

Management guidelines in the event of disruption caused by severe weather

Overview

In the event of severe weather the University must ensure that it is able and prepared to respond to any subsequent disruption of its activities. It is acknowledged that adverse weather conditions can affect University life in a number of different ways. However recent experience has clearly shown that there are two facets of University activity of particular importance – staff attendance at work and disruption to teaching and learning activity.

The present guidelines focus on these issues.

A. Disruption to staff attendance

1. Introduction

It is recognised that severe weather conditions may occasionally make it problematic for staff to attend work either due to difficulties in attending work or as a result of disruption to carer arrangements (e.g. school closures).

This guidance clarifies expectations with regard to attendance at work and on how resulting absences will be dealt with where normal working becomes impossible. This guidance applies to all employees of the University of Birmingham.

2. Governing Principle

- This guidance recognises that the University is a complex organisation in which the operating needs of its parts will differ enormously. Therefore a single approach to the management of absence due to severe weather conditions is impractical and local management discretion must prevail in the assessment of the situation and how any absence is treated.
- However in applying this discretion managers are required to ensure consistency of approach, wherever practicable.
- Decisions on individual staff attendance issues are the responsibility of local managers with due regard these guidelines.
- Decisions on individual school/budget centre closures will be made by the appropriate Head of College or Senior Officer in consultation with the Registrar and Secretary.
- In instances where College wide or cross-University closures are being contemplated by the relevant Head of College or Senior Officer then the Registrar & Secretary will seek the Vice Chancellor & Principal's (or Provost & Vice Principal in his absence) approval prior to any such broader decision on closure being made.

3. Principles

- It is expected that all staff will make every reasonable effort to attend work. Where normal travel arrangements have broken down, all possible alternatives should be explored. In instances where normal carer arrangements have been disrupted, reasonable alternatives should be explored where possible.

- Notwithstanding the above, the University recognises that health & safety considerations are of paramount importance, and staff should not take unnecessary risks in relation to themselves or with those over whom they have a responsibility as a carer.
- Where any individual member of staff is unable to get to work, or is likely to be significantly delayed, they must inform their line manager at the earliest opportunity, and, if appropriate, give an indication of expected arrival time.
- Where a member of staff arrives at work late due to severe weather conditions they will not be required to make up the lost time and will not suffer any loss of pay.
- Where attendance at the normal workplace is not possible at all there is no automatic entitlement to payment for the absence. Staff will be required, where possible, to work from an alternative location, which may include their own home. Notwithstanding this, members of staff on approved University business whose return to work is delayed due to severe weather conditions will not see any reduction in their pay nor be required to use part of their annual leave. Travel on approved University business requires appropriate insurance cover and so all members of staff are required to register their travel plans – please refer to www.travel.bham.ac.uk/
- Where attendance at work is not possible and work cannot be undertaken elsewhere, the individual should agree with their line manager how to treat the absence for payment purposes. The following options should be considered:
 - 1) Annual Leave

In most instances it will be acceptable for a day's annual leave to be used, and, if the full year's leave entitlement has already been exhausted, it will be acceptable for a day to be brought forward from the next leave year.
 - 2) Work in Lieu of Time Taken

Alternatively, the individual member of staff may elect to make up lost time on days/dates as agreed with their line manager.
 - 3) Authorised Unpaid Leave

As an alternative to the above, and subject to the agreement of the line manager, the individual may elect to take the day as unpaid leave. This can be done either by agreement with the line manager and/or, as applicable, in line with the 'Time off for Dependents' section of the Universities Family Leave arrangements www.intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/hr/attendance/family/. The manager will notify payroll accordingly and an appropriate deduction will be made from normal salary.
- The manager in deciding with the individual which course of action should be adopted in each case must give appropriate consideration to members of staff with disabilities where it can reasonably be assumed that the disability will impact the individual's ability to cope with the severe weather.
- The manager retains the right to challenge any absence or late attendance at work where they reasonably believe that there has been an abuse of these principles or a failure to make appropriate efforts to attend work. In such instances the manager should seek further advice from their local HR representative.

- Where severe weather conditions develop during the course of the working day it will be for local managers to decide any individual request to leave work early taking into account these guidelines and the particular concerns and needs of the member of staff.
- In situations where worsening weather conditions during the day suggest that staff, in general, may have difficulty in travelling home, it will be for the Head of College/ Head of Corporate Service (or a nominated deputy) to decide, at local level, whether to close the College/School/Service and send staff home early.

In formulating this decision the Head of College/Head of Corporate Service (or a nominated deputy) will consult with the Registrar & Secretary in advance of its communication to the affected population.

In making such a decision, due regard will be given to advice and information from appropriate sources, e.g. local radio, police and motoring organisations.

Where a decision is made to send staff home before the end of the normal working day no deduction from pay will be made.

- Decisions on overall University closure will be made by the Vice Chancellor & Principal (or Provost & Vice Principal) in consultation with the Registrar & Secretary.
- Where the severe weather conditions persist into the following working day(s) such that an extension of any existing partial or complete University closure needs to be contemplated then the consultation and approval steps outlined above will need to be repeated.

B. Disruption to learning and teaching activity

1. Purpose

This document provides some advice for staff in Colleges¹ managing contingency or mitigating actions relating to teaching and learning arising from staff or significant student absence from the University due to severe weather conditions. In the majority of cases the absence of staff members may be dealt with under existing policies and practices, and this document reminds Colleges of some of the options available. Where formal approval is needed for any actions taken this is made clear in the document.

The document does not cover circumstances where large numbers of staff and students are absent from the University, where there may need to be more significant action taken in terms of postponing activities.

Throughout the document 'staff' should be taken to mean, as appropriate, academic staff, support staff, technical staff, visiting lecturers, postgraduate teaching assistants and others involved in supporting teaching and learning activities. Contact information for further advice and information is provided at the end of this document.

2. General Points

Colleges should have in place the necessary contingency plans to address disruption caused by a severe weather event. In particular Colleges should ensure that:

¹ For 'College' throughout this document use the relevant organisational unit as appropriate to and agreed within the College e.g. School, Department, Group

- there are effective and timely mechanisms in place for staff to report absence and for this information to be passed to those with the knowledge and authority to consider contingency action;
- there are named contacts with the knowledge and authority to consider possible contingency action;
- timetable information is available for each member of staff so that, once absence is reported, all teaching and learning events for the likely period of absence can be readily identified;
- activity information is available for each member of support staff involved in supporting teaching and learning activity so that appropriate alternative or contingency arrangements can be made (e.g. teaching support office staff, laboratory assistants, workshop staff);
- teaching materials for staff are easily accessible, either electronically or through accessible filing, including curriculum plans and where possible individual teaching session information;
- lists of students on each module are readily available;
- contact information for students (including students from other Colleges taking modules) is readily available;
- mechanisms are in place to ensure that significant student absence is noted.

3. Staff Absence

a. Providing cover

Where possible Colleges should look to reduce the impact of the absence and not cancel relevant teaching and learning events.

Where a member of staff responsible for delivering a teaching event (seminar, lecture, laboratory etc.) is reported as absent, this information should be communicated to the named contact responsible for consideration of possible contingency action. The named contact will look at the teaching and learning events likely to be affected (assume at least 5 working days from the date of notification, possibly more) and for each event consider the following list of possible action.

- Is there another member of staff with the knowledge and time to cover the event? This may include other staff teaching on the module, module leaders, research staff from the research group (for laboratory teaching in particular) or PGTAs².
- Is the material to be covered already available in electronic or printed form (e.g. via WebCT or module booklet) and if not, is it possible to provide this material to students?
- Are there health and safety issues to be considered in determining whether the absence can be covered (e.g. technical training on laboratory equipment or ensuring sufficient staff/student ratio)?
- If the event cannot be covered, is it possible to re-structure the teaching plan to fit in a replacement event during the term, taking into account the likely availability of students? Note that many teaching rooms are available 5-7pm.
- If the event is near the end of the teaching period can it be rescheduled for the next period (mainly for year long modules but may also be possible for other modules, taking into account the likely availability of the students on the module)?

Where absence is likely to be prolonged as well as the considerations above the College may wish to consider postponing the remainder of the module to the following teaching period (in exceptional circumstances this could include the summer term, which will require approval from the PVC) or, if the absence is at the start of a module, permitting students to take another module (and providing materials to allow them to catch up on missed sessions). See also under Significant Staff or Student Absence below.

² Where consideration is given to extending the support provided by PGTAs this should be within the limits set up within the relevant Code of Practice. Exceptions will need approval from the PVC.

