

Procedures on Responding to a Report of a Missing Student

1 Purpose

- 1.1 These procedures have been written to guide staff on the appropriate actions to take in respect of students who may be considered as “missing”; to ensure a co-ordinated approach is undertaken across the institution and to ensure the University discharges its duty of care in reporting cases of potential missing students without unnecessarily imposing a burden on emergency services.

2 Definition of Missing Student

- 2.1 It is not necessarily a straightforward task to determine whether or not a student is missing. Not all students adopt a common sense approach of notifying flatmates or friends or the University regarding absences during term time. During assessment periods, reading weeks or vacations it can be difficult to distinguish whether a student is merely absent or missing. There are usually quite simple explanations why a student is ‘missing’. They may, for instance, have visited family or friends without having told someone; or have gone on placement elsewhere and fellow students may not know this; or they may have left the University.
- 2.2 Occasionally there is more reason to be concerned about a student who has not been seen for a while; they may be a genuine ‘missing person’, they may have been detained by the police or immigration services, or have been sentenced by the courts and already be in prison.
- 2.3 The University has a general duty of care to its students and should respond appropriately when it is believed a student is missing. There can be tensions between what others think the University should do and what might rightly be done in accordance with University policies and guidance. These tensions need to be handled carefully and tactfully, especially where cultural or other sensitivities are at play.
- 2.4 Any action should bear in mind the risk factors identified in appendix 1 The Student Visa system for international students on a Tier-4 Visa also determines how the University must respond as a prompt response is particularly necessary if the student is not to be reported to the UKBA for failure to comply with their visa requirements.
- 2.5 Therefore, for the purpose of this document a student is deemed to be missing from the University when their absence gives rise to concern and as a consequence a concern is expressed by an individual or individuals. The expression of concern may take the form of:-
- a student speaking to a member of the University's staff
 - a member of staff reporting their concern to another member of staff, particularly to those staff members who have a designated responsibility for student support
 - the student's family expressing their concern

- someone outside the University reporting their concern to a member of the University community.

3 Missing Person Enquiries from the Police

- 3.1 Missing person enquiries from the police about students should be referred, in the first instance, to Student Support and Careers.

4 Third Party Reports of Missing Students

- 4.1 Staff who deal with third party reports of 'missing' students must appreciate that, whilst there may be a high level of concern expressed, students may not wish others (especially parents and other family members) to know what they do while at university, or even that they are at *this* university. If students have not responded to phone calls etc from home, then they may have a reason for not doing so and this is not necessarily any business of the University. This can sometimes be difficult for parents or others to appreciate, and this may especially be so where there are strong cultural expectations of children, and where certain family members occupy a status position that they believe entitles them to have access to personal information from the University's records. We need, nonetheless, to be sympathetic to the genuine enquiries of concerned third parties, and these can be referred to Student Support and Careers.

5 Contact with Family/Next of Kin

- 5.1 In order to avoid unnecessary distress to the student's family, in most circumstances they need not be contacted until initial enquiries have been completed and as much clarity as possible about the student's absence has been obtained. However it is important to maintain a degree of flexibility dependant on the circumstances. Those involved should seek the most sensitive means of finding out if the student has returned home without informing the University, but without causing unnecessary concern to the family, and taking into account all the known circumstances.

6 Communication Across the Institution

- 6.1 The University can best co-ordinate any necessary response to a report of a 'missing' student if all information is channelled through Student Support and Careers Services who are then able to involve other departments, as appropriate, to ensure that the institution is being most effective and efficient in addressing the matter.
- 6.2 Consequently, any member of staff who suspects a student may be missing, or who receives a report of a student who has gone missing should gather as much of the initial information stated in sections 9 and 10 below and alert Student Support and Careers Services as soon as possible and normally within 24 hours. (Where prompt action is required out of normal office hours, individuals should contact the University's emergency number 01970 622900).
- 6.3 Student Support and Careers Services will consult with appropriate colleagues to gather further information as necessary and assess risk.

7 Data Protection and Confidentiality

- 7.1 The processing of personal data about students is subject to the terms and conditions of the Data Protection Act 1998. In addition, there are some professional groupings within the University who are bound to the Code of Ethics of their profession, e.g. the Student Counsellors.
- 7.2 Whilst there is a clear expectation that personal disclosures are treated confidentially, when a student is thought to be missing, and possibly at risk, any relevant information which might be pertinent to the investigation should be shared between relevant staff of the University. However, all parties to the information have to be made aware of the need to maintain confidentiality wherever possible.
- 7.3 In responding to critical incidents and related matters Student Support and Careers Services will seek and impart information as needed in accordance with University Procedures on Confidentiality.

8 Advice on next steps

- 8.1 Any member of staff who has concerns about whether a student might actually be missing and what action may be necessary is able to discuss this informally with Student Support and Careers Services before taking matters any further.

9 Initial Action

- 9.1 As there may be ambiguity as to whether or not the student is missing or absent the first step is to gather and co-ordinate as much information as possible to clarify the situation.
- 9.3 In many cases this initial phase will be carried out within the student's academic department or University Residence. When the investigation needs to be widened, i.e. when it cannot be established that the student is not missing, it is advisable to have one person in Student Support and Careers Services to co-ordinate the activity and to avoid duplication of effort and potential confusion. This individual will ensure close liaison and co-operation between all those involved, be they academic staff, residences staff, support staff or students.
- 9.4 Before taking any action, it is advisable that whoever believes a student may be missing enquires as to whether the student is still registered at the University. This can be done directly via AStRA or by checking with the Academic Registry. If the record shows the student as registered it is still worth checking, where practicable, that they have not submitted a withdrawal which is pending and not yet entered onto their student record. This can help avoid unnecessary work in trying to trace a student who has left the University.
- 9.5 To ensure prompt action such enquiries should be directed as follows:
Postgraduate Students: Academic Registry (x2272/2274) and Student Support and Careers Services (x1761/2087)
Undergraduate Students: Academic Registry (x8515/2787) and Student Support and Careers Services (x1761/2087)

10 Gathering Further Information

10.1 To best gauge any necessary response to a 'missing' student it is helpful if important key information is available as soon as possible. Consequently, a member of staff suspecting a student is missing, or anyone taking a report from students about a possible missing person, should seek to ascertain as much of the following as possible:

- the student's full name, student ID, programme, year or any other data that would make unambiguous identification possible;
- the student's current address (term-time and permanent) and any means of contacting them e.g. preferred email address, mobile number, land-line etc;
- where and when they were last seen and by whom;
- when the student last logged into the University network – (Information Services can help with this).
- their state of mind when they were last seen, together with any reason why the 'missing' student might be vulnerable or there might otherwise be concern for their safety or welfare;
- whether they were known, or suspected, to be with anyone else (including name(s), contact details etc) at the point when they went 'missing';
- whether their absence is typical or out of the ordinary;
- details of steps already taken to try and contact the 'missing' students, together with any outcomes;
- the names and contact details of those reporting the student as missing*;
- any other information that it is felt might be helpful in locating the student or finding out why they have not been seen for a while.

11 Assessing Risk

11.1 Having consulted with colleagues, Student Support and Careers Services shall undertake a risk assessment based on the factors identified in Appendix 1:

12 Reporting the Student Missing

12.1 Where further investigations confirm suspicions that a student may be genuinely missing (and especially where there are concerns over potential vulnerability – e.g. the student has a compromised health status), then the Head of Student Support and Careers Services or their nominee will, having normally consulted with the relevant Pro-Vice Chancellor, report the matter to either the student's recorded next-of-kin or the police.

12.2 Any future liaison with the police will normally be conducted by the Head of Student Support and Careers Services or their nominee. Any media enquiries are to be channelled through the Communications and Public Affairs Team.

13 Outside of Office Hours

13.1 Outside of normal office hours it may not always be possible to gather the information necessary to determine whether or not concerns should be reported to the Police. However, this should not prevent action being taken and where concerns

have been expressed that a student may be missing the Head of Student Support and Careers Services should be consulted. Staff should contact the University's 24 hour number 01970 622900 who will arrange for the Director of Student Support to contact the staff member expressing concern.

14 Action Upon Locating a Missing Student

- 11.1 It is extremely rare for "missing" students not to re-appear at some point. Student Support and Careers Services will advise those departments/staff notified under section 3 (above) that the student is no longer missing.

14 Support for Students and Colleagues

- 12.1 Depending on the circumstances surrounding the disappearance of a student and their own role in reporting the matter, others (for example fellow students or tutors) may require support in respect of their own concerns and feelings, either immediately or at some later time. Student Support and Careers Services can advise on appropriate sources of such support.

Appendix 1

Checklist for assessing risk

- does the student suffer from any known form of physical or mental health condition that makes it desirable to have them considered a high risk?
- is the student known to need medication or medical treatment?
- is their absence a significant change in their established pattern of behaviour, which cannot be explained, and gives reason that some harm may befall them?
- are they vulnerable due to age, infirmity or any other factor?
- are there any known drug/alcohol/financial related difficulties?
- has the student stated an intent to harm themselves/others?
- has the student recently been involved in racial/homophobic/bullying/violent incidents or is deemed to be the subject to a crime in progress e.g. abduction?
- has the student been a victim of crime, especially harassment, bullying or violence?
- does the student partake in any hazardous sports or activities?
- has the student had any recent injuries, especially head injuries?
- are there adverse weather conditions that would seriously increase risk to health?
- does the student have a previous history of having been missing?
- are there known to be family/relationship difficulties?
- how long is it since the student was last seen by any member of the University community?
- are they usually resident abroad and have gone missing in the UK?
- are they usually resident in the UK and have gone missing abroad?
- does the student have the ability to interact safely with others in an unknown environment?
- are there any indications that the student has made preparations for absence
- is the student known to have difficult family or other close relationships e.g conflict or abuse

Appendix 2

Departments who may need to be notified by Student Support and Careers regarding a Potential Missing Student

- Vice Chancellor's Office
- Communications and Public Affairs
- Campus Services – Security and Accommodation
- International Office
- Academic Department
- Students' Union
- Academic Registry

Version:	2	Publication Date:	24.2.16
Reason for update:	Restructuring of document and minor changes to content		
Approved:	Student Support Committee	Effective From:	24.2.16
Other Stakeholders:	Academic Registry; Information Compliance; Information Services		
Contact:	Caryl Davies, Head of Student Support and Careers Services ccd@aