ABERDEEN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' ASSOCIATION

AUSA CLASS REP HANDBOOK 2021/2022

Your guide to representing students!

Contents

Introduction

Student Engagement is an integral part of the learning experience in the Scottish Higher Education system and plays an equally important role in improving teaching and learning here at the University of Aberdeen. Class Reps are at the forefront of what we do at the Aberdeen University Students' Association (AUSA) to support learning and teaching across the different faculties and disciplines at the University.

As a Class Rep, you are a vital link between the University and students. If you feel a little out of your league when you are in a room with teaching staff, remember that you, and your fellow students you represent, are the experts on the student learning experience. Your input is extremely valuable. This handbook along with your online training or webinar will provide you with the basics of how you can excel in your role. The handbook is designed to compliment the skills you learned during your training on gathering and providing feedback, and to make the most of your time as a Class Rep.

AUSA – Brief basics

AUSA is led by five Student Leaders, Sabbatical Officers, who are democratically elected from the student body each year to work in paid full-time roles. The elections are normally held in March.

Student Council is the main representative body of students at the University, and it is responsible for decision-making and setting AUSA's direction through policy. The Council consists of the members of ten Committees, representatives from Liberation and Section Forums and all Student Groups. The new Councillors are elected toward the end of the second semester. Any student who is not graduating may nominate themselves for the Committee elections. By being a Class Rep, you already are a part of this structure, providing valuable student input. You can find more information on the committees and representation here.

Class Reps feed their input into the School Conveners, who alongside the Vice President for Education, make up AUSA's Education Committees (two of the ten committees), which feeds into Student Council and University Senate. Within each individual School, Class Reps feed into the Student-Staff Liaison Committee and to academic staff.
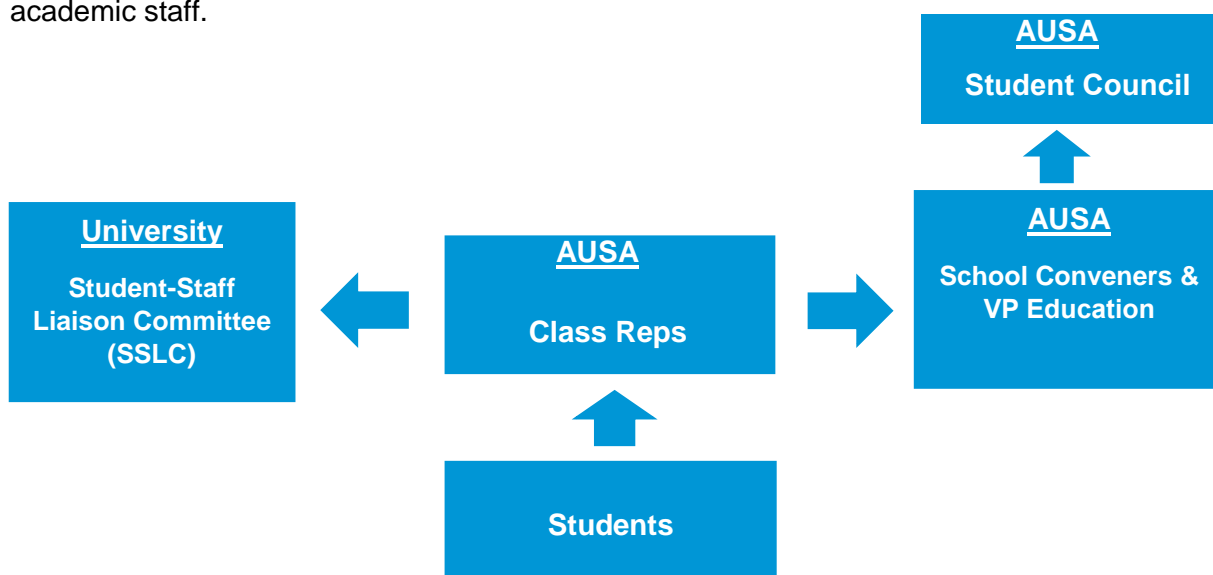
The Role of the Class Rep

Class Reps foster dialogue within your classes, year groups, and degree programmes. Class Reps contribute feedback and student opinion on the quality of teaching and other aspects of the student learning experience in their School's Student-Staff Liaison Committee (SSLC) meetings. These meetings often take place once a semester and will include Class Reps and relevant members of academic and non-academic staff.

When students are well represented and feel valued on their courses and programmes, they enjoy their studies more. Good relations between staff and students can help resolve any arising issues quicker and students are more content overall. Class Reps are a vital link between members of staff and their fellow students, being instrumental in effective communication. **If you think that you share your role, but are not aware who the other Class Reps are, please contact your course/programme organiser or email ausareps@abdn.ac.uk.**

What will I do?

Your time as a Rep will be centered around gathering feedback, presenting it to the University and reporting back to your fellow students. You will be required to attend your School's Student-Staff Liaison Committee (SSLC) meetings. The Reps' most important task is to communicate with both students and staff.

As a Rep, your tasks are to **listen, represent and signpost**. By listening to your fellow students, you can understand their learning experience, which may differ from yours, and gather feedback to present at the SSLC or alternative meetings. You may also need to signpost or direct students to the correct person or other services, depending on what they come to talk to you about. If a student approaches you with concerns about personal matters, issues of serious conflict or asks you to proofread or tutor, these matters are beyond your role as a Class Rep. See page 12 for more information on other student services for signposting.

Benefits of being a Class Rep

- **Skills, Leadership and Networking:** Class Reps repeatedly tell us that they gained confidence and communication and other transferable skills in their role. Being a Class Rep is a good opportunity to hone these skills. Our additional Class Rep events also allow you to practice networking by creating situations in which you can engage with other Class Reps.
- **Recognition of your work:** You can seek recognition for your work as a Class Rep on your Enhanced Transcript. This allows you to demonstrate that you have successfully completed your role. To receive this recognition, we must have a record of your attendance at the SSLC, completion of your induction training and completed a self-reflective work report. Find more information on the Class Rep Enhanced Transcript website.
- Additionally, Class Reps can complete a Bronze STAR Award and enhance their skills by completing Leadership Academy.

Who supports Class Reps?

- **Vice-President for Education:** Ondrej Kucerak is the Sabbatical Officer responsible for Education for 2021-2022. It is an important part of Ondrej's role to support Class Reps in representing their classmates, and to ensure they are provided with the best possible training.

Overall, the VP for Education is there to represent students on educational and teaching quality issues in the University. Ondrej also supports and provides guidance to School Conveners (UG & PG[1]), who sit on the Education Committees. You can reach Ondrej by emailing ausaeducation@abdn.ac.uk, messaging Vice President for Education on Teams, or via Facebook (Ondrej Kucerak VP for Education).

- **School Conveners:** School Conveners work in partnership with the VP for Education to ensure that the views of all students within each School are effectively represented, both at University and AUSA. They take proactive steps to ensure the involvement of Class Reps and other students in School-wide issues and campaigns. They also provide opportunities for students in your School to network in a student-led space to discuss issues concerning the School, and organise projects and campaigns that will make positive changes happen. School Conveners coordinate and organise meetings of students and Reps within your School, and represent the views of the student body in meetings with staff and academics. School Conveners also help Class Reps prepare for SSLCs via one-to-one or group meetings. School Conveners receive their School's Class Rep contact details from the School Office and will be able to contact you. If you are not sure who your School Convener is, please email ausareps@abdn.ac.uk or ausaeducation@abdn.ac.uk.

- **AUSA Student Representation Co-ordinator:** The Student Representation Co-ordinator deals with all matters relating to student representation, including supporting the VP for Education in maintaining and developing the Class Rep system. Once you become a Class Rep, and join the Class Reps 2021/22 Microsoft Teams group, the Student Representation Co-ordinator can contact you in relation to your progress with training, recognition and other resources. The Student Representation Co-ordinator helps facilitate webinars and workshops for Class Reps, responds to Class Rep queries and manages the Enhanced Transcript recognition for Class Reps and School Conveners. You can contact the Representation Co-ordinator with any questions relating to your role at ausareps@abdn.ac.uk.

- **Support via Microsoft Teams:** Once you have been elected a Class Rep, you can join the Microsoft Teams Group. This is a space which is available for collaboration and discussion with your fellow Class Reps and where you can ask questions. You will also be able to contact your School Convenor. We'll also use this group to post the latest updates on Class Rep training opportunities, any issues we are aware of and information on the Enhanced Transcript recognition which is available to Class Reps. You an join the group here.

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[1] The VP for Education chairs and supports both Undergraduate and Postgraduate Education Committees.

