

WELCOME TO ADVICE AT NORTHUMBRIA STUDENTS' UNION

We offer a free, independent, and confidential advice service for Northumbria students facing difficulties at University. Our team of advisers specialise in University processes and help around 500 students per year to understand the University regulations and ensure their fair treatment.

We provide support on the following themes, and can signpost students seeking help with other matters:

- Academic misconduct allegations;
- Appeals against exam board decisions;
- Complaints against faculties or University services;
- Disciplinary panels and professional suitability boards;
- Personal extenuating circumstances;
- Other situations where students might be in conflict with the University.

Students wishing to access our advice should register online at www.mysu.co.uk/heretohelp/advice, or visit us within the Students' Union.

SERVICE AGREEMENT

Northumbria Students' Union provides a free, independent and confidential service to students with academic issues. In order to support you with these issues, we provide impartial advice, support and representation, as is appropriate to the nature of your case. We can only support current students or those who have been a student within the past twelve months.

AS A STUDENT AND SERVICE USER, YOU CAN EXPECT TO BE:

- treated with respect and consideration at all times;
- assisted and advised as quickly as possible; we aim to respond to all queries and emails within two working days;
- advised in a suitable format; if you have specific access needs please let us know and we will take any reasonable actions to meet these;
- contacted as soon as reasonably possible if we are aware of a development with your case;
- informed of any conversation we have with University staff regarding your case. We will only speak to University staff if you consent to this;
- told about further help and where it can be obtained, if this is necessary;
- treated in a manner consistent with all NSU advice service policies. These are available online at <http://www.mynsu.co.uk/nsu/documents/nsu>, and can be requested by emailing su.advice@northumbria.ac.uk.

WE EXPECT YOU TO:

- contact us as soon as you would like advice;
- keep us updated on the progress of your case, and let us know the outcome;
- provide us with full and accurate information;
- take personal responsibility for your case and be proactive in taking actions required following our advice;
- treat all staff with respect and consideration at all times;
- arrive promptly for any appointments and give as much notice as possible if you are unable to attend.

I confirm that I have read and understood this service agreement. I accept its terms and wish to be registered as a client of the NSU advice service.

Signed _____ Name & student number _____

STANDARD LEVELS OF SERVICE

The Students' Union advice service supports a large number of students each year. In order to do this effectively we have to set levels of support that students can expect from us. The type and level of support we provide depends upon the nature of each case. As standard, we provide the following where they are applicable:

- Up-to-date information leaflets explaining relevant University processes;
- Assessment meetings with each student presenting to the service;
- Email advice on University regulations and the specifics of each case;
- Signposting to relevant external and NSU services;
- Copies of relevant template documents;
- Comments on one draft of formal written submissions to the University;
- Advice on options for further recourse, including the complaints scheme administered by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator.

Complex cases

Some cases are particularly complex and may require significant levels of additional support to those outlined above. Whilst students will ordinarily receive our standard level of support, the Advice and Representation Manager or Director of Membership Services may class a case as complex and designate it for additional support for the following reasons:

- A student experiences particular barriers to understanding and exercising their rights within the University processes;
- A student's case involves specific regulatory processes which require additional research and investigation;
- A student is facing numerous, simultaneous regulatory processes;
- The nature of a students' case is such as to warrant significant concerns regarding their treatment;
- A student is invited to a formal panel hearing at which Students' Union representation is requested;
- There are significant policy implications of a specific case.

WITHDRAWAL AND LIMITATION OF SERVICE

It is the responsibility of advice service staff members to make clear to service users the nature of support that they can provide to a case.

From time to time, it may be necessary for staff to impose some restrictions upon service (for instance, refusing to provide any advice until a particular form has been drafted, or refusing to comment on numerous drafts of documents). Where this is necessary, the staff member advising you will clearly state the nature of the support that will be provided.

Whilst we are committed to providing the best possible service to all Northumbria students, there may be also occasions where we have to withdraw access to our advice service. The circumstances in which this may be necessary include, but are not limited, to the following:

- Threatening or violent behaviour
This is not restricted to threats of physical harm and may include any behaviour which causes staff to feel afraid, threatened or abused. This may include inflammatory statements or unsubstantiated allegations against members of Students' Union staff.
- Consistent breach of the Students' Union Equality & Diversity Policy
This policy can be found on the Students' Union website at <http://www.mynsu.co.uk/resources/6013/Equality-and-Diversity-Policy/>.
- Consistent failure to follow advice
Where students choose to ignore advice we may cease to offer further advice. Where a student faces a specific language barrier and/or disability which makes advice difficult to follow, we ask that they disclose this so we can endeavour to make reasonable adjustments.
- Provision of duplicate advice
Where a student seeks advice on regulatory matters from an external party, for instance a solicitor, it can be to the student's detriment to continue receiving duplicate and potentially conflicting advice.
- Repeated non-attendance at agreed appointments
Students failing to attend agreed appointments without sufficient prior notice will be reminded of the service user agreement, and may be refused further appointments.
- Conflict of interest
There are some circumstances in which advice service staff may have a conflict of interest in a particular case (e.g. representing another student involved in the case). In this event we will seek to arrange an alternative staff member to provide support. Where no alternative staff members are available, service may have to be withdrawn.
- Inappropriate or excessive demands on resources
We may have to withdraw or limit service if students:

- fail to take responsibility for actions arising out of their case and/or demand that service staff perform these tasks on their behalf;
- demand responses within an unreasonable timescale;
- insist on speaking to a member of staff when it is not possible or appropriate;
- refuse to accept explanations of what our advice staff can and cannot do;
- make numerous phone calls and/or send an excessive volume of emails, particularly if these do not heed the advice already issued;
- continue to pursue a case after it has been closed.

This is not an exhaustive list and in other exceptional circumstances it may be necessary to withdraw or limit service. In all instances the process outlined below will be followed.

The process for withdrawing service

1. Concerns will be raised with the Advice and Representation Manager at the earliest possible opportunity;
2. The relevant staff member will consult the Director of Membership Services and Human Resources, or their delegate, if they believe that withdrawal or restriction of service is necessary;
3. The Director of Membership Services and Human Resources, or their delegate, will make a decision on whether to withdraw, refuse or impose specific conditions upon service, in consultation with the Vice President Education. Their decision is final.
4. The student will be informed in writing of the decision to withdraw, refuse or impose conditions upon service, with an explanation as to why this has occurred. Where possible, details of other advice providers and services that may be able to provide support will be included in this letter.
5. Records of this decision, including all correspondence with the student, will be retained within case records until they are destroyed (usually six years after a case file is closed).
6. The student concerned will be provided with details of the Students' Union's complaints procedure.

Any withdrawal or limitation of service, or concern regarding the behaviour of a service user, will be reported to the Advice and Representation Manager or their delegate, and will be recorded on the service user's case file.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Our advice service operates on a confidential basis. Nothing a student tells us will be shared with any other organisation or individual outside the Students' Union advice team. We believe that service users deserve the right to confidentiality to protect their interests.

Our definition of confidentiality

We understand confidentiality to mean that we will not share any identifiable information regarding a case with any other organisation or individual, without the concerned student's expressed consent.

Only members of advice service staff may receive details of cases without such consent. They will ensure that they do not discuss cases outside of the advice service. We will conduct any appointments in a confidential environment unless agreed otherwise.

Case recording and reporting

The advice service records all enquiries by service users. This enables us to monitor use of the service and to identify any common issues. We also report on the cases we support, but this is always presented in an anonymous form, so that individuals' personal details cannot be recognised. This reporting includes both aggregate data (quantitative information) and anonymised case studies (qualitative information).

