

Communicating with Parents

When your son or daughter joins us in St Andrews it marks the start of an exciting new phase in life – for all of you! The student is embarking on a life where they will discover who they really are, what they are capable of, and they will do this in an independent environment, very much an adult contributing to our community and entering into a new relationship with our staff, who will work closely with your son or daughter to help them fulfil their potential.

However, for parents this can be a difficult time, as you learn to relinquish a large part of the usual contact you have with your son or daughter. Up to this point, you have told them what is right and wrong, made decisions on their behalf and steered them through their young lives. But now it is time for you to let them lead, define and assume that self-control which will guide them through their own, adult lives.

In our experience, the shift from home life to university life sparks a **new** relationship between parent and child. The existing bond you have with your son or daughter will not break, they will need you throughout their university career and beyond, but a change in your relationship is inevitable. So we want to work with you to help make this transition positive, rather than painful. We recognise the potential tensions in the transition and we want to help parents assess what their role can be, and what we in the University can, and cannot, do to help.



How can a Parent be involved?

At the University of St Andrews we encourage families to stay in touch with each other. But try to avoid making assumptions or setting expectations about how often your son or daughter contacts you. Some students have daily contact with parents, others weekly, but it varies from family to family. Set the frequency together, in partnership. If you have agreed to be in touch on a regular basis, review it after a few weeks, once the student has settled into a routine and started to understand the demands they have on their time in this new setting.

We strive to provide information to our students' families to help them stay involved in University events and achievements. Very often you will still remain a first point of contact – even if you are some distance away - so, to that extent, you can be a very important source of information, helping us by signposting sources of guidance within the University. The more you know about the University's systems and what we can offer to help students, the more you can provide them with guidance on what to do when they come to you with doubts.

We suggest you take time to review our Web Pages, which can be found at <http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/>. If you have any queries about anything, contact the ASC, our University information centre. The ASC is an abbreviation of the “Advice and Support Centre” and students on arrival very quickly learn to “Ask the ASC”. But you can use it too, and the team of trained staff will be delighted to help anyone with an enquiry. You can contact the team by email at theasc@st-andrews.ac.uk or by phone on 01334 462020.



Also, the Development Office runs the popular and free-to-join Family Programme, enabling families to be a part of the St Andrews community, keeping them up to date with University news, and providing ways in which you can contribute to and share in its achievements. Through joining the Family Programme (<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/alumni/relations/familyprogramme/>), members will receive a regular *St Andrews in the News* e-newsletter, a bi-annual *Link* newsletter, exclusively for Parents and delivered to your door, the annual *Chronicle* magazine for alumni and friends of the University, invitations to attend University events around the world, and access to the SPARC benefits scheme. All Family Programme members are also invited to attend one of the Parents’ Receptions at the beginning of Orientation week, to be welcomed by the Principal and Vice-Chancellor, and where members of staff from our Schools and Units will be on hand to meet you. Finally, Family Programme members also have access to *Love From Home* (<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/alumni/relations/familyprogramme/lovefromhome/>), run in cooperation with local baker and confectioner Fisher & Donaldson, which offers the opportunity for you to send your son or daughter cakes, chocolates or gift baskets on special occasions.

What are the limits to a parent’s involvement?

As we have said above, you can still remain involved, still be interested in what they are doing so long as they allow it. However the law (namely, the Age of Legal Capacity (Scotland) Act 1991) supports the stance that they are now independent adults. This is a very different context from many other international countries and we appreciate it might come as a surprise to parents to realise how little control or right to students’ personal information they may have. However it is important that we enable realistic expectations from the start: in Scotland we treat people as able to make decisions affecting their own lives from a very young age.

For example, the legal age of capacity here is 16 and so over that age a young person is in charge of their own surgical, medical or dental permission. Furthermore, in relation to sharing of health care information, in Scotland if you are 12 or over, the law assumes you can make your own decisions about your health care information unless there is evidence to suggest you can’t.

The University finds that the privacy of its relationship with its students can be a significant strength – this is a fundamental core of the University’s purpose; we firmly believe in developing the agency and independence of our students. The staff working with students must develop a close, but professional, relationship which is based on mutual trust between respectful members of a single University community. The relationship prevents us from betraying that trust by giving out our students’ personal information to anyone else and, in this context, parents are no different from other students, friends, family members, carers or husbands/wives.

Releasing information to parents, other relatives and third parties

Parents, other relatives and third parties often contact the University to request personal data about students at the University (e.g. as to whether they are attending classes).

However UK and Europe privacy laws place a duty on the University to **protect** the privacy of all members of the University community – students and staff. This means the University is not able to disclose personal data (even to parents), other than in the most exceptional of circumstances because of the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998 (the DPA).

In accordance with the legal statutes above, the University further makes a declaration through its Student Data Protection Code stating:

“personal information will not be given out externally without the student's permission. This restriction includes passing information to parents, legal guardians and next of kin.”

This means that we cannot, without a student's permission, let you know if they are or are not attending lectures, their grades, what clubs/societies they are members of, etc. And so, given the legislation outlined above, if you wish to know about the private details of any student, then the only legitimate way for you to get an answer is to ask them yourself.

If you have any questions about how the University protects student privacy, colleagues at the University will be happy to discuss this further.

What if the parents are the ones paying the bills? Surely they can be kept informed?

Some parents may think it reasonable that they should have direct access to information from the University because they are paying for their son or daughter's fees. However:

The Contract is with the Students – both financially and operationally

The University charges the tuition fees to the student. The student pays the fees. Some students borrow the money from a bank, some work to self-fund, others are granted financial assistance by their Governments. Some students do, indeed, borrow or receive a gift of money from their parents. Whatever the source of the money, the student is the person we work with and there is no obligation of contract to the person or agency at the source of that funding.

Can the student sign a waiver when they matriculate allowing the University to discuss the student with a third party?

This is a common procedure in some other countries, including the United States of America. Unfortunately, this is not something we can do in the UK. However, there is one exception to this; occasionally it is agreed between staff and student that it would be helpful to contact parents (e.g. where a pre-existing medical condition reoccurs and advice from a parent on past treatment might be helpful in an emergency situation). If we do this, the student will have to sign a statement of permission, which will allow us to discuss one particular, clearly outlined, issue with a third party

over a very limited period of time. The permission form will be applicable only to that one instance and therefore cannot be reused at a later date. This discussion will take place with the student present. We will not discuss a student with a third party behind their back. This will not help the student's development, and will undermine the relationship between student and University.

How can the University help if you have serious concerns about a student?

There may be circumstances when you may have major concerns about your son or daughter - perhaps you have not heard from them for a while or maybe you are concerned over a serious (but not vital) medical condition they have or possibly you have received a worrying message about them in some way. In such cases if you leave contact details or correspondence with us, we will endeavour to pass them on and encourage the student (assuming the individual is a student at the University) to make contact. If the individual is not a student at the University the details will be destroyed.



But will the University contact parents if the student is in trouble?

Yes we do, but only in very serious circumstances. We do not normally contact anyone else if the student is responsive and receiving assistance from University staff (Support Advisers or Counsellors), or external agencies (medical professionals, private counselling). If a student is the subject of Disciplinary procedures, even if the Police are involved, parents will not be contacted. The student is an adult and responsible for their own actions and the repercussions from those actions. However, The Data Protection Act does permit the University to disclose information in certain exceptional circumstances; these are usually life or death situations. In such cases the routine need to obtain consent before disclosing personal data may be waived if a student is in immediate, grave risk we may contact parents with some caveats:

- (1) We ask students to provide "Emergency Contact" details when they matriculate.

Emergency contacts are collected – this is assigned by the students themselves. They may, or may not, choose to name parents in the role of "Emergency Contacts"

- (2) If the student is experiencing difficulties and they, or the University, determine that input from the Emergency Contact could be helpful, **we shall ask the student's permission** to make contact. If the student agrees, the Emergency Contact will be contacted, usually with the student present.

If the student is in trouble, but not at grave or life threatening risk, the University will not usually contact anyone else without the student's permission.

- (3) If the student is in **grave danger** and a parent has been identified as the "Emergency Contact" we are able to use that contact even if the student is unable to give permission. The decision to contact an Emergency Contact will be taken by two managers and will be based on the agreement that communication with an emergency contact is necessary in order to protect the **vital interests** of the student. These circumstances are very rare, but when they occur the most common causes of this necessary communication are where a student has been reported missing and is believed to be at risk, where a student is unresponsive and has been taken by emergency

transportation to hospital, where a student is mentally incapacitated and at extreme risk, or in the event of a student's death.

You can tell us....!

While the University does work to protect the privacy of students and to honour the promises made to them, there are some actions that it can take to balance the right to privacy and to help facilitate interactions with a third party who has a legitimate interest. If you find that you cannot reach your son or daughter, although the University cannot give you their contact details, we can ask them to get in touch with you. If you find that you are concerned about a loved one, do let the University know. We can then move to check if things are as they should be. Whilst we may not be able to tell you the outcome, we can act on what you tell us, and we will encourage your son or daughter to make contact with you.

What if the Parents know a student is struggling?

There are few things more painful to a parent than knowing that their son or daughter is unhappy, or in trouble, and feeling powerless to help. The privacy of our students may mean we are limited in what we tell **you** but if you know something about a student which would help **us** to help **them**, you can tell us by contacting the ASC at theasc@st-andrews.ac.uk or 01334 462020.

There are numerous formal and informal support systems available for students in this small town, and we can find lots of ways to easily reach out to students. Through the information service at the ASC, students can be referred to Student Services Support Advisors and Counsellors, who are all professionally trained. They work daily from the Eden Court building on the Scores: in most circumstances, students can get a same-day appointment with an Advisor, who will guide them to resources relating to a range of difficulties from study issues through to practical money or international student problems to personal and emotional worries. In addition, Wardens and Assistant Wardens living and eating with students in the University Halls of Residences can offer some general monitoring, engage students in conversation, and if necessary, direct them to the appropriate central services.

The Chaplaincy team is available to students of any faith or philosophy of life for confidential listening and support, and for hospital visiting – and if you have information that you believe would help the Chaplaincy support your son or daughter, you are welcome to contact them at chaplain@st-andrews.ac.uk or 01334 462866.

If you know that a student is already consulting one of the support teams at the University and you have information which you think might help us, feel free to let us know. Although, remember, that it is only possible for us to use the information you give us, as part of the counselling or support process, if the student knows that a conversation has taken place between you and the service.

Sources of support are outlined on our **Advice and Support** pages on the web <http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/student-services/>

Leaving University early

St Andrews is a magical place. When students graduate, they leave recommending the St Andrews experience to others and our student satisfaction and retention rates are astonishingly high compared to other UK institutions. However some students, even though they have received considerable support, find that their situation doesn't improve and leaving the University might be a positive choice for them. For some the time for Higher Education is just not right, the course is too broad or too narrow in scope for them, or ultimately the University is not the right place for them.

We are flexible. So allow your son or daughter to take some time out and think about what they actually want. Often it may be possible for them to return to us at a later date¹ when they are more ready to embrace the experience. Alternatively, we can assist with a transfer to another institution if that is a more suitable option. Forcing a student to stay where they are not happy will hinder their personal development and create a negative experience, two of the outcomes which go fundamentally against the values of this University. We need to listen to their needs and support them, together.

Our students will grow, develop, and change in many ways in the four years they are with us. Your supportive relationship with them as their parents will also have evolved. So we shall be delighted to meet you at the end of this life-changing journey as you watch them walk across the stage at Graduation, as self-sufficient adults with their own mind, with self-direction, ready to find solutions to their own problems and with the strength to face their life ahead. Thousands each year manage this transition to independence, and your son or daughter will value your support as they achieve it too.



¹Please be aware that UKVI rules require a student to apply for a new visa prior to returning from a leave of absence. More information can be found at:

www.st-andrews.ac.uk/international/information/visas/applying/newstudents/applyingfort4generalvisa/