
Support and Safety at University

**Understanding University, the
Ultimate Uni Podcast - Episode 8**

Karina

Welcome to Understanding University, the Ultimate Uni podcast. My name is Karina, and I am a Collaborative Outreach Assistant at the University of Essex and I work closely with our Aspire and Aspire Higher programmes.

Katie

My name is Katie and I work alongside Karina at the University. If you have any questions about any topics, we discuss please use the hashtag #UnderstandingUni on Twitter, or you can email outreach@essex.ac.uk.

Going to university can be a big step up from college or sixth form. You'll experience things you'll never had the opportunity to do before and you'll meet a variety of different people and take on new responsibilities. Whilst adapting to your new university lifestyle, it's important to remember how to keep safe in a new environment, especially when moving away from home. Every university also offers a range of facilities to support students, so in this episode we'll also cover what support students can get access to at university. Today we are joined by Vinnosh who works at the University of Essex and I think what I'll do is just let you introduce yourself, go ahead.

Vinnosh

Thank you very much Katie my name is Vinnosh. I'm the Vice President of Welfare, the Essex Students' Union. So my role, primarily, is to represent student welfare interests across the three campuses so I work closely with our student well-being facilities service at the University to ensure that the service are meeting the demands of our students on campus.

Katie

Thank you and would you mind just sharing a bit about your studies as well because I'm aware that you, you did your studies at the University of Essex as well. So that'd be great for our listeners to know.

Vinnosh

Yes, absolutely yes, so I started my Law degree with foundation programme in 2016 and I graduated actually in July 2020 so it's been just under a year in two months that I've graduated my undergraduate degree. During my time at degree, I worked at the SU kitchen, which primarily employs student staff, which was a very, very interesting period of my life it was very fun exciting and first part time job that I ever had. I was also fortunate enough to be involved in the Essex Law Clinic where we help students, well essentially members of the public as well to gain exposure into working within a legal setting and we offered to help to a lot of our Community members, which is really good and in the last year I graduated I was very, very lucky to grab a front runner position for the family law division of the clinic which was very eye opening experience as well. So that kind of sums up my great Essex experience but yeah.

Katie

Wow that's amazing so do you think these opportunities that you had whilst you were studying helped you to get into this role now?

Vinnosh

Absolutely, I think the skills in particular that I acquired from doing these experiences has been invaluable in any other, you know, in every setting of my life, I found it to be very useful, especially in the line of work that I'm doing at the moment, which has a lot to do with safeguarding and welfare aspects of students. And kind of thinking back about all of the you know, the nice experiences and the not so nice experiences has really kind of developed me in the sense to understand how to deal with situation holistically and kind of see the bigger picture in a lot of ways, so absolutely.

Karina

Definitely! Thank you so much for that and just to provide our listeners with a bit more information. Could you tell us what SU Advice is? And what they do?

Vinnosh

Absolutely, so I work quite closely with SU Advice. SU Advice is basically an impartial free and confidential service that the Student Union provides and we help students in a range of issues they can come to us, we are the first point of contact in any issue. We primarily help students when it comes to academic appeals or conduct procedures, fitness to practice, immigration, housing, money, you name it. We are the first point of contact for it. But what we do is, we try to ensure that students have the right information in order to access the services that they need. So it could be that a student is looking for well-being and inclusivity services, now because, SU Advice is prominently on square three students usually rock up to SU advice, and you know we're able to kind of guide them through the options that they have at that point of time. So we feel that our referral is the best thing to do, we'll refer them to the university service. If not, we'll try to help them in house as much as we can to prepare them for whichever assistance that they need.

Katie

Health is something that is very important to talk about and I know that SU Advice can provide support in terms of well-being or or or know how to or who to refer students on to and and I just want to say to our listeners that it's not just mental health, physical health as well that both just as important, each other and we're very lucky to have a huge variety of support. And even at university as well, and I just wondered Vinnosh if you could just sort of share with our listeners what support do we have when it comes to health?

Vinnosh

Absolutely, I think you touched on something very important Katie. When we talk about health, a lot of people automatically assume that we're talking about mental health and surprisingly enough, a lot of students think that you know mental health is a particular conception about something. And what we've been trying to do this particular year is to really improve those conversations around mental health, where we're saying to students look everyone has mental health, it's a spectrum. You know, there can be good days, there can be bad days, how do we work with the student, to ensure that they have the support that they need, and when they're not having such good days and when they're having great day, how do we celebrate that? So when it comes to support services through mental health we usually refer students to the student well-being inclusivity service, where they can have a more tailored support to meet their individual needs, because when we talk about mental health we're talking about a wide range of things. We're talking about various different issues and varying different things that are influencing people and how they feel about their mental health. So referring them is kind of our first point of option when they usually come to SU Advice because one of the things that I would like the listeners to know is that you know our SU Advice and staff members aren't trained counsellors, therapists, psychologists, so we want to ensure that our students get the best support that they need, which is why we do the referrals at the first point of contact if we're unable to help them. If not, we work with local services, we've got services such as CARA and you know various various support services. Such as Samaritans as well, where we speak to members of the public in public organisations, where they can give more tailored support in that sense.

Katie

Thank you for that Vinnosh and thank you also for signposting to those resources. Students can look into those now and also in the future if the need them.

We also have an on campus GP, so students can see a doctor or nurse whilst at university and I think sometimes, this is something that just gets forgotten about, especially if you don't go to the

doctors that often. When you go to university and you have an issue that requires seeing a doctor, students are advised to register aren't they, for their local GP which will become their local GP when they move to university, but what, why is it so important, and how can students go through this registration process?

Vinnosh

I think a lot of students, you know, especially when we look from an international perspective, a lot of students, sometimes come from countries where healthcare is you know is privatised essentially. And kind of breaking that stigma around being able to register with the GP is something that you know we we try to push, year in and year out, I think it's because sometimes I feel it's because the GP is hidden slightly, tucked away. So students, know where it generally is but very often with healthcare services students tend not to access it until they need it. So I think there's a lot of work that can do that, we can do, essentially in the promotion of the team services, I think it's also important to highlight that counselling is available as well, at the University. I think a lot, you know a lot of students fall into the trap of thinking that they have to pay out of their pocket when actually there is a service that the university provides. It's very often about just being a lot more visible to our community. One of the things that's really happened when we are you know kind of an online world is that if you don't see the information, you won't have it, because it's not on a flyer you know when you pass by to a classroom or it's not something that you see a lecturer kind of saying in the off-tone of a physical lecture room. So I think a lot of the work generally is about promoting and telling students the services are here for them and for them to use, to utilise and really support them when they need it.

Katie

Definitely, and obviously we really hope that our listeners that listen to this episode will be able to find out this information that we're sharing today and then they'll feel hopefully a bit more prepared for university when that situation does arise. So yeah you're totally right, do you think the mental health support a universities has become more accessible? And how do you think mental health support at university will develop in the future?

Vinnosh

I would say yes and no actually. When it comes to mental health, I think in terms of accessibility, yes, because we have moved to an online world where we see that people are able to deliver provisions online. We're talking about drop in services, counselling, GPs even can zoom call you these days and be like right tell me your diagnosis and it's really good, because we were able to connect a lot more. I would say no simply because technological barriers are a real thing. So we're talking about you know how will we actually we, I think, as people sometimes we do take for granted that we do have a laptop or a communication device that we can communicate with. It's about understanding the other person's perception of it as well to see you know how are they accessing services, how are we, ensuring that they have access to the services as well. So I would say yes and no but on a general scale Katie I would say yes, I am glad to see that we're able to reach a lot more people than we did before. And we're seeing it across the sector there's a lot more engagement and involvement from people coming forward before things get too bad or things become unmanageable. And that's what we really want, we want students to be confident enough to approach our services to say look I think I've got a problem. Or I've got an issue or I've got a matter or you know I'm just not feeling too great, I just want to have a chat with you and that's what we want, we want them to come through the door earlier just be like right let's work together to sort out this issue for you, with you. Could you repeat your second part of the question as well Katie?

Katie

Yeah, of course, and I was just going to add on to what you were saying just then about some students obviously pre-empt these worries and they think oh there's gonna be no one there, or like what if what if this happens, or and and and just you saying then, about you can just pop in

like if you have a worry, or if there's something on your mind you, you can just pop in and ask, and there are people there to support you so yeah, thank you for mentioning that so. My other question was how do you think that mental health support at university will develop in the future?

Vinnosh

I think, yes, thank you for that it just slipped my mind. Yeah um I think the development of the of the service delivery is going to be really good. I'm very optimistic about it simply because covid-19 essentially what it did was it made us all press the pause button on every aspect of our life because we were never able to do the same things that we did before. And by doing that we were essentially forced to rethink the foundation of everything that we do, and that is a very scary thing. On a usual day, but in a covid-19 day like there's no option, you have to do it. So it's really forced service delivers to rethink how their main outlet of service delivery is. And that is great, because I think before this, one of the troubles of having the conversation before this was always oh there's not enough time. It's just too much work, but now, this is your work if you don't put in the groundwork for it, you, you won't be able to carry out your services, so in that sense, I think people will be a lot more innovative in kind of delivering their services and to make sure that it reflects and is accessible to everyone. Because technology has tapped in a way, larger market. I would confidently say engagement across the sector has increased by triple and that's good because that's what we've always wanted. And now it's really about utilising the online platform and how we make it more interactive, how we make it more accessible for people. How do we make the quality of the information we give a lot more useful to people? So I think it's developing in the right direction, in a good direction that we all have prayed for needed for such a long time.

Karina

I was just gonna ask another question to follow on from that. I think you raised, really, really good points there. But just to go back a little while, we sort of mentioned that obviously students shouldn't be afraid to sort of just go forward, come ahead, speak about anything that's on their mind, to sort of start dealing with as soon as possible and I think there's always a big misconception on what's quote unquote important and what's quote unquote not so important. So I just wanted for our listeners for us to now discuss the sort of what kind of support might a first year student wants to seek help on? What are the sort of topic areas that you've come across that students may sometimes think, oh no this is just going to be a waste of time sort of thing?

Vinnosh

Yeah I think it's it's really important that you raise that Karina, because I think there is, you know when you're a first year student kind of thinking back to my own time, as a first year student. I appreciate this might be four years ago, but, as we say some problems never get old, and I think with first year students that's truly the case. When first year students come to the university, they you know, each department wants to ensure that the student knows that they are there. So they're consistently being given information, leaflets, pamphlets you know and it's great that they have all that information but, you know, kind of looking at as a first student, I had to put it aside and do it as bedtime reading, one by one, because there was a lot of information. My one tip to first year students is a) honestly get to know the support services. Get to know the support services because no matter what you think, or what you feel, by knowing where to find SU Advice and SWIS. When the problem starts, when you're not feeling that great, you know where to go. Because essentially when you are a first year student, very often, is the first time you're moving away from home, you could be an international student it is the first time you're in a foreign country and and the feelings and emotions that come around that time are very sensitive. Your first two weeks of uni experience will really shape how you view your life, your course, your you know your friendship circles your social circles, so I would really recommend that you familiarise yourself with the support services in order to ensure that you know where to go if you're having difficulties essentially. But yeah that that would be my top tip for first year students. Familiarise yourself with everything. Don't be afraid of going to a service that you think might not be appropriate. It's fine! Go to the service and they'll refer you to the appropriate service and that's

how you learn. Mistakes are the beautiful thing about being at university, you can make all the mistakes you want and you'll still learn from it, so do it. I feel like so very often, unless you want to go and do a Masters and PhD, your undergraduate is where you can make a lot of mistakes and you learn from them.

Katie

Yeah definitely and and you were just saying about just ask anyone because there'll be able to point you in the right direction. And I'm just thinking well you get you get to talk to loads of people, and you might even make some friends out of it, meeting other students in the same similar situation and you go "Oh, do you know where you need to go?" "no, I don't" "let's find it together". Yeah, that's definitely something that'd be really nice. You mentioned SWIS and I just thought for our listeners would be great if you could just give a little definition of what you mean by SWIS?

Vinnosh

Absolutely, I think sometimes when you're at university, you use so many lingos that you forget. Sometimes I've had conversations where I've referred to SWIS to external people outside the university and it was like we didn't know you had a whole dealing with an entire other country and I was like, no, no that is that is not what I meant. SWIS is the Student Wellbeing Inclusivity Service that the University has so, kind of the the SU Advice and Student Wellbeing Inclusivity Service which I afore-mentioned from here on out will mention as SWIS. SWIS and SU Advice work quite closely and SWIS is, the best way I could describe it is that SWIS gets into the nitty gritty work that we aren't able to provide at SU Advice. So their drop-in service is one of the primary example, they've got trained individuals who are able to help students to talk about their feelings and whatever issues they're facing and signpost them appropriately. They've also got the counselling service there, where the referrals are made. You know, staff essentially decide whether someone is appropriate for counselling, whether it is the right group for them or not. It's also the place where they discuss about disabled students allowances grant. So, if students who are disabled need help, in terms of accessing their disabled students allowance grant or just want to know about the process and whether they qualify that's kind of the first point of contact that they go into.

Karina

Thank you very much for that and just before we start to sort of wrap things up, I wanted to sort of bring our listeners attention to the general safety on campus. So what are some of the great aspects of the University of Essex as an example to provide safety and support for students?

Vinnosh

Yeah, so I think when we talk about health and safety we're talking about a lot of things, you know we're talking about health and safety in the social aspect. You know if you, you know if if you're feeling unsafe, then we've got security, which is 24hrs. They are able to, very often help with on-campus issues, where you know if there's a fight breaking out, or you're feeling unsafe and that's kind of security, you know you're able to go and contact them there right off on square three, which all of our listeners, potential students will be able to come and visit soon. We try to ensure that we create a safe environment essentially when it comes to health and safety, even when it comes to learning, you know. Health and safety covers students being able to access a lecture facility. So, you know kind of working from my perspective at least, kind of working for the University to ensure that students have access to all places. That's kind of a primary aspect of health and safety, so you know it's it's, I think, when we talk about health and safety narrowing it down is allowing us to kind of look at the particular aspects of it, you know. One of the questions I always ask is very simple, I go to a student, and I say "what can we do to support you?" "what is making you feel you know, not as confident to access our services but it's making you feel you know you feel that it's not appropriate to access the service?" and that's where we build a conversation from. Tailoring health and safety is most of the most important things. We've got

general health and safety, where we're talking about protecting you and protecting me. We've got computer safety. We've got fire safety, yes, that all makes sense from a staffing perspective. But from a student's perspective we're talking about how we can create elements that will give them the confidence to know, look I'm not worried about going into this particular place or accessing this particular store because the footing of the experience is equal and that's what we tried to achieve in health and safety.

Karina

Definitely, and I really agree with that one of the things that I actually got to see happen in that student voice being taken and things being changed, while I was at university was the library access changing to 24 hours, so it gives more availability for students to go and have a safe space to study, revise, access books. There's also other great examples of things like this include the Silberrad Student Centre which is accessible 24 hours as well. We have student support, SU Advice, there's a service called nightline as well, which works over night time so whether you're stressed about an exam or you just feel really bad after an night out, you can always go to them have a cup of tea have a quick chat. And even our multi-faith chaplaincy as well, which offers a space for reflection, socialisation as well and sort of time for yourself. Thank you for that. My last question of the day is going to be sort of to all of us, I will let you start this off Vinny, but could you provide a top tip for future students to sort of help them feel prepared for university?

