

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
UNIVERSITY EDUCATION COMMITTEE
CONTENT ADVICE GUIDANCE

1. PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

This paper gives guidance on Content Advice, particularly in relation to the health and wellbeing of students in their education. The paper outlines some key principles which should be adhered to in circumstances where a course may have content which may cause upset or distress.

The Committee is invited to **note** this paper for information.

2. PREVIOUS CONSIDERATION BY /FURTHER APPROVAL REQUIRED

	Board/Committee	Date
Previously considered/approved by	QAC SSC	12 October 2021 18 October 2021
Further consideration/ approval required by		

3. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- 3.1 The mental health and wellbeing of students is a primary concern of the University. There are occasions in our teaching where topics, themes, language are exploring which may induce a negative reaction in students who have been affected by a similar experience in the past, and where discussion of such themes may re-induce a traumatic experience.

4. GUIDANCE

- 4.1 The attached Guidance has been prepared by a working group from staff and students and has been shared in draft with the School Directors of Education. The Guidance will be posted on the University website and in due course, will be part of the Framework on Accessibility and Inclusion in Education, which will available from the University webpages: <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/teaching/accessibility-7775.php>

5. FURTHER INFORMATION

Further information is available from Abbe Brown, Dean for Student Support (abbe.brown@abdn.ac.uk).

October 2021

Freedom of Information/Confidentiality Status: Open

2021
University of Aberdeen
Content Advice Guidance

1 BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- 1.1. The mental health and wellbeing of students is a primary concern of the University. There are occasions in our teaching where topics, themes, language are explored which may induce a negative reaction in students who have been affected by a similar experience in the past, and where discussion of such themes may re-induce a traumatic experience.
- 1.2. To safeguard our students, teaching staff should ensure that students are advised about where distressing material or issues will be discussed in their course. This will give students who may be affected by such themes an opportunity to prepare mentally for the content, or, where learning outcomes allow, be given an opportunity to withdraw from that discussion.
- 1.3. Content advice can also serve to highlight to students who would not be affected by such issues that they should be sensitive in any comments they make in relation to the content, so that their comments do not add to the stress of other students who are affected by the topic.
- 1.4. This guidance is not intended to censor what is taught; no topics are out of bounds per se; the intention is to enable students to prepare for discussion of topics they might find challenging and, in some cases, to choose to consider the possibility of a different course or degree.

2 PRINCIPLES AND PROCEDURE

- 2.1 If a course contains potentially distressing material or issues, students should be informed about this well in advance. This is to be done via content advice.
- 2.2 Content advice may apply to specific material or topics within a course, or to an entire course.
- 2.3 Content advice should be provided as early as possible. For all courses, the content advice should be incorporated into course handbooks and made available to students on course registration. If large proportions of a course may have the potential to cause distress to some students, content advice should be included in the catalogue entry so that students can make an informed decision about whether to choose that course or not. Where only individual lectures or tutorials contain potentially distressing material, content advice should be repeated immediately before that material or topic is studied.
- 2.4 Each individual student has specific personal circumstances and experiences, and no two students will be affected by course content in the same way. Distress may be caused by many factors; some of the most significant of these are listed in Appendix A below. It follows from this that for courses in some disciplines, the inclusion of content advice will be the norm rather than the exception.
- 2.5 Students should be encouraged to approach staff privately with any concerns they may have both before and after exposure to sensitive content, and staff should make themselves available accordingly. Staff should provide more detailed information about the material to be studied if students request this. Where appropriate, staff may offer alternative or adapted content. If this is not appropriate, staff will support students in exploring possible

next steps such as changing course or in some cases degree. If students have been affected by course content, staff should signpost them to the Student Advice and Support Office.

- 2.6 It is inevitable that certain topics, which are potentially distressing for some, will be overlooked. Students are encouraged to inform staff, confidentially if appropriate, of any unforeseen distress caused by course content, and also of any particular topics of concern for them, to enable staff to take this into account in advance if possible. Staff should add or revise content advice accordingly for future iterations of a course.

