

# Supporting vulnerable students

A Guide for Staff

# Introduction

This guide aims to:

- raise awareness of the kinds of difficulties that students may face;
- provide practical advice to help staff respond effectively;
- assist staff in supporting the University's obligations under Prevent
- identify the most appropriate sources of advice for staff

## Student difficulties

Students can experience a number of complex challenges and those students who are already vulnerable, particular support may be needed.

The sorts of difficulties students may encounter include:

- physical or mental illness
- excessive alcohol or drug use
- relationship difficulties
- exposure to extremist groups
- financial difficulties
- difficult life transitions
- sexual or other forms of harassment

## Staff responsibilities

There are some key points to remember when considering the responsibility that staff have for the general welfare of our students:

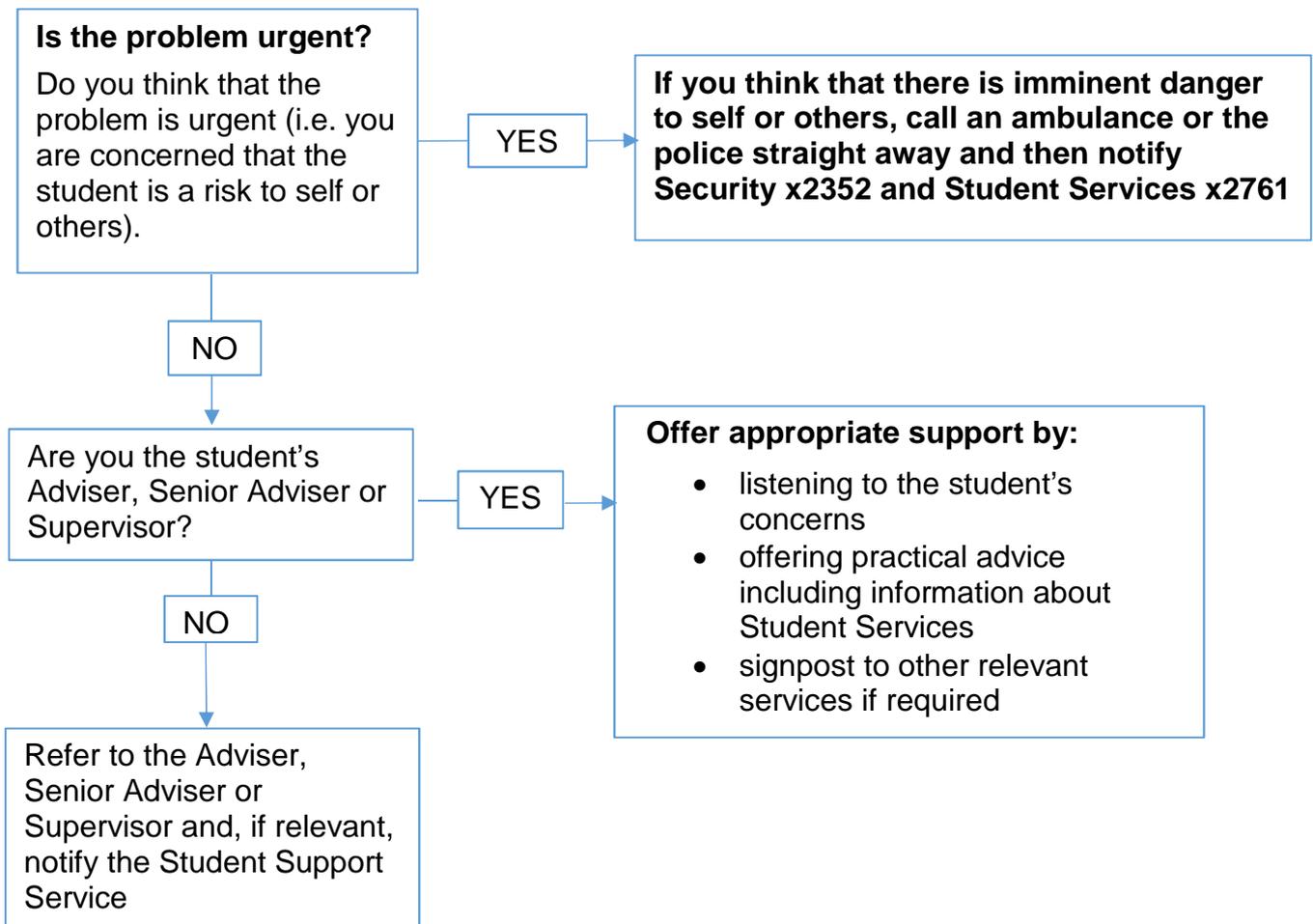
- Students who are over 18 years of age are adults and we do not act in loco parentis for them. However, we do have a duty of care.
- We have a statutory duty to respond effectively where we have a concern that students are at risk of radicalisation.
- We have a well-established commitment to supporting the wellbeing of our students.
- In many instances they consist of signposting to the appropriate services either within or external to the University.

