advice NI
- Citizens Advice Bureau

Advisers and other UUSU staff/officers can propose referral agencies for the Coordinator to consider and if appropriate, they will be added to the central referrals list.

In the event a student requires specialist financial advice, they will be encouraged to visit unbiased.co.uk to source an Independent Financial Adviser (IFA).

The adviser will record details of all referrals and/or where an individual has been signposted and this will be added to the client's case file. A report can be run on Advice Pro (AP) to confirm the following:

- the date of referral
- the AP case number
- where they have been referred to
- the subject area (e.g. housing, welfare benefits, employment)
- why they have been referred.

If any case records are to be transferred to the referral agency, then a request must be made directly by the client or from the agency with an acceptable form of authority signed by the client.

Advisers will ask clients for feedback on the referral agency and to feedback directly if any issues arise. The advisers will record any feedback, whether positive or negative, about services following signposting or referral.

Any referral sources used will be reviewed on an annual basis. It will consider issues such as whether the referral list is up to date, any feedback we have received and if any gaps in local service provision can be identified. It will also help to identify if better links are needed with referral agencies, any gaps in the Advice Bureau's service and if individual advisers' referrals should be discussed with them.

Withdrawal and Restriction of Service

UUSU Advice Bureau is committed to providing a high-quality service and will not usually apply restrictions to the service offered or withdraw the service from someone within the client group. However, there may be some instances where the service is restricted or withdrawn either temporarily or permanently.

Restrictions to the service include:

- If the client is not a UU student or part of the specified Client Group.
- Where a conflict of interest has been identified.
- If the level of assistance required is outside the remit of the service e.g. immigration or debt advice.
- If the level of support required is limiting time available for other students or is disempowering the student.
- If the student has made a serious complaint against the Advice Bureau and this is being investigated. A serious complaint will be deemed to be one that infers or states incompetence, prejudice or negligence on behalf of the Advice Bureau. A decision will be made following the investigation of the complaint whether the service can be resumed by the client.

Students will be informed of the reasons and terms of any restrictions placed upon their use of the Advice Bureau. This may be followed in writing and they will be referred to the Complaints Procedure should they wish to pursue a complaint.

Withdrawal of Service

In certain circumstances, the Advice Bureau may withdraw the service temporarily or permanently. This may apply in the following circumstances:

- If a client fails to comply with the terms of a restriction to the service.
- If a client authorises the service to negotiate on their behalf and following agreement the student, then refuses to abide by the terms of the negotiated agreement without good reason.
- If a client is seeking advice from or already has another advice agency acting on their behalf regarding the same issue or issues and refuses to stop being advised by the other service.
- If a student has made a previous complaint against the Advice Bureau and this has been found to be deceptive, fraudulent or disingenuous following a formal investigation under the Students' Union complaints procedure.
- If a student has been violent or harassed a member of staff within the Advice Bureau. In this situation, the first stage would be for an investigation to be carried out by the Advice Bureau Coordinator, unless they are the victim, in which circumstances this would be carried out by the Membership Director. Both the member of staff and the student would be asked to write a statement explaining the incident/s in their own words and may also be interviewed in person (if considered appropriate). After reviewing all the information available the Advice Centre Coordinator will decide whether the client can continue using the service, can have restricted use (e.g.: only e-mail correspondence) or should no longer have any access to the service. Complete withdrawal would be in very rare circumstances.
- If the student is considered to pose a threat to the safety of staff or other students.
- If a student displays behaviour that is aggressive, abusive, discriminatory or violent.

Students will be informed in writing of the reasons and terms of any withdrawal of service and will be referred to the Complaints Procedure.

Complaints Policy

At the UUSU Advice Bureau, we pride ourselves in providing an exceptional service. However, there are times and situations where we may have fallen short of your expectations. If this is the case, then we would like you to inform us, so we can investigate the situation and take any necessary steps to resolve the situation and improve our service.

Informal complaint

If you have any concerns about the service provision or are unhappy about the service you've received, then you have the right to raise a complaint with the Advice Bureau Coordinator. This can be by e-mail d.kerr1@ulster.ac.uk, in person or in writing via Declan Kerr, UUSU Advice Bureau, Ulster University, Northland Road, Derry, BT48 7JL.

At the first stage, the Advice Bureau Coordinator will investigate any concerns raised as appropriate.

Formal Complaint

Should you feel dissatisfied with the outcome of your informal complaint, you can submit a formal complaint to us. You will need to do this in writing by completing a formal complaint form. This can be e-mailed to the Advice Bureau Coordinator, Declan Kerr.

It can also be posted to; Declan Kerr, UUSU Advice Bureau, Ulster University, Northland Road, Derry, BT48 7JL.

You will receive an acknowledgement of your complaint within 5 working days. The Advice Bureau Coordinator will then investigate and consider all aspects of the issues raised. This may include consultation with the Membership Director. You will receive a formal response within 30 working days.

Union Complaints Procedure

If you are unhappy with the outcome of the formal complaint or you wish to raise a concern regarding the Coordinator you can contact the UUSU Membership Director.

Access to Advice during Complaint

In most cases you can still access the service whilst your complaint is being resolved, however we may need to make necessary adjustments, such as seeing a different adviser or receiving advice by e-mail instead of in person. If we are unable to continue advising you, we can signpost you to an alternative advice agency.

COMPLAINTS FORM

You should complete this form with your details if you are dissatisfied with the outcome of your informal complaint.

Name:

Address:

UU B Number:

Contact Telephone number:

E-mail address:

Your Complaint

Please provide details about your complaint (you can continue a separate page if needed):

How can we improve the service on the back of your complaint?

To help follow the progress of your complaint(s) please complete the following sections:

Date of first complaint:

Whom did you address the complaint to:

What was the outcome of your informal complaint: