

Supporting students in crisis: A guide for staff

Scope

This guidance has been developed with thanks to the University of Edinburgh, to assist partnership staff in responding to students in crisis, and in signposting to appropriate sources of support.

The guidance promotes a consistent approach to the support of students in crisis and therefore directly contributes to equivalence for the university partnership. This guidance applies to all Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) students enrolled in the University partnership.

This guidance does not apply to statutory disclosures including those in place for protection of children and adults at risk and PREVENT.

1.0 Duty of Care

1.1 The University of the Highlands and Islands, as a partnership, has a duty of care to respond appropriately to situations in which there are substantial concerns relating to a student's mental and/or physical functioning and the impact upon the individual and/or other members of the university community.

2.0 What is a Crisis?

2.1 The word 'crisis' covers a wide range of situations and what one person might consider a crisis may be manageable to someone else. Crisis can come about very quickly, or develop over a period of time. Likewise, it may endure for only a short time or over a more prolonged period.

2.2 For the purposes of this guideline, a crisis can be said to occur when a person experiences a real or perceived threat to their self-esteem or significant relationships (personal, professional, etc.), or when particular events cause anxiety and/or fear to be aroused, and when usual coping strategies do not restore an internal sense of confidence that the feelings being experienced can be tolerated and managed.

2.3 For the purposes of this guideline, there are three levels of intervention, depending on whether the situation requires an immediate response (Level 1), an urgent response (Level 2), or a non-urgent referral to support (Level 3). Whether or not a student is in crisis is a subjective judgement. It is therefore recommended that the decision to invoke a Level 1 response be taken by the Academic Partner Student Services Manager and an appropriate Academic Partner senior manager, in consultation with external expertise (e.g. a student's GP or other qualified professional) as necessary.

3.0 The Role of Partnership Staff in Supporting a Student in Crisis

3.1 Most students manage the demands of academic life by drawing upon support from their peers, family and lecturers. But sometimes one may require more specialist support. If you feel you need to, or are requested to, give students extra assistance, it is important to work within the boundaries of your role and what you feel competent to do.

3.2 Members of staff, via their interactions with students, are well placed to recognise when a student may require support and/or guidance. This includes, but is not limited to, lecturers, Personal Academic Tutors/FE Student Advisers, Directors of Studies, Supervisory Teams and Third Party Monitors. Since all members of staff within the university partnership have a shared Duty of Care towards students and staff, it is important that any concerns about students are acted upon and signposted appropriately, in order that support can be provided where appropriate.

3.3 The present guidance is intended to assist in handling not only crises but also everyday situations. It is important to be prepared for all eventualities, but bear in mind that crisis situations are rare and that expert help is available and should be used where appropriate.

4.0 Confidentiality

4.1 Normal student support confidentiality protocols apply to crisis situations.

- Wherever possible, do not pass information about students to anyone outside of the university, including third parties, without the student's explicit consent. However, it may not always be possible to obtain informed consent because of the nature and degree of a student's mental health issues,
- If a third party (e.g. parent) wishes to contact a student, you can offer to forward their communication to the student or tell the student they have been in touch.
- Treat personal information about a student with the utmost discretion.
- Do not promise absolute confidentiality and advise the student you may have to consult a colleague.

5.0 Guidelines for Partnership Staff

5.1 It is challenging to support someone who is under significant stress and not coping well. If you are aware of a student who is disturbed, distressed or indicating suicidal or self-harming feelings, action should be taken. The specific action taken will depend on the following:

- The seriousness and nature of the behaviour/distress.
- Whether the student acknowledges that they have a problem and agree to seek help.
- Whether there are any other members of staff around.
- Whether you feel you are safe dealing with the student.
- Whether the student is coherent and rational.
- Whether you know the student.

5.2 Always seek advice from Academic Partner Student Services (and/or the local student counselling service, if applicable) when a student expresses suicidal thoughts and/or presents a risk to themselves and/or others.

5.3 It is not necessary to wait for a crisis to occur before referring a student for guidance or counselling. A student whose behaviour in class, peer relationships, or relationship to authority is impacting adversely on their ability to engage with a programme of study can benefit from a referral to Academic Partner guidance and/or counselling services. A qualified counsellor can help the student to understand the nature of various problems and conflicts, clarify how the problems affect behaviour and academic success, explore alternatives and make referrals for on-going assistance. Student Services will take advice from, or refer a student to, a relevant source of support, including the university's online counselling service as appropriate.

5.4 Staff in the university partnership engage with a diverse student body and one is not expected to understand and respond to all of the needs and frustrations presented. The staff member's key role is to recognise that a student is in distress, and to make an initial referral to Academic Partner Student Services or the local student counselling service.

5.5 A student's Personal Academic Tutor/FE Student Adviser or Director of Studies, in particular, is well placed to recognise when a student's distress is an impediment to academic productivity, and to make an initial referral to Academic Partner Student Services or the local student counselling service.

- *Step 1:* Request meeting with the student privately after class (or determine a mutually agreeable time). Contact may be made using VC technologies, Skype, etc., although such technology may be unsuitable for sensitive one-to-one interactions.
 - *Step 2:* Give your reason for seeing the student - e.g. "I'm concerned about your progress in this class". Indicate what you have observed that makes you concerned without interpretation - e.g. "You often complain about the assignments and do not submit them on time."
 - *Step 3:* Allow the student to talk and help the student elaborate, but do pre-empt them. Ask the student if they are aware of the behaviour and how they understand it. Remain calm, factual and listen respectfully without judgement or advice giving, and do not pretend to understand what you do not.
 - *Step 4:* Recommend professional counselling (refer to Academic Partner Student Services, the local student counselling service or the university's online counselling service initially). Validate that difficult circumstances or feelings can interfere with performance or concentration. Enquire if the student has been in contact with anyone in Student Services. Talking to a counsellor can help to relieve some of the student's worry and a student counsellor can make and/or support referrals for various services or resources. It is important to emphasise that services are free and confidential.
- 5.6 Students working at distance should be referred to Student Services at their Home Academic Partner and/or the university's online counselling service (<http://www.uhi.ac.uk/en/students/support>) in the first instance. The student may be advised to contact the Samaritans or NHS 24 (<http://www.uhi.ac.uk/en/students/support/getting-help-at-uhi/counselling>) if they feel they require immediate support. At Level 3, students may be advised to self-refer to the university's online counselling service.
- 5.7 Support is offered to students on an opt-in basis. Some students may not wish to engage in counselling or support. If you are concerned about the behaviour of a student, you should seek advice from Academic Partner Student Services in the first instance.
- 5.8 The university will endeavour to postpone any decision about the student's academic study until he or she is able to participate in an informed way in discussions. As a last resort, however, the university's Fitness to Study procedure may be invoked.

6.0 Levels of Risk

6.1 Level 1 – Handling Emergency Situations

When you believe the student may be at risk of harm to themselves and/or others and are concerned for one or more of the following, for example:

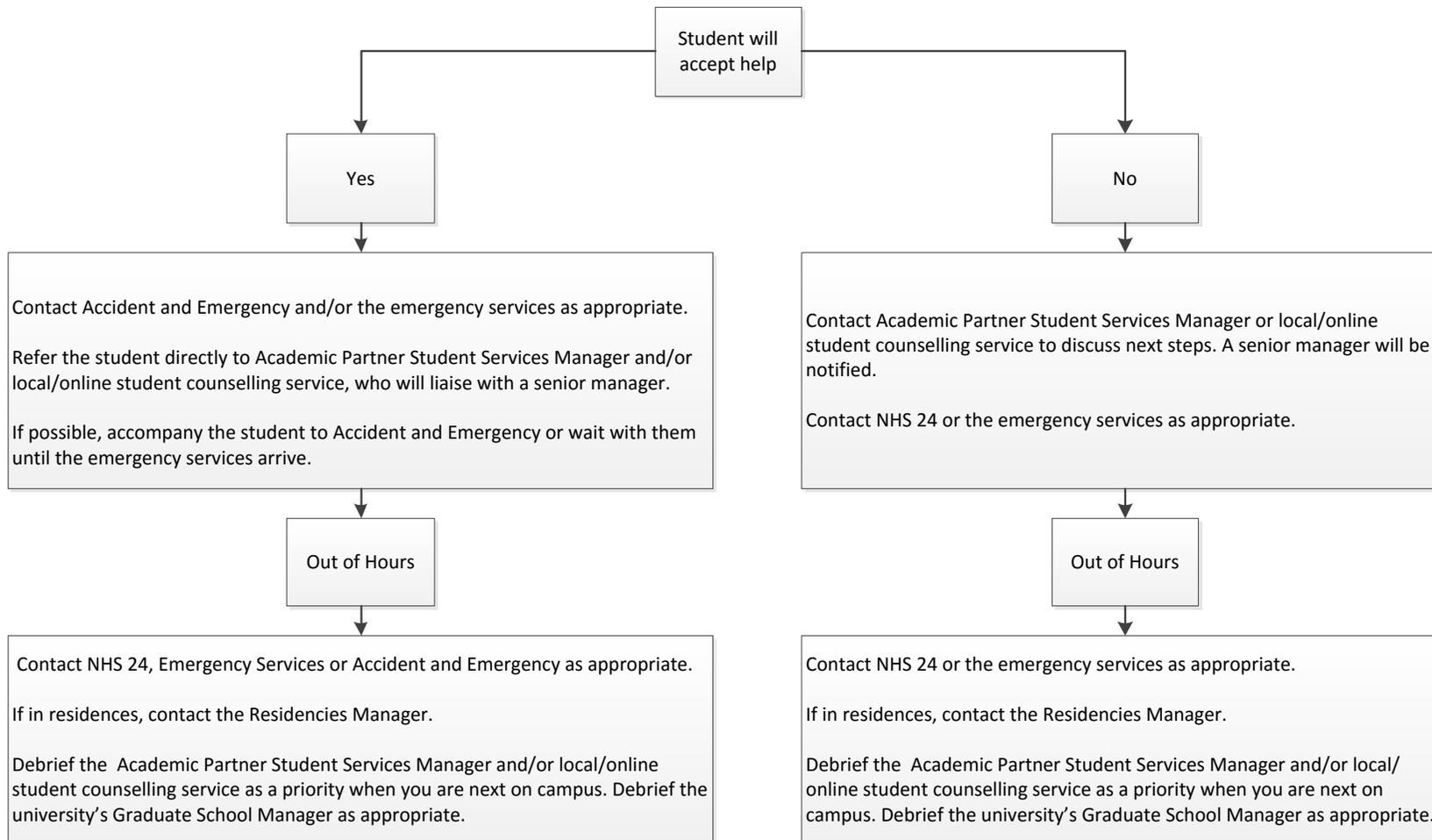
- The student is actively talking about suicide.
- The student is threatening violence to people or property.
- The student is behaving out of character.
- The student seems very disturbed, disorientated and/or clearly in mental distress.
- The student tells you they have taken an overdose.

The following is recommended at Level 1:

- Move the student to a quiet and safe place if possible. Enlist the help of someone else so the student is not left alone and you are not left alone with the student.
- If the student is willing, arrange for them to go to the nearest Accident and Emergency department. Telephone 999 and explain the situation. It may not be possible to obtain the student's consent because of the nature and extent of the student's mental health issues.
- If the student is very disturbed, dangerous and/or uncooperative and you are on campus call Estates or Security and request that the Police and/or an ambulance be called. The Police can arrange for an ambulance if necessary.
- Contact the Academic Partner Student Services Manager or a member of the local/online student counselling service for assistance, who will liaise with an appropriate Academic Partner senior manager. If the incident occurs near closing time or out of hours call Estates or Security and ask them to help locate the senior manager on duty.
- Stay with the student until the emergency services arrive and you are able to hand over to the paramedics or Police. It is not necessary for you to accompany the student in the ambulance to hospital.
- Make a written note of key points and action taken (Appendix A). A short summary of each Level 1 incident should be provided to the Academic Partner Quality Manager or designated officer, for onward forwarding to the university's Dean of Students if required.
- Speak with your Line Manager about your concerns and your actions as soon as possible.
- Contact the Academic Partner Student Services Manager or local/online student counselling service to arrange a debriefing session and hand over written notes so that an action plan follow-up support can be coordinated. Where the incident involves a postgraduate research student, the university's Graduate School Office should also be debriefed.
- If the incident occurs out of office hours follow it up as a priority when you are next on campus.

6.1.1 Flow chart: Level 1 – What to do when a situation requires immediate action

- Stay calm and prioritise your own and others' safety at the scene.
- Debrief by talking the situation over with your Line Manager, the Academic Partner Student Services Manager or a member of the local/online student counselling service. Debrief the university's Graduate School Office as appropriate.
- Record the key details of the incident and provide a summary to the Academic Partner Quality Manager or designated officer.



6.2 Level 2 – Making internal and external referrals: urgent care

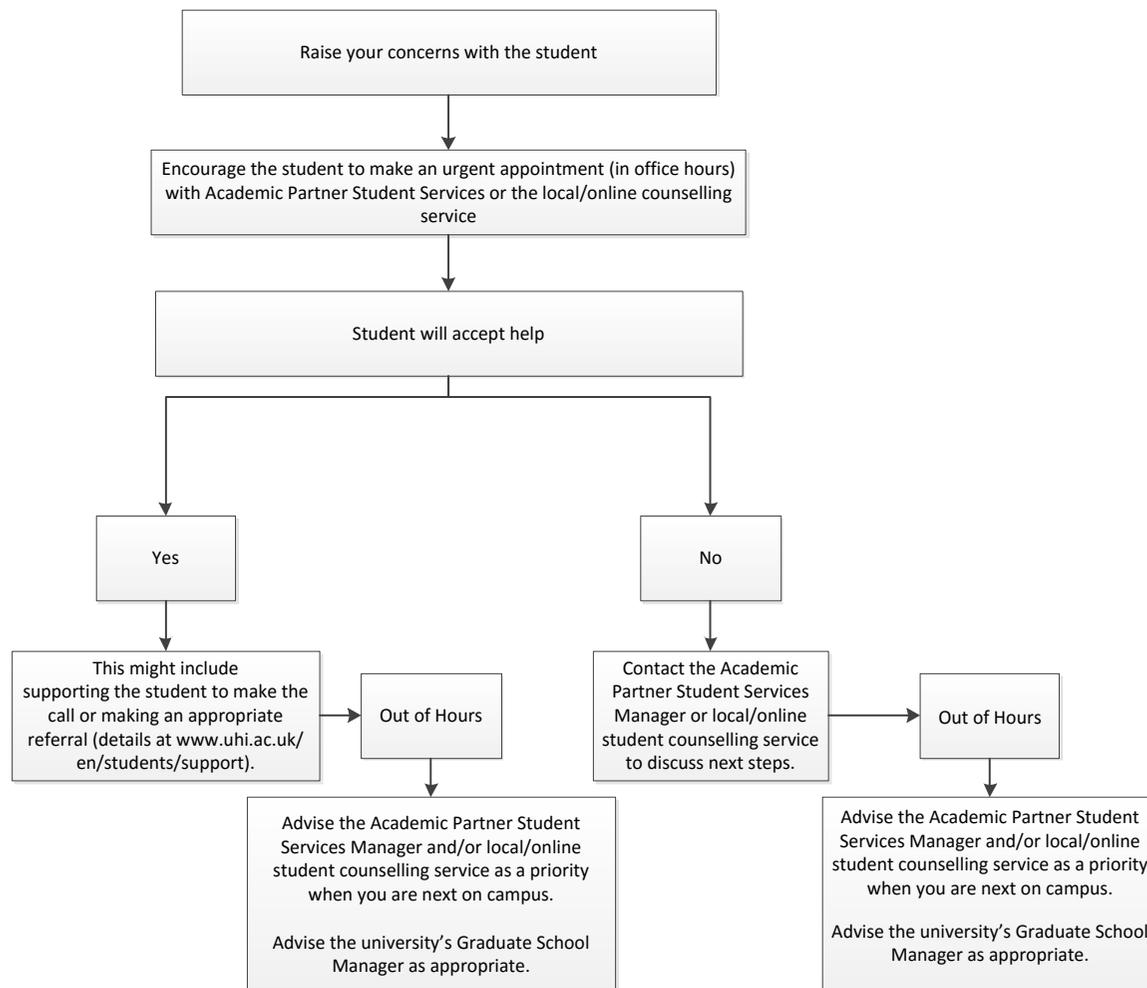
When you feel the situation is urgent but do not think that the student requires intervention from emergency services.

The following is recommended at Level 2:

- Talk to the student in a direct, concerned and caring manner. Explain your reasons for concern.
- Encourage the student to seek help via an emergency appointment (within office hours) with:
 - Their GP (if they are not registered in the area a local GP can take them as an emergency out of area appointment).
 - Academic Partner Student Services.
 - The local/online student counselling service.
- Offer to help to arrange an emergency appointment with one of the services identified above. This might include:
 - Supporting the student to arrange the appointment.
 - Making the initial call, explaining the emergency of the situation and then passing the telephone to the student to arrange an appointment.
 - Giving the student contact details for the Samaritans, Breathing Space Scotland or other specific helpline.
- Make a written note of the key points and action taken (Appendix A).
- Speak with your Line Manager about your concerns and your actions as soon as possible.
- Contact the Academic Partner Student Services Manager or local/online student counselling service to arrange a debriefing session and hand over written notes so that an action plan of follow-up support can be coordinated. Where the incident involves a postgraduate research student, the university's Graduate School Office should also be debriefed.
- If the incident occurs out of office hours follow it up as a priority when you are next on campus.

6.2.1 Flow Chart: Level 2 – What to do if the situation requires an urgent response

- Debrief by talking the situation over with your Line Manager, the Academic Partner Student Services Manager, and/or a member of the local/online student counselling service. Debrief the university's Graduate School Office as appropriate.
- Record the key details of the incident and provide them to the appropriate member(s) of staff.



6.3 Level 3 – Promoting Self Help

When you are worried about a student’s mental health or behaviour but this does not pose an immediate risk to the student or others. The student may be:

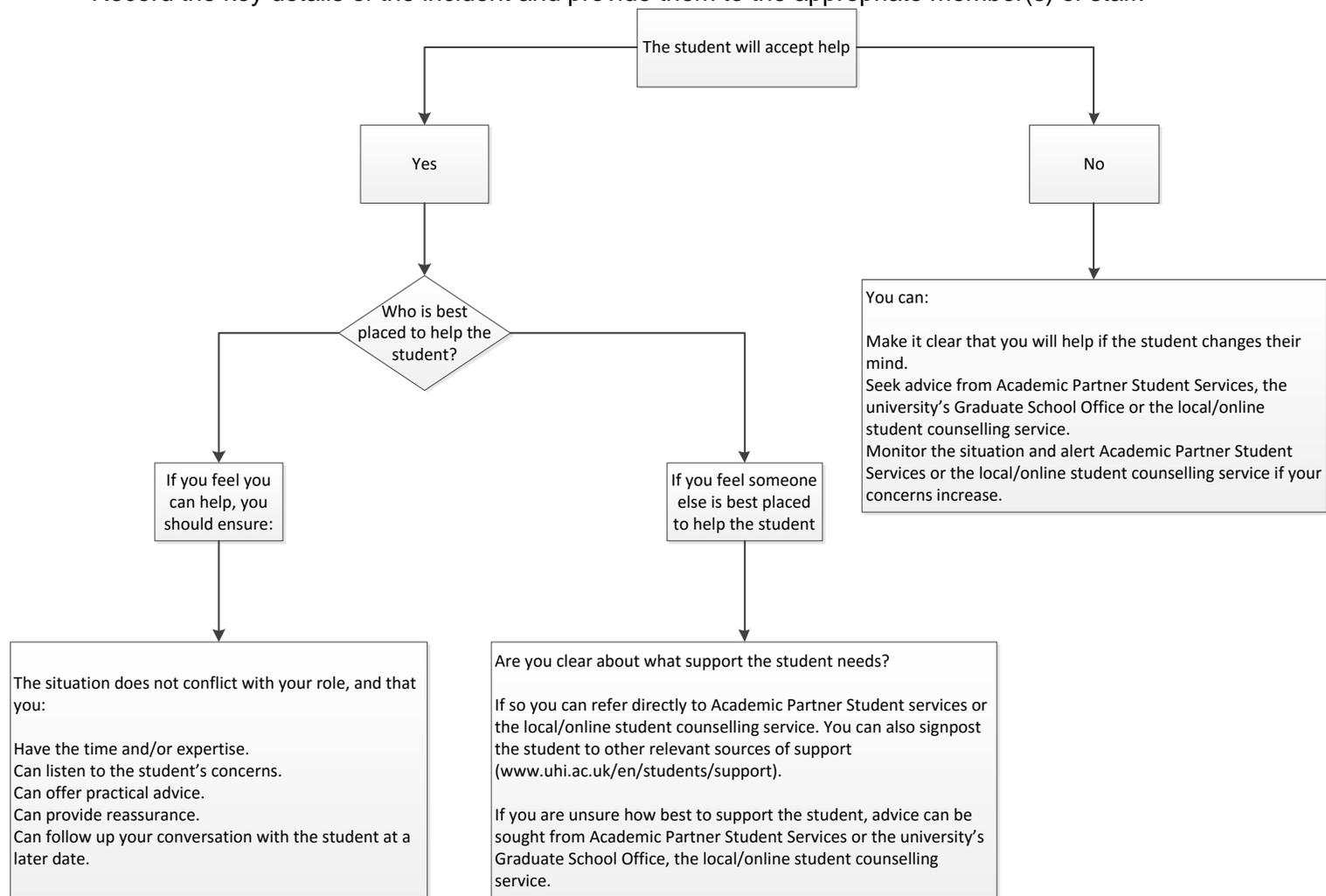
- Depressed, anxious, generally stressed.
- Having problems with relationships.
- Bereaved.
- Suffering from low self-esteem.
- Homesick, lonely or isolated.
- Having unexplained study or money issues.

The following is recommended at Level 3:

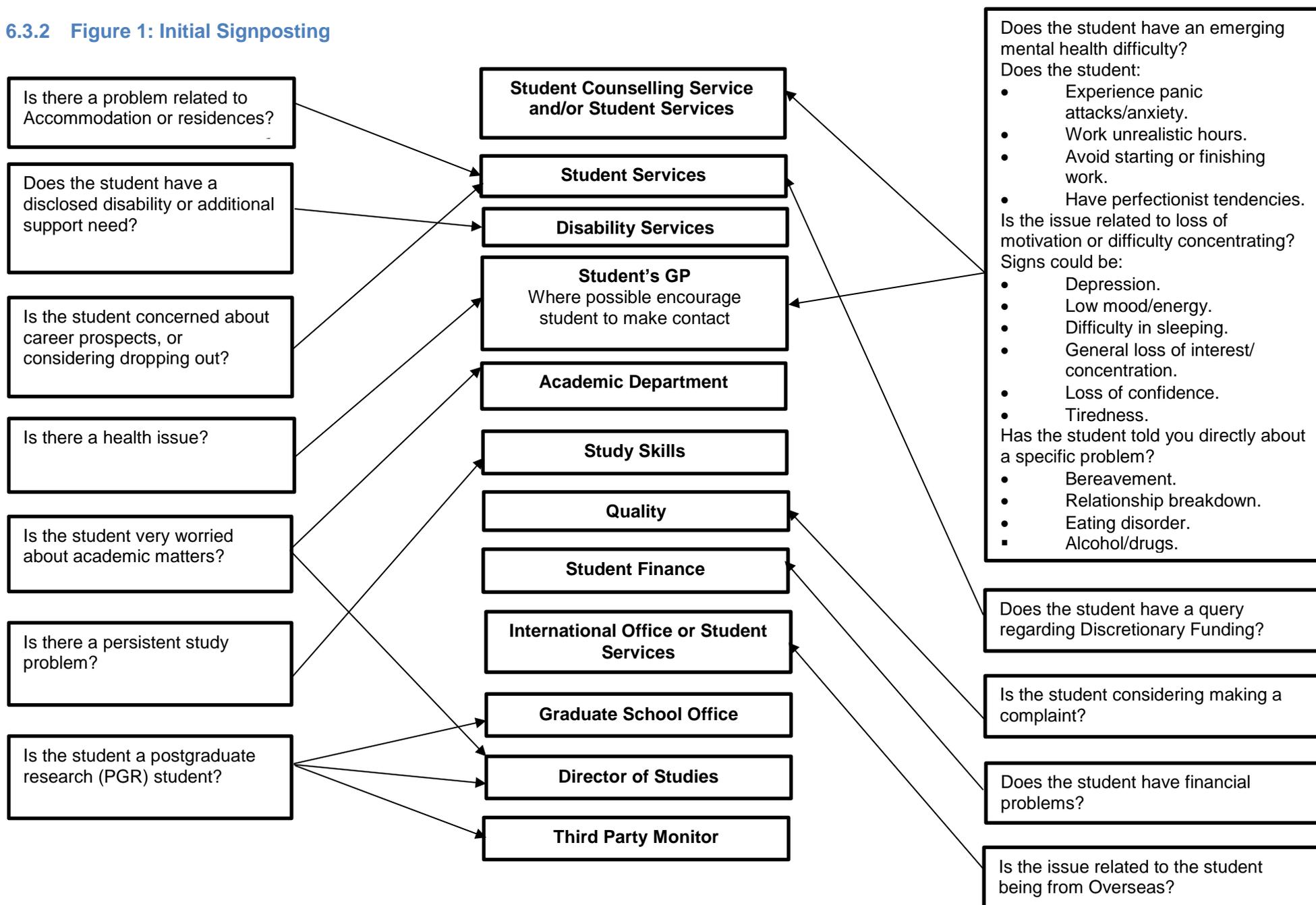
- Listen to the student. Prompt and clear indications to the student that their behaviour is a cause of concern are usually helpful.
- Ask the student if they are already receiving support (e.g. via their GP, local mental health services or local student counselling service). If so encourage them to seek help via these established structures.
- If the student has not already been referred to mental health services, encourage them to begin this process via their GP or the local/online student counselling service.
- If the student appears unwilling to seek help, acknowledge that they are having difficulties. If you have any other concerns, you can seek advice from Academic Partner Student Services or the local/online student counselling service without disclosing the student’s identity if you wish. Confidentiality protocol allows the student’s identity to be disclosed when a cause for concern is raised.
- Make a written note of the key points and action taken and pass it to the Academic Partner Student Services Manager, Graduate School Office or the local/online student counselling service, bearing in mind the need for confidential storage.

6.3.1 Flow Chart: Level 3 – Referring a student to support

- Debrief by talking the situation over with your Line Manager, the Academic Partner Student Services Manager, the university’s Graduate School Office and/or a member of the local/online student counselling service.
- Record the key details of the incident and provide them to the appropriate member(s) of staff.



6.3.2 Figure 1: Initial Signposting



STUDENT DETAILS

Name

Student ID

CONTACT DETAILS

Address

Telephone

Mobile

DETAILS OF INCIDENT

Date, time and place of incident.

REPORTED BY

Name

Position

Work
location

Telephone

Email

WHO ELSE HAS BEEN INFORMED?

Who else has been informed about, or is aware of, the incident (including Academic Partner staff, the Emergency Services, the student's next of kin, etc.).

COURSE INFORMATION

Brief details of incident (what happened, who was involved, how did you hear about incident, other relevant information).