In all cases the students on the module should be kept informed through email / letters / posters as appropriate. The home Schools of students from other Colleges should also be kept informed, as well as welfare and support staff within the College.

b. Managing the academic impact of missed events

If it has not been possible to provide cover for missed events the College may wish to consider taking this into account in the setting or marking of assessments. If key material has been missed and cannot be compensated for by self-study then it may be appropriate to remove missed material from examinations or to mark examinations or coursework taking this into account. In such cases the College will need to agree the revised approach, ensure that the External Examiner and Examination Board formally approve the action taken and communicate this clearly to students.

c. Non-availability of assessment information or marks

Where the absence of a member of staff impacts on the setting of assessment, e.g. through non-provision of coursework materials, essay questions etc. then consideration should be given to extending deadlines for submission of work for all affected students. If it is not possible to delay the submission date for the assessment then consideration may be given to arriving at a module mark without that piece of assessment (see below). Where the absence of a member of staff impacts on the availability of marks for assessments, consideration should be given to the consequences of late provision of marks for student feedback, mitigations management, Examination Boards progression decisions and resit arrangements.

Where adjustments may be needed to calculate module marks due to the cancellation of an assessment or permanent unavailability of marks Examination Boards should decide upon and formally approve the action to be taken. They may permit a final module mark to be derived from the available assessment marks, and may set minimum thresholds for the percentage of marks available for a final module mark to be derived. This may vary with, for example, a higher threshold for modules that are prerequisites for the next year of study or for final year modules.

General advice is that, for 10 credit or 20 credit modules, if 50% or more of the marks are available then Examination Boards may determine that the other 50% need not be included (where marks are missing). This means that the mark(s) for the 50% would be scaled up accordingly. The Board may wish to take into account the level of the module, whether it is compulsory or optional and its significance in any progression or award calculation. The Board will also need to check that the assessments for which marks are available do reflect the learning outcomes of the module.

For modules of 30 credits or higher the Board may wish to have more than 70% of the marks available given the relative importance of each piece of assessed work.

Often the different pieces of work will be assessed by different staff. This means that some work may be marked and some work may not. In these cases principles around equity of treatment will need to be considered before decisions can be made. Please contact colleagues at the end of this guidance note for further information.

Boards may also wish to consider when the assessment was completed, the weighting of the assessment within the module, and the type of assessment. For example:

- Whether an assessment is near the beginning or the end of a module;
- Weighting of the assessment as a proportion of the module mark;
- Whether the assessment mark is derived from group work or not;
- Whether the assessment assesses all the learning outcomes of the module or only some of them;
- Whether the assessment is core to the module e.g. laboratory skills in a practical-based module.

For each decision the Board should clearly record the main reasons for the decision.

d. Non-availability of feedback

Where the absence of a member of staff has delayed provision of feedback to students, the College may wish to take this into account at the Examination Board. This will be particularly important in circumstances where the delay in provision of feedback could be said to have directly impacted on preparation for the next assessment, for example feedback on dissertation proposals before submission of the final dissertation.

e. Research student supervision, support and examination

Where a member of staff acts as supervisor for research students, efforts should be made to ensure that these students are informed of the absence of the member of staff, and reminded of alternative sources of support should urgent issues arise. This might include mentors, second supervisors or PG Directors. Where possible research supervision meetings should be re-arranged when the member of staff is back at work, and not cancelled.

Where a member of staff is absent and a viva voce examination or progression meeting is scheduled, this should be rearranged for as soon as possible taking into account the availability of all parties concerned.

f. Other staff responsibilities

The College will wish to ensure that there is sufficient cover for staff undertaking key roles, such as Welfare Tutors, Admissions Tutors and Examination Officers. Additionally students should be reminded of the Personal Tutor / Academic Tutor system in each School and the alternative sources of advice and support should their lead contact not be available.

4. Low levels of student absence

For individual students, the mitigations procedures already in place should be used to allow students to self-report absence and its impact on their teaching and learning. College may wish to consider the actions above under 'Providing Cover' in terms of providing access to teaching materials.

5. Significant staff or student absence

Where there are significant numbers of staff or students absent in a College such that it is not possible to continue with the normal teaching and learning timetable this should be reported as soon as possible to the University via the Emergency Planning Officer so that consideration can be given to further action. Exceptionally this might include extending the academic year, postponing assessment periods or other actions. In such cases there are significant and numerous implications for other activities within the University, for staff and for students and so all such decisions will be taken by the University CPAG, the relevant University Committee (likely APRC or PAB) and/or UEB.

6. Further advice

It is expected that School or College Learning and Teaching Committees will be the appropriate fora to discuss concerns, problems or issues, and additional meetings may need to be arranged. There are many staff in Colleges with considerable experience and expertise with similar issues. In addition, for discussion of particular cases or issues, staff are welcome to contact one of the following:

Clare McCauley, Director of Registry 0121 414 6715 c.l.mccauley@bham.ac.uk
Vicki Phillips, Taught Student Records Manager 0121 414 6374 v.h.phillips@bham.ac.uk