## How do I know if a student is vulnerable?

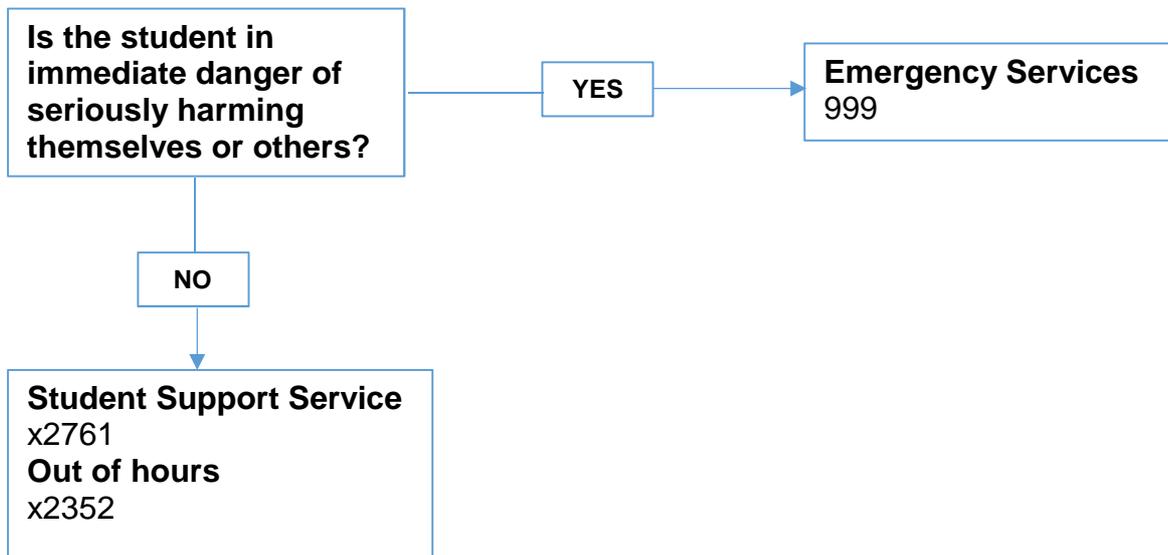
It is inevitably difficult to identify with certainty when a student is vulnerable. However, the following list may be useful:

- Inappropriate emotional affect (e.g. excessively angry, agitated, visibly upset, withdrawn)
- Sudden changes in personal appearance (e.g. significant weight change, signs of fatigue, unexpected visible bruising)
- Pattern of poor attendance

# What is the most appropriate response if you have concerns about a student?

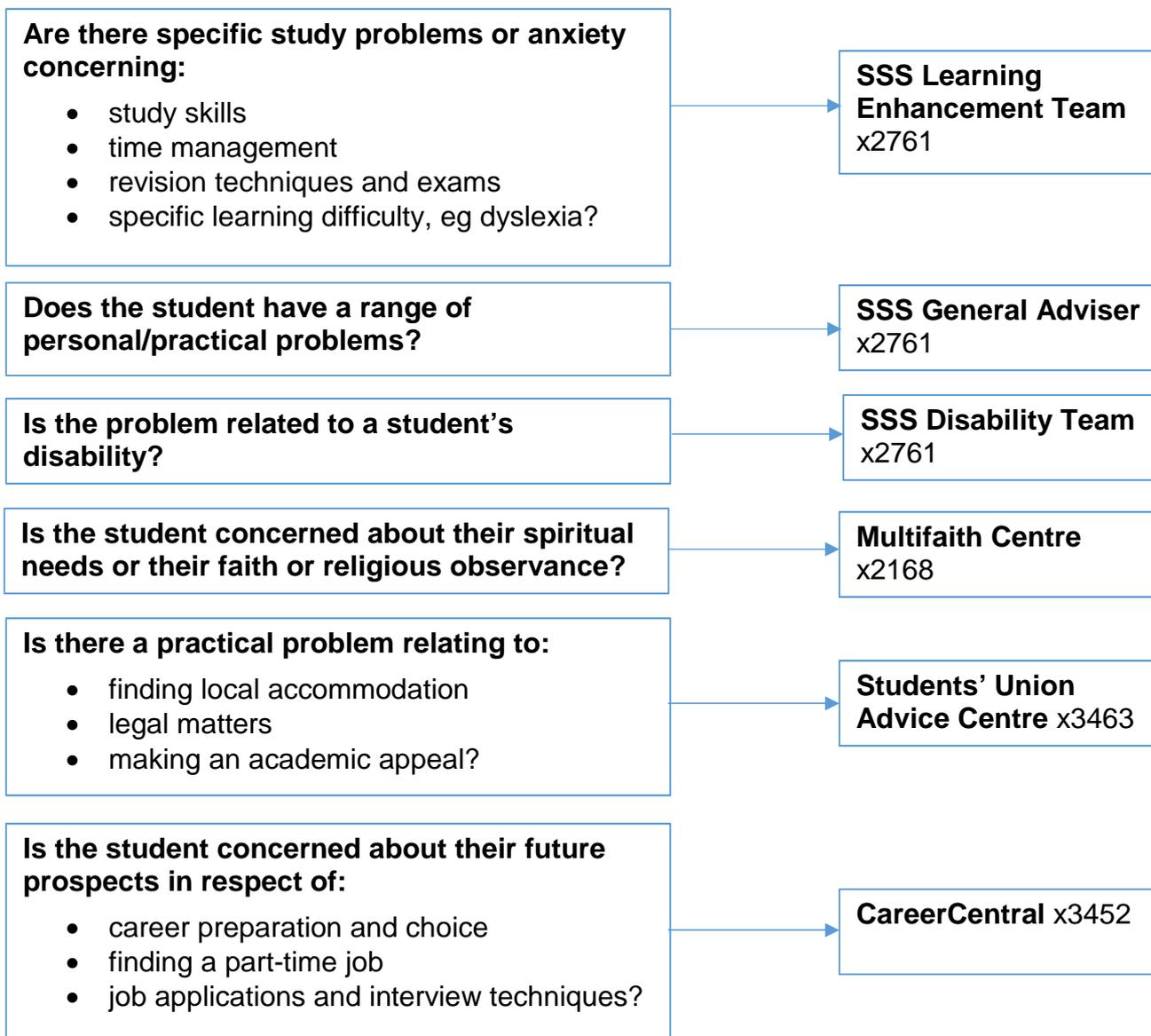


# What is the most appropriate source of help for students?



*If you are in any doubt, please phone the Student Support Centre (x 2761) and ask to speak to Head of Student Services or an SSS Adviser.*

# Other sources of help



## How should you respond?

The first step would normally be to listen to the student in order to find out more about their situation. Encouraging the student to talk to you by showing your concern may reassure him or her and allay your own worries. You may discover that they are already seeing a doctor, counsellor, or mental health or other specialist adviser in the Student Support Service. If you are not reassured by your conversation with the student or you are unable to get the student to talk openly, then you need to consider how best to proceed. There are two main courses of action that you could consider: directing the student to an appropriate source of help or offering further support yourself.

It is important both for your sake and that of the student that you do not let yourself get out of your depth or lose sight of the boundaries of your role. Student Services staff members have the benefit of specialist training and very broad experience to guide students appropriately and support them in learning how to manage their difficulties; they also know where students can find the most appropriate help and advice, whether that be within UEA or externally.

SSS staff and doctors may sometimes contact a student's Adviser (normally with the student's permission) for information or to discuss with the Adviser ways of helping a student to manage their academic work during an emotional crisis or period of illness. In many cases a partnership approach can be very effective, particularly if the student is willing for information to be shared in this way.

### **Responding to emergencies**

Very occasionally a student exhibits behaviour that gives rise to considerable concern. There may be evidence of:

- suicidal thoughts;
- risk of serious harm to self or others;
- serious physical or mental illness;
- alcohol or substance abuse or addiction;
- hearing voices or holding fixed irrational beliefs;
- an inability to function effectively, academically or in other areas of life.

### **Intercalation and Fitness for Study**

There can be occasions when you are sufficiently concerned about a student's wellbeing and/or their academic engagement that you believe that he or she is not currently fit enough to continue their course. It may be appropriate to suggest to them that they consider applying for a period of intercalation in order to aid recovery and you may be in a position to write a statement in support of an intercalation request. If the student appears unwilling to seek help or accept that they are unwell or struggling, it may be necessary and in the student's best interests to take a Fitness for Study route, the formal stages of which normally involve the Head of School, the Student Support Service, the Learning and Teaching Service and the student's Adviser

# Summary

Student life can at times be inherently stressful. Moderate amounts of stress can be motivating and energising, but very high levels of stress, anxiety and distress can be debilitating and impede academic development and performance. University staff can play a very important role in helping students to manage the stress of their lives, particularly those that relate to or have impact on their academic progress.

Often just listening to a student and showing that you are concerned is all that is required. By being aware of the symptoms and behaviours that are indicative of serious emotional or psychological distress, and of the appropriate support services available to students, you may be able to help to prevent a student's problems escalating or leading to academic failure. Prompt and appropriate referral can also help minimise the impact of a student's difficulties on fellow students and friends.

## Key contact numbers

**Student Support Service:** 01603 592761  
**University Medical Centre:** 01603 251601  
**Security Service:** 01603 592352