Vinnosh

I think one of the top tips I would, I would genuinely recommend is just asking questions. It is as simple as that and it can be one of the hardest things to ever do and it's one of the easiest things to ever do as well. When you enter, you know, university setting you are essentially entering a whole new world. You know it's an exciting experience, very scary experience, it's a nervous nerve wracking experience, but your experience is what you make of it. You know, it's the one place where you can get to reinvent yourself, you can be whoever you want to be at university. And I would you know genuinely even with the nerves kind of coming in, one of the things I always tell students is don't be afraid to just go ask the questions you know go and speak to that stranger that you think you know, you and they could get along. Don't ever worry about the perception of other people around you because everyone is feeling the same way, everyone is feeling self-conscious, everyone is feeling nervous. You're not separate from the herd and, but you are individual from the herd. So just do it. That's my one top tip I would give, don't don't have any regrets just go out and do it all.

Karina

That is an amazing amazing tip. Thank you so much. My tip would just be that you'll again meet lots of new people and try out new and exciting activities. So just to sort of ensure you're safe, remember to think safe, so some of the examples would include always having a buddy with you, if you have to go anywhere later in the evenings or having taxis booked in advance, so you don't get stranded anywhere. Staying with your group of friends on nights out or even having a panic alarm handy in case of emergencies, so that would be mine.

Katie

I feel like I'm not going to have something as incredible as you guys with those words of wisdom, but I know that if you're particularly feeling nervous about meeting your new flatmates, a good icebreaker would be to bring some cookies or brownies or something, because everyone loves a little sweet treat and it will get a good conversation going and then maybe you'll even do some baking together in the future, so yeah that's my little treat for you guys.

Vinnosh

You know touching a bit on what Katie said, just to ensure that its health and safety compliant, just make sure you check your friends dietary requirements, ie your gluten frees and your vegans. Just to make sure, because you want to have a safe and fun time with your friends.

Katie

Yes, thank you so much Vinny and thank you so much for all of your words of wisdom today and your information about the support that the University of Essex provide. And also just for our listeners as well that, although we have talked about some services that the University of Essex offer, there will be plenty of very similar services at other universities as well so when you're doing that really important research, do check out what is available. Thank you again Vinnosh, it's been lovely having you here.

Vinnosh

Thank you very much for having me Katie and Karina. It's been a pleasure speaking to you both about this very important topic and I will speak to you soon.

Katie

So, after our fantastic discussion with Vinnosh, Karina and I are now just going to cover some other areas that we feel are important for students to be aware of. This also includes specific support for students with disabilities. So Vinnosh did mention the disability students allowance and the other services that universities can provide include academic support. They can provide advice on accessible transport. So when you're doing your research do have a look at the facilities on offer. You can even have a chat with the student support team and see if you can have a view of some specific accommodation, or even potentially get a private tour of of the campus. They can provide you with more specific information about the services available and you could talk to them about any additional equipment that you might need to. At Essex, we have specific mentors that that can be assigned to you, and so, if you would like that you can inquire about that too, and just another reminder about the disabled students allowance, that if you think you're eligible do check it out, because that's additional funding that can be that you can use to support you whilst you're at university.

We also want to mention, it might seem really random, but the use of fire alarms and drills so, they will happen, they they do have them at university and, but you will be informed and briefed on the university's expectations. So not something that you'd have to necessarily worry about you would just need to follow the protocol, like you do at school or college now. But we just thought that might be something we would mention in this episode. Another quick little thing is something you might want to think about it's down to personal preference, but if you wanted to get insurance to cover your belongings that is something that you can look into as well.

Karina

Those are really good points thank you so much Katie. And yeah, I just wanted to say to all of our listeners that remember that university will be a new experience so be sure to get involved and be open minded. But don't forget that it is important to look after yourself mentally and physically. For more information, you can take a look at the 'know before you go guide' created by Student Minds it's a really handy PDF that you can take a look at to help navigate your way through your university life. We'll make sure that this is accessible on our schools and colleges web page. Universities also offer a variety of support systems like we mentioned earlier, so do check them out when you're doing your research. If you have any questions about this episode don't forget to send them in via Twitter using the hashtag #UnderstandingUni or send an email to outreach@essex.ac.uk. Additional resources will be posted on our website and sent to you via email if you're registered listener. Thank you for listening to today's episode, don't forget to share with your family, friends and colleagues.