Student-Staff Liaison Committee (SSLC) Meetings

Before the SSLC meeting

1. **Join the Class Reps 2021/22 Microsoft Teams group.**
2. **Make sure to complete your self-directed online training or sign up to a webinar. Read through the Handbook and other resources here.**
3. **Introduce yourself to your fellow students.**

Although you may think that most of your classmates know who you are, do not take this for granted! There are multiple ways of communicating with your fellow students and AUSA recommends using several methods to ensure you reach all students. With all methods, remember to introduce yourself, what your role is and what you can help with. Here are a few example methods:

- Messaging students via MyAberdeen
- Displaying your contact details on MyAberdeen (staff can help with this!)
- Circulating your contact details through the School admin staff or your programme/course coordinator
- Whatsapp or Facebook groups
- Introducing yourself to students during lectures, tutorials, etc.
- Study groups
- Online forums

Top tip: Be proactive! The more active you are, the more likely students and staff will contact you. Introduce yourself to your programme coordinator and other relevant staff. When staff know you, they may request you to specific questions about some components of the module/course/programme they already plan to change.

Using the method of communication is up to you. Some methods will work in your situation, others will not. E.g. Facebook groups might work for small classes but not with larger courses. **Please note:** Due to new data protection regulations passed in 2018, Schools cannot give you your fellow students' email addresses.

3. **Prepare for your SSLC meeting**

To prepare for your SSLC meeting, gather feedback on your course/programme from your fellow students. Students should feel comfortable approaching you at any time concerns arise, but prepare to check-in with your fellow students before the meeting. Remember that each student has a personal learning experience, and you as a Class Rep represent all of them.

Top tip: Decide on a feedback gathering method that works for your class size. E.g. Surveys are popular and generally useful for all class sizes, but sometimes with smaller classes focus groups work better. Take into consideration all feedback you receive!

4. **Feedback as evidence**

You can use a combination of qualitative and quantitative data to present at the SSLC meetings. *Qualitative evidence* explains how students perceive certain components of the course/programme, demonstrating how a student feels or thinks about an issue (e.g. open-ended questions on a survey).

You can also support your feedback with *quantitative evidence*. This can be collected by, e.g. conducting a survey where students are asked to rate their experience of different components of their learning experience. Quantitative evidence can show, for example, that 70% of students are happy with the course guide, but 50% struggle to understand the

expectations of an assignment.

5. Presentation of feedback

Effective feedback is *accurate, balanced, constructive and depersonalised.*

Be as specific as you possibly can and focus on actions rather than personality traits. It is important that you balance your feedback. Using techniques, such as the 'feedback sandwich', allows you to surround an issue you wish to raise with some positive feedback. To see examples of the ABDCs of feedback, please see pages 9-10.

Top tip: Bring a typed version of your feedback (however collected) to the SSLC meeting. This will make it easier to present and you can send it to any relevant staff afterwards. This will also make give the impression that you are prepared, and representing the views of students rather than your own.

6. Read minutes of previous SSLC meetings.

Previous minutes of SSLC meetings that include discussions regarding your course/programme should be available to all students, especially Class Reps. You may discover issues previous students have raised that have also been mentioned by your year group. This is a good way of holding academic staff accountable and making sure that student concerns are taken seriously. Ask your School Convener or VP for Education for support if needed.

During the SSLC meeting
Staff are there to listen to you as a representative of the class. They value your feedback and input. Behave professionally and explain patiently to staff how an issue affects students' learning experience. Remember also that some feedback you deliver may be beyond the scope of this committee. In this case, contact your School Convener, Student Representation Coordinator or VP for Education. All of them are there to help you.

Important: It is good practice to try to agree to an action plan, time frame, or next steps on any suggestions that are taken forward or on changes that will occur. Sometimes this is not possible, but if you know the steps towards solving an issue, you can inform your classmates of these actions in your return feedback.

After the SSLC meeting
Close the feedback loop by informing your fellow students of the outcomes and content of the meeting. It is vital that you remember to do this, as it demonstrates to your classmates that their feedback is valued and acted upon. Once the minutes of the meeting are finalised, they should be made available to all students. **Note:** When closing the feedback loop, make sure your message to students is an accurate representation of the discussion and outcomes.

Even after the SSLC meeting, remain proactive. You are still an important point of contact for both staff and students, and you need to foster good relationships and maintain open dialogue. Do not be afraid to contact members of staff with questions and feedback from your class. This is part of your role throughout the term.

Important: If staff tell you that they will follow-up on an issue later, make sure that you do receive a response and communicate this information to students. If you have any unresolved feedback, you can contact your School Convener or VP for Education.

Student Learning Experience – Areas of Feedback

This chapter will help you ask your fellow students specific and meaningful questions around each of the areas that make up the learning experience. Think of areas and questions you think would be relevant for your course/programme. You may also consider areas/ issues surrounding your learning experience you are personally interested in.

Top tip: You may also ask your course/programme coordinator or lecturer for any areas they would specifically like students to give feedback on. However, your academic staff SHOULD NOT design your survey for you!

1. Learning and Teaching Process
➔ Staff contact time, independent and group work, class sizes and teaching styles

Example questions:

- Were you consistently/sufficiently guided to practice your skills throughout your course?
- How would you rate the teaching?
- Do you find the current teaching methods a satisfactory way of imparting information?
- Did you find the size of your group supportive of further learning?
- Did you feel your department/course prepared you sufficiently for your assessments?
- Is teaching material up-to-date?
- Do you understand lecture contents?

2. Curriculum
➔ Course content, handbooks, additional opportunities, placements, optional and compulsory modules

Example questions:

- Do you feel your course is making you more employable?
- How is the course organised?
- How clear is the timetable?
- Is there a curriculum outline provided?
- Are classes useful?
- Does the curriculum of a course match your expectations from the prospectus/ handbook?
- Are learning expectations clearly outlined?
- Did the learning outcomes actually correspond to what you learnt?
- Are you satisfied by the module choices that were offered?
- How are modules structured?
- Was the course challenging?

3. Learning resources
➔ Library, IT, MyAberdeen/Blackboard, classroom resources, labs

Example questions:

- Are there adequate facilities for on-campus learning?
- Are you provided with guidance and support on how to navigate the belended-learning experience?
- Do you have access to materials you need (e.g. books, lab equipment and art materials)?

- Did departmental facilities meet your expectations?
- Was the lecture material easily accessible?
- Were resources adequately available?
- If you are studying a practical course, do you have access to the right resources?
- Are you aware of/do you know how to use the resources available to you?
- Are all facilities and learning resources accessible to students with disabilities (e.g. wheelchair or BSL[2] users)?

4. Assessment and Feedback
➔ Independent and group work, number and type of assessments

<u>Example questions</u>:

- How content are you with the quality and promptness of feedback?
- Does the assessment adequately and fairly represent the content of the course?
- Was the course fairly marked?
- Do all the lecturers grade to the same standard?
- Do you receive adequate feedback from your assessments?
- Is the feedback received useful and appropriate after assessments or course work?
- Are there too many exams or assessments?
- What is the frequency of course work and assessments in each module?
- Is the assessment criteria clear to you?
- Are you given enough time to prepare for assessments?
- Is the style of assessment appropriate?

5. Additionally…
You represent a diverse student population from a wide range of backgrounds. As a Class Rep, you represent all of those views and concerns. There is a number of factors to consider regarding diversity:

- **Nationality & ethnicity** – does the material seem equally understandable to a British and an international student?
- **Ability** – do you know what students with disabilities think about the quality of teaching on your modules and courses? Do they feel like the School is meeting their needs?
- **Age** – do you have any mature students in your modules?
- **Living situation** – are there any long-distance commuting students or students with caring responsibilities in the class? What about those joining online from abroad?
- **Learning style** – how many students feel like they learn more from an exam than from an essay? How many students would call themselves auditory or visual learners?
- **Other factors** – consider how your teaching includes students that represent other minorities, such as LGBTQ+, different faiths, BME[3], etc.

All the listed factors may contribute to differing opinions and needs of your classmates. Taking extra steps to ensure that your feedback is representative of different student groups helps you demonstrate the value of your feedback, allowing you to make a more effective case to the teaching staff.

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[2] British Sign Language.
[3] Black and Minority Ethnic.

The guide to good feedback

The A,B,C,D of effective feedback

Accurate
Depersonalised
Effective
Balanced
Constructive
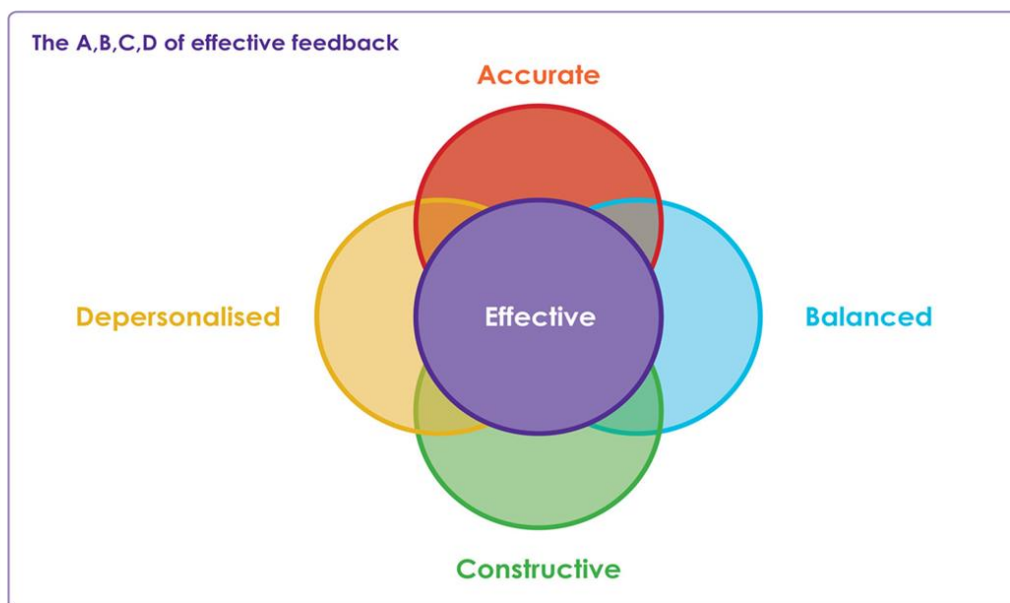
- **Accurate:** When commenting on the learning experience, be specific, and provide evidence for what you are saying. Avoid sweeping generalisations or emotional language.
- **Balanced:** Highlight both negative and positive comments. Balancing the feedback between negative, positive and constructive comments and suggestions helps you appear professional and the feedback fair.
- **Constructive:** You are not just here to identify the problems; you are also here to help find a solution too. If you raise an issue, make a suggestion at the same time – this shows that you want to work for improving student experience.
- **Depersonalised:** Even if students think that a member of staff has done something wrong, feedback on this must always be about an action rather than a personality trait. Try not to mention students by name in meetings, instead talk about the class and the impact on the learning experience. If an issue is focused on a specific staff member's conduct, those comments are better discussed one-to-one.

How do I impact change?
A lot of being a Rep can involve asking lecturers/coordinators to improve. When you approach academic staff to talk about something that they do, make sure to apply these following techniques, also taking into account the previously introduced *ABCD of Good Feedback*:

- **Be confident:** Remember that you represent the students' voice. You can start your sentences with 'the student feedback indicates', 'evidence I gathered suggests', or 'the problem X has consequences of Y and Z for students on this course'.
- **Separate the behaviour from their personality (Depersonalised):** Do not tell a lecturer they are lazy (they are normally anything but), but say instead that you and other students feel that they are not receiving enough timely feedback to be able to make improvements in their next assessment. The first feels like something that

cannot be changed and a personal attack, whereas the second comes across more like a change in work practices.

- **Explain the cause and effect:** Help illustrate why you are bringing up the issue. Mention what impact the lecturer's decisions and behaviour have on the student learning experience. By adopting this approach, you can hopefully start a dialogue with the teaching staff in your School and improve the quality of teaching!

Feedback sandwich

Positive and constructive feedback is important. By using the 'Feedback sandwich' method, you can start by highlighting aspects the students are content with. Give credit where it is due, but do not shy away from constructively demonstrating where an issue lies. After helping staff to understand how students are affected by specific components of their course, it is polite to finish up with some positive comments.

Important: In case the student feedback you receive is mostly negative, you can present the feedback as a list of 'concerns raised' and focus on finding solutions. This way, the feedback may not seem as negative.

Top tip: What if I do not receive any feedback?

It may seem like people are generally happy with the quality of teaching in their modules, especially, if you ask 'do you think X is good/going well'. Asking more specific questions (examples p. 8-9) can help you gain feedback that is more accurate and relevant. *However, please know that you may raise issues with relevant staff at any point during your course/programme.* You do not need to wait until the SSLC meetings. You can also discuss issues after the meeting if no substantial feedback was given in time for the meeting.

If you are using a survey as a feedback method, you can ask your course/programme coordinator help you circulate it to students. This can boost the response rate.

Collecting Feedback

Being able to present evidence helps to make a case for changing something while inherently carrying the weight of being a representative opinion. This is why collecting feedback from students is an essential skill for Class Reps.

You can collect feedback in a number of ways. Quantitative feedback provides you an idea of how many students share a view, whereas qualitative feedback addresses how a student feels about their learning experience. Here are a few examples:

- **Surveys** – you can create a survey online using Microsoft Forms. We ask for data protection and data security reasons that you **do not use any other survey software**. You can use some of the suggested questions from the previous chapter in your survey.
- **Drop-in sessions** – you can make yourself available for students to speak to you face to face. This could be before or after you classes. (Please always consider current and up-to-date government regulations and guidance around face to face interactions).
- **Focus groups** – you can set up a time and place where multiple students can meet online to discuss feedback with you, where you facilitate the meeting. Your School Convener and VP for Education are happy to help you organise these.
- **Facebook or Whatsapp group** – you can set up a Facebook/Whatsapp group where you can invite your classmates to share concerns, ask questions and talk about the content of your course. This is also a good place to share a survey.
- **MyAberdeen** – you can ask the course coordinator or lecturer to allow you to have a section on the course tab of the website and post updates and request information from students there

Important: Whenever you are collecting feedback, do your best to ensure that when you take that feedback onwards, you have anonymised the data. Be respectful of confidentiality of some of the information your fellow students bring to your attention.

What if the problem is about something beyond my class?

Class Reps may have feedback on practices that affect them and other students but are beyond the scope of the SSLC and teaching staff. Bring these issues to the attention of the School Convener, who can address it on the School level and speak about it on the Education Committee. You can also contact your AUSA Reps Team and Student Representation Coordinator at ausareps@abdn.ac.uk. Also your VP for Education is always happy to hear from Class Reps at ausaeducation@abdn.ac.uk. We can explore alternative ways to discuss the issue with the University. On the next page, you will learn more about different support services for students that might be helpful to you as a Class Rep.

Survey Tools and Data Protection

It is important when collecting feedback from your class that you are mindful of how the data is collected and how that data will be used. In partnership with the University, we have created some guidance for using survey tools when gathering personal data which is available through the Class Rep Resources page on the AUSA website. Please ensure that when you are collecting data, that you use Microsoft Forms (with your University account) and refer to the guidance for best practice. If you have any questions, please email ausareps@abdn.ac.uk.

Signposting

Finally, it is important for Class Reps to know of the support services on campus by both University and AUSA that you may have to direct students to. Occasionally, students may approach you with issues that are beyond your remit, and are best dealt with specific support staff. This page will include a list of services, what they can assist with, where to find them and their contact details.

AUSA Advice – an independent, confidential and free advice service. AUSA Advice can help with issues such as accommodation, employability, health and wellbeing. You may also contact the team regarding academic issues and to inquire about the EU/International Hardship fund. The team also help represent students if there are grounds for challenging a University decision. For more information, please visit https://www.ausa.org.uk/ausaadvice/ or email ausaadvice@abdn.ac.uk.

Infohub – an information center for all students, located on the High Street on Old Aberdeen campus, can help with matters ranging from fees & finance, accommodation to your curriculum and timetable. For more information, please visit https://www.abdn.ac.uk/students/ or email infohub@abdn.ac.uk.

Student Support – located on the 2nd floor of the Student Union Building, student support services can help with a multitude of things. These include, e.g. financial advice, mental health advice, visa & immigration and disability. Student Support also has information on various grants, like the Disabled Students' Allowance and Childcare Fund. Please visit the Student Support website for more information and contact details.

Personal tutors – every student at the university will be assigned a personal tutor when they register. If you are a student in medicine or dentistry you will have a regent. Personal tutors can provide general guidance and support throughout your studies.

Multi-faith Chaplaincy – the chaplaincy provides a confidential support and listening service to students of all faith or non-faith backgrounds. The chaplaincy can also provide spiritual support or refer students to more specialist agencies, and work closely with Student Support. The Chaplaincy is located on the High Street on Old Aberdeen campus, visit their website for contact details, more information on their services and how to access them from Foresterhill.

Counselling – the University has a free counselling service to all students based on Dunbar Street. To access counselling, students need only to refer contact the service and refer themselves for sessions. Email counselling@abdn.ac.uk or visit their website for more information and online resources.

→ **Important:** All of the services mentioned here are entirely confidential! If you are ever unsure which service to signpost students to, please get in touch with either your School Convener, VP for Education (ausaeducation@abdn.ac.uk) or the Student Representation Coordinator (ausareps@abdn.ac.uk).