1. Welcome and Chairs’ Update

1.1 Abbe Brown (AB) and Nick Edwards (NE) opened the meeting and welcomed members, including new members, to the fourth meeting of the Student Support Committee (SSC). An oral update was provided including information about the new resources approved within the Student Advice & Support Team. Members of staff have visited the Qatar campus to work with the team on the student journey. The work of the Pastoral Review Task and Finish Group (TFG) was noted. AB presented the ‘emerging recommendations’ to Senate on 02 February and valuable discussion was had on this. The next phase will involve focus groups to which colleagues and students have already expressed an interest in attending; the groups will take place on 10 and 17 February. The TFG will then reflect further on the recommendations to be made. A report will be provided to SSC on 21 March, in the first instance.

2. Approval of the minute of the SSC held on 8 December 2021

2.1 Members of the Committee approved the Minute of the third meeting of the SSC held on 8 December 2021.

3. Aberdeen Student Experience Survey (ASES)

3.1 Members of the Committee discussed the paper about the ASES. The Student Experience Team have drawn together the results and shared the information with Schools and Directorates and responses are now being received from Schools and Directorates on the required actions. The SSC will continue to discuss the ASES and space will be provided on the agenda for the next meeting for sharing practice. Morag Beedie (MB) shared some results of the papers and actions which have been identified.

3.2 MB highlighted that once all Schools, campuses and professional service departments have had the opportunity to review the results and identify any actions based on specific feedback to their area, the Student Experience Team will look to close the feedback loop by promoting any changes and improvements through the University’s feedback website. This information will also be shared on social media and through the current student e-newsletters.

3.5 Growing the ASES response rate and engagement will only improve the feedback and quality of the feedback. The questions will continue to be reviewed and refined to ensure that we receive actionable data; the Student Experience team will engage with relevant departments to ensure that the questions are the right ones to ask.

3.7 Members of the Committee noted that from one perspective you can look at the numbers and acknowledge that these are positive but from another perspective they are not positive; there are some serious areas highlighted that 10% or more of students do not agree with, including the fact that courses are intellectually stimulating, as well as areas relating to bullying and racism. 24% of students do not know about Student Support Services and 50% of students agreed that they received a School induction. It was highlighted that we are at the noting phase of considering the results. The results have been provided to Schools and Directorates and we
should note where we have done well but we can always improve further and there is an expectation that this is what we will continue to see across the full wealth of points which have been identified. The action points from the Schools and Directorates will feed into the SSC. The most important action from the Student Experience Team’s perspective is that we communicate to students that their feedback will be actioned through the website, social media and various communications.

3.8 Members of the Committee discussed suggestions for improvements such as advertising Student Support Services on the main page of the University website from time to time. Consideration is being given to producing an easy to follow flow chart or step by step guide so students know who to start with to access support. It has been identified that more needs to be done in relation to promoting services throughout the year, in a way that students can effectively engage with the information, including social media, and the ways that we know students are interacting with the University more positively and learning from this. We need to ensure that the information provided is current and relevant. This is a large piece of work but we know what is required. Resource is needed to do this effectively.

4. **Update from Code of Practice Task and Finish Group**

4.1 Members of the Committee discussed the paper on the work of the Code of Practice TFG. The paper highlights the key areas that the group has identified to take into consideration for the code. It also outlines the key topics that the current code does not effectively cover. The TFG are currently working on a draft of the new code of practice. A meeting of the group will soon take place to finalise the direction of travel. It is hoped that a first draft of the new code of practice will be available later in February or in early March, to be presented through the Committee structure to Senate for an initial academic view, so that it can then be refined and finalised and be in place for new academic year.

4.2 Resource will be considered by the TFG to ensure that individuals undertaking investigations and decision making receive training. They will consider where this training will be sourced and where the support for progressing cases will come from.

4.3 No comments were received from members of the Committee.

5. **Update from Monitoring Task and Finish Group**

5.1 Members of the Committee discussed the paper on the work of the Monitoring TFG. The TFG has met twice and the work is progressing well. The group will meet again later in March. The work has been divided into two main strands, ‘principles’ considering what should we be monitoring and why; this work has involved discussion and benchmarking. The other area which Marion Malcolm has been leading on, focuses on what we do now in terms of monitoring, absence and engagement. It has been identified that the potential for streamlining and adopting new practices is high. Many areas have been identified as potential areas of ‘learning’ for Schools. The meetings that Marion has been undertaking should be completed in the coming weeks and it is planned that the strands will be drawn together, to identify ‘quick wins’ we can implement straight away and looking beyond this, to identify how we may wish to change the system and how we might deliver this more effectively.

5.2 It was confirmed that the TFG are looking at the connection between monitoring and absence and the Personal Tutor (PT) system. They are reviewing how this is working in all of the Schools and how this process could be improved. Recommendations from the two TFGs will hopefully reduce duplication and inefficiency in the process.
6. Class Representative Review

6.1 Members of the Committee discussed the paper on the Class Representative Review. The current system has existed for a long time and can work extremely effectively but it has not been reviewed for a significant period of time. Questions have been raised about the current process and if it can be delivered more effectively, in particular, how can we make better use of existing and new technology.

6.2 One of the areas identified of key importance in the NSS is responding further to the student voice. AB is working closely with AUSA and Ondrej Kucerak (OK), and the work is being supported by SPARQS (Students Partnership in Quality Scotland).

6.3 Phase 1 of the review has been completed; AB and OK have met with all School SAMs and Education Leads, which was very productive, and identified that some excellent practice is going on and a variety of approaches are being followed. A report is being prepared which draws together all of the different processes identified. This will stimulate discussion on whether a single approach should be adopted and whether this may streamline the process. Consideration will be given to whether this would be helpful to students who study across different Schools, or whether there are strong reasons for different approaches to continue and if flexibility may be of value.

6.4 After completion of the initial mapping phase, which is staff focussed, AB and OK are looking to engage directly with students to learn what they think of the process and how it can be developed further. They will then look to develop some possible new approaches which will be discussed further with staff and students.

6.5 AB advised that IT systems such as Unitu are being considered to support the process to work effectively.

6.6 The review is in the early stages and reports will be provided to the SSC.

6.7 No comments were received from members of the Committee.

7. University of Sanctuary

7.1 Members of the Committee were provided with an oral update on the University of Sanctuary. This initiative reflects strong engagement by the University to support displaced people, for example asylum seekers and refugees. It is part of a wider City of Sanctuary initiative. SMT committed over a year ago to the University working towards membership of the initiative. A wide group of staff and students across the University is continuing to work on this area. We also have a wider Community of Practice, which meets quarterly where expertise is shared and guest speakers are invited. The focus of this is twofold; it is about embedding awareness, respect and action for displaced people in everything that we do and in order to embed this, it involves us taking new approaches. There is also an external engagement angle in which we are working with GREC (Grampian Regional Equality Council) who undertake a significant amount of work with Syrian New Scots and in recent months we have been working with Aberdeen City Council in relation to refugees from Afghanistan.

7.2 A draft application has been completed which we hope to submit soon. Once the application is submitted, University of Sanctuary will provide feedback and we will work together on this.
7.3 A key detail of focus at present is in relation to scholarships; we need to demonstrate that the University offers Sanctuary Scholarships. The Development Trust have raised, and continue to raise, funds and this has been dedicated to Sanctuary Scholarships. We also have some existing Sanctuary Scholarships which have been termed ‘Shinning Light’ that we have delivered over the years to students recommended to us through CARA (Council for At-Risk Academics), which also covers students.

7.4 We are aiming to formalise and make clear the support that the University can offer, such as free accommodation including for families. AB is working with Jacqui Tuckwell (JT) on this and a case will be made to SMT about this. Fee waivers are also being considered. If these elements were covered by the University then the funding available from the Development Trust could be used for course-related costs (such as the purchase of books and IT) and daily living expenses. AB recently met with the Heads of School and she is trying to identify exactly how the fee waiver could be approached - there is a tremendous amount of good-will do this. It is hoped that this work will be finalised as soon as possible.

7.5 Members of the Committee noted their full support for this welcome initiative. Members of the Committee highlighted that the scheme needs to be promoted and further awareness of this should be raised within the University community and the Admissions Team so that cases are treated sensitively and the student’s circumstances taken into consideration, without compromising our quality etc.

8. Inclusion and Accessibility in Education Framework

8.1 Members of the Committee discussed the paper on the Inclusion and Accessibility in Education Framework. The aim of the Framework is to try to make more visible, to prioritise and to support colleagues to provide an inclusive and accessible educational experience for everyone. A wide approach has been taken and includes recruitment activities and events. The Framework does not create anything new in itself but it is a stimulus to new and shared practice.

8.2 At present the Framework includes an inclusion and accessibility checklist, there is guidance on captions and on etiquette for online communications. It also includes the EDI and Religion Policies. It provides the relevant information in one place on the website.

8.3 The events taking place which relate to the Framework are advertised on the webpage; members of the Committee were provided with an outline of the events that have taken place and the upcoming events.

8.4 The other resource which has been developed is a Reflection Document which has roots in Equality Impact Assessments. The Document provides a process to review an activity such as a course/recruitment event, to consider factors related to inclusion and accessibility, with the aim of identifying improvements/actions that can be made. The document is available at: www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/documents/Accessibility%20and%20Inclusion%20Reflection%20Document.docx

8.5 The Framework will be considered by SSC once per year to discuss the progress, although it will be reviewed more frequently. It will also be shared with the Equality Diversity and Inclusion Committee (EDIC).

8.7 No comments were received from members of the Committee.
9. **Student Withdrawals Report**

9.1 Members of the Committee discussed the paper on the Student Withdrawals report.

9.2 The timing of withdrawal was considered; the highest level of withdrawals was identified in November.

9.3 Withdrawals were considered on a School by School basis. Not many clear patterns were identified at UG level but the Business School have been identified as having the lowest rate of UG withdrawals, followed by MMSN, compared to the Institutional average.

9.4 The main reasons for withdrawal were identified as health and ‘other’ reasons for UG students. No further data is available to identify what the ‘other’ reasons are. This is perhaps a further area the University needs to understand.

9.6 Most UG withdrawals occur in stage 1. There has been a spike this year in stage 3 students withdrawing compared to previous years.

9.7 For PGT students there has been a large spike in withdrawals in December this year compared with previous years.

9.8 There is no clear pattern across the University in the number of withdrawals for PGT students but this year there has been a large spike in the number of PGT students withdrawing in the Business School, with low withdrawal rates in previous years.

9.9 There has been a large spike noted for withdrawals as a result of ‘other’ reasons for PGT students this year.

9.10 Most PGT students who have withdrawn this year are from the ‘Overseas’ fee paying category. On further investigation the numbers seem to represent a group of students registered with the Business School who have registered their ethnicity as Bangladesh. This may require further investigation/explanation for a fuller understanding.

9.11 There has not been a large increase in the overall withdrawal number this year; it may be slightly increased. The reasons for withdrawal can be unclear as students can select ‘other’ reasons which do not require them to specify the exact reasons.

9.12 In the future, we can look to expand the analysis to include withdrawal data against demographic information so we can report against protected characteristics.

9.13 There is hope that Schools would be provided access to a PowerBi dashboard so that they can monitor and analyse the data in the areas of interest.