3 SUPPORT

- 3.1 Information for staff on formulating content advice and responding to students may be found in Appendix B.
- 3.2 General advice for students is presented in Appendix C.
- 3.3. Further guidance will be provided through the Centre for Academic Development on identifying potential causes of distress, strategies for addressing sensitive material and issues in class, and fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment.

APPENDIX A

It is impossible to anticipate all the topics that might be potentially distressing for students and therefore would benefit from content advice. The following provides a short, indicative list of potential causes of distress in course content:

- Sexual violence / physical or mental abuse
- Racism and racial slurs
- Homophobia / transphobia / sexism
- Mental health issues
- Dysphoria / body image and appearance / eating disorders
- Animal experimentation / cruelty / death
- Hateful language

APPENDIX B

INFORMATION FOR STAFF ON FORMULATING CONTENT ADVICE

Staff should review each element of their course content (texts studied, topics explored, critical approaches, etc.), to consider its potential to cause distress. The list in Appendix A may be useful as a starting point and staff should be aware that individual students may have their own particular experiences, which they may share with you. Consideration should be given to every element of the course, regardless of historical period, fictional setting, medium, or any other potentially mitigating factor. Consider also whether content advice is appropriate for the entire course, or whether it only needs to be applied to specific elements within a course.

There are several ways to provide content advice:

- **Blanket Advice:** In a course where sensitive topics will be covered throughout the entire course, it is advisable to add a content advice statement to the catalogue of courses. Content advice should always indicate the type of content that some students might find challenging. In addition, your introductory lecture and the course manual should highlight the content advice. These actions will enable students who have chosen the course as one of their optional courses to make a change if they feel the subject matter would be distressing to them. If the course is one that is required for the student's degree programme, the student should contact the course coordinator to discuss their concerns to determine whether any adjustments could be made and what support can be offered to the student, including discussing the possibility of the student changing to a different degree programme.

Example wording to use:

CONTENT ADVICE: The content and discussion in this course will cover themes of racism on a weekly basis. This content may be difficult to deal with for some members of the course, but we are keen for everyone to engage. The classroom will be made a space to engage sensitively and empathetically with this content and any potentially extra-sensitive content will be warned about in advance.

- **Course Manual Advice:** Where discussion of sensitive topic occurs in a few lectures or tutorials, it is more appropriate to add content advice to the course manual at the relevant points, for instance, alongside the lecture/tutorial content description. Content advice should always indicate the type of content that some students might find distressing.

Example wording to use:

CONTENT ADVICE: This week's classes will include references to self-harm and suicide, which some students may find distressing. If you feel you may be particularly affected by this topic/material, please contact me (Lecturer / Course Coordinator) and this can be discussed in advance of the class. Note that confidential and impartial support is available from the [Student Advice and Support Office](#). If you wish to speak to a Student Support Adviser, you should email student.support@abdn.ac.uk. The Student Advice and Support Office website has contact details for [several different support services](#) including where you can find [out of hours support](#).

- **Email Advice / MyAberdeen Notifications:** This can be used as a way of reminding students and preparing them for an upcoming teaching event that contains material that some students may find distressing. This should always be accompanied by information on what a student should do if they feel they would be particularly affected by the subject matter.

Example wording to use:

CONTENT ADVICE The upcoming class, “topic” on Friday will include sensitive material containing depictions of sexual violence, which some students may find distressing. Being a sensitive issue, this content advice has been designed to prepare you for the class, and to explore support which may help you to engage. If you feel you may be particularly affected by this topic/material, please contact me (Lecturer / Course Coordinator) and this can be discussed in advance of the class. Note that confidential and impartial support is available from the [Student Advice and Support Office](#). If you wish to speak to a Student Support Adviser, you should email student.support@abdn.ac.uk. The Student Advice and Support Office website has contact details for [several different support services](#) including where you can find [out of hours support](#).

- **In Class Content Advice:** Even if you have given students advice in a number of different ways, it is advisable also to provide content advice verbally immediately before the teaching session where potentially distressing material will be discussed. This can be done at the end of the lecture/class immediately before the lecture/class in question, and at the start of the lecture/class which contains the material that may cause distress to some students.