Storage of records

All case records are kept in lockable filing cabinets or stored securely on our electronic case management system. Case records and information related to cases will be locked away at the end of each working day. Records of cases will be destroyed six years after the date on which the case is closed.

Consent to share information

We will not share information or discuss cases with anyone outside our service without a service user's explicit written consent. We may ask for consent to discuss cases with University staff where this is appropriate, and service users may choose to give or withhold such consent. We will always inform service users when we have discussed their case with a member of University staff.

Appointment of delegates

In a small number of cases, students may choose to appoint a delegate to handle their case, e.g. a parent or guardian. If they wish to do so they must provide written consent for us to liaise with this delegate and share information regarding their case. This should specifically state what information the student is happy for us to share, and the nature of involvement they wish their delegate to have.

Service users may revoke this delegation arrangement by writing to us at any time to request that information is no longer shared.

Telephone calls

In some instances it may be helpful to provide advice or arrange appointments via telephone. When we call service users, we will make no reference to who is calling until we are assured that we are speaking directly to the correct person.

Breaches of confidentiality

We may need to breach confidentiality in certain exceptional situations, in particular if we feel that someone is at serious risk of harming themselves or others. Any such breach of confidentiality will be treated very seriously and will first be discussed with the Director of Membership Services and Human Resources, or their delegate. It is only in situations where breaching confidentiality is agreed to be the only or best option that this will be done. If we do consider it necessary to breach confidentiality we may contact the University's security team or staff within its Student Support and Wellbeing service.

DATA PROTECTION

In order to understand and support cases the Students' Union will ask for some data about each service user and their course of study. The Data Protection Act 1998 requires us to inform service users about the exact data we hold and how they can access this.

Types of data

When students register with our service, they will be asked for contact details and some information about their case. At any appointment or during any discussion, our staff will also take notes to enable us to understand and support the case.

Personal data

The data we request includes course and contact details. These details allow us to identify and contact service users for the duration of their course. Any case information will be held securely until its eventual disposal six years after the case is closed. Records containing confidential information will be disposed of securely.

Sensitive personal data

We may ask service users to provide us with some demographic or other personal details when registering with our service. This information is anonymous and is stored separately from their personal information. It will be used only to provide aggregate data for our monitoring reports. Service users will not be named or identified in any way in these reports, and may choose not to provide any such information should they wish to.

Other sources of data

- Letters: we will retain letters relevant to a case, where service users have shared them with us or we have received them through people they have consented for us to contact. These will be kept in a secure filing cabinet, or stored securely on our electronic case management software, depending on their format.
- E-mails: we will store any case-related e-mails from service users or people they have consented for us to contact in a secure filing cabinet, and/or securely on our electronic case management system.
- Supportworks system: The Students' Union advice service uses a confidential case management system, which gives us access to some personal data which is obtained from the University's student information system. This does not include any information related to protected characteristics within the Equality Act.

Access to data

Access to information about cases is limited to members of staff directly connected with the advice service. We will not share information about cases with anyone else without the service user's permission. We may discuss cases with relevant University staff if service users have given us specific permission to do so. We may also present cases anonymously, as case studies. In this instance we will ensure that the service users concerned are not identifiable from the information we present.

Accessing records

We are happy to share with any service user the information our advice service has relating to them and their case. Information can be requested by writing to Niall Sweby, Director of Membership Services and HR, Northumbria Students' Union, 2 Sandyford Road, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE1 8SB. This can also be requested by emailing niall.sweby@northumbria.ac.uk.

COMPLAINTS ABOUT THE ADVICE SERVICE

Complaints regarding the advice service should follow the Students' Union's complaints policy. In this first instance issues can be raised informally with the Vice-President Education by emailing a.dalgleish@northumbria.ac.uk, or with the Advice and Representation Manager by emailing daniel.carr@northumbria.ac.uk.

The complaints policy can be found online at <http://www.mynsu.co.uk/nsu/documents/complaintspolicy/>.