9.14 AB noted that she invited the Bangladeshi students to meet with her. Most of the students had their visas reported due to lack of engagement and not residing in Aberdeen (many students were living elsewhere in the UK). There are lessons to be learned from this in terms of recruitment and how we support students when they are here. NE clarified that students in the position of not residing in Aberdeen were given the option to come to Aberdeen to engage now that in-person teaching had resumed or they were given the option to return home and have their visa reported.
9.15 Members of the Committee noted that paper was very helpful and commented that it is useful that some of the data has been provided as a percent of registered population as this takes into consideration the changes in composition of our programmes, particularly around online and the new and emerging methods of delivery, but also our on campus composition and numbers are changing over too.

9.16 Members of the Committee noted that PGR student withdrawals are not considered at present. It was agreed that it would be good for these figures to be tied in to this work in the future. Figures will be provided to the SSC in relation to withdrawals every three months and we can then consider how we incorporate the PGR figures.

9.17 Members of the Committee discussed what we will do with these figures. How do we take the information on board when considering why students are withdrawing and what can we do (when possible) to prevent this from happening? It was agreed that colleagues think and reflect on this for the next meeting of the SSC.

10. AOCB

10.1 NE advised the committee on the work being undertaken on the Gender Based Violence (GBV) Strategy Group. We have recently signed up to the Emily Test Charter pledging to take the Emily Test in a year. More information will be shared in the next few weeks and the University community will be engaged with an aim of explaining what the Emily Test Charter is. It is linked to GBV in the Scottish Higher Education Sector and is a charity led by Fiona Drouet, whose daughter Emily died when she was a student studying with us. NE has been working with Fiona Drouet on a number of projects over the last couple of years. The charter was launched late last year as something that the sector can get behind to champion good practice in relation to GBV within and outside the University community. We’re hoping to hear back in response to our application later in the month. NE will update everyone on the next steps we’ll be taking.

10.2 Members of the Committee asked about whether additional support has been considered/implemented for late start students, mainly postgraduate taught students (PGT). The Business School have increasing numbers of students starting late and anecdotally they seem to struggle as they miss induction and the first few weeks of teaching. They often find that there is less engagement with students in this position and it is felt that they do not perform as effectively as their peers (although data is needed to evidence this).

AB has undertaken a lot of work around this as this has been identified as an area of concern for a while. For now some steps have been implemented; communications went out to students in November and December to make it clear that they should not arrive late. Systems have been put in place to ensure that students are clear if they do not arrive by a particular time this will make it a lot harder for them to be permitted to commence their studies late; the deadline has now passed so if a student wishes to arrive late, they require the approval of Ruth Taylor to do so. This may reduce the number of students affected but it is appreciated that this can still be a challenge. Communications have tried to be clear about the requirement to participate in online orientation and to join the University community online when the student is unable to physically attend. Attempts have also be made to highlight Student Support Services. English Language has been highlighted as an area of concern and in-sessional English language courses are available. Schools have been encouraged to apply C6s more often, so that it is clear to students about the engagement requirements early in the term. It is a live conversation that AB is continuing to work on. Plans are in place and consideration has been given to providing information about the expectations to check emails and MyAberdeen etc., perhaps in students’ first language, in video format. AB advised that discussions have taken place with colleagues across the Schools in relation to this area and comments and feedback are welcome.
11. Reflection on this meetings’ discussion regarding equality, diversity, inclusion, health, safety and wellbeing.

11.1 No comments were received from members of the Committee.

12. Reflection on Aberdeen 2040 Updates on Operational Plan

12.1 AB advised that there is ongoing work on decolonising the curriculum.

13. Reflection on SSC Task and Finish Groups

13.1 No comments were received from members of the Committee.

14. Action required

14.1 The UEC is asked to note items 1 to 10 and 12 above.

15. Further Information

15.1 Further information may be obtained from Abbe Brown (abbe.brown@abdn.ac.uk), Nick Edwards (n.edwards@abdn.ac.uk) or Lesley Muirhead (l.muirhead@abdn.ac.uk).