Example wording to use:

[End of class prior to next teaching session]: CONTENT ADVICE: Please be aware that the next class will include the use of graphic material on accidents in industry, which some students may find distressing. If you feel you may be particularly affected by this topic/material, please contact me and this can be discussed in advance of the class. Note that confidential and impartial support is available from the [Student Advice and Support Office](#). If you wish to speak to a Student Support Adviser, you should email student.support@abdn.ac.uk. The Student Advice and Support Office website has contact details for [several different support services](#) including where you can find [out of hours support](#).

[Start of class]: CONTENT ADVICE: Please be aware that this class will include the use of graphic material on accidents in industry, which some students may find distressing. If you need to discuss any concerns, please contact me at the end of the class, or in a break. Note that confidential and impartial support is available from the [Student Advice and Support Office](#). If you wish to speak to a Student Support Adviser, you should email student.support@abdn.ac.uk. The Student Advice and Support Office website has contact details for [several different support services](#) including where you can find [out of hours support](#).

Responding to Student Contact

- This will largely depend on the nature of the course and circumstances.
- In some cases, providing more detailed information about the material will enable the student to evaluate their situation and feel able to attend and participate.
- It may be that the subject matter (such as sexual violence in a Law course, or an assessment on anxiety in a Psychology course) involves the core competences and learning outcomes. If so, no changes should be made, and this should be explained to the student in a supportive manner and the possibility of other study paths suggested.
- If, however, the content involves a small part of the course and the learning outcomes can be met without it, or there are other means by which the learning outcomes could be met (such as reading a text on the topic but not coming to class, or offering a choice of assessments), staff should explore these with the student and make reasonable adjustments. As an example, it would not be reasonable to offer to meet individually with a large number of students if they each would prefer to explore an issue privately. It may be reasonable to do so with one student, although care should be taken as this could lead to different experiences from year to year.
- If staff have questions on how to deal with a particular situation, they are encouraged to contact the Course Coordinator, School Director of Education, or the Centre for Academic Development.

They will support you in exploring solutions in a particular situation and enable peer learning and consistency across the University.

- Staff are encouraged to read the Information for Student (Appendix C) in this document.

APPENDIX C

INFORMATION FOR STUDENTS ON CONTENT ADVICE

- Some of the courses delivered at the University, and which you may need to study as part of your degree programme, include materials and issues that for some students could be emotionally challenging. Course Coordinators will endeavour to provide advance notice of any potential causes of distress. This will be done by means of **content advice**.
- Content advice may apply to entire courses, or to specific elements within courses.
- Content advice will be published in course handbooks and, if it applies to the whole course, may appear in the entry for the course in the Catalogue of Courses, so that you can make informed decisions about your course choices.
- Content advice will outline the type of content that may cause distress.
- On some courses, engaging with distressing material (including through assessment) may be necessary to fulfil the learning outcomes of the course; in such cases, you may wish to consider choosing an alternative course, if the course in question is an optional course. If the course is required for your degree programme, you should discuss your concerns with the course coordinator to determine whether any adjustments could be made. It may be that adjustments in a particular core course would not be possible, and in that case, you may have to consider and discuss a change to your programme of studies.
- If you have any concerns surrounding upcoming course content, contact the course coordinator as soon as possible. They will be happy to provide more detailed information about the material and may be able to suggest ways in which your exposure to distressing material can be mitigated.
- Every individual has different circumstances and experiences, and it is inevitable that course content may occasionally cause distress that has not been foreseen. In these circumstances, please accept our apologies. Please also inform the course coordinator/lecturer (confidentially if so wished) so appropriate content advice can be added for future cohorts of students. You are also encouraged to consider sharing any particular topics of concern for you, to enable staff to take this into account in advance if possible.
- If you have been affected by any course content, confidential and impartial support is available from the [Student Advice and Support Office](#). If you wish to speak to a Student Support Adviser, you should email student.support@abdn.ac.uk. The Student Advice and Support Office website has contact details for [several different support services](#) including where you can find [out of hours support](#).

Students are encouraged to read the Information for Staff (Appendix B) and may also find it useful to look at Appendix A which sets out an indicative list of potentially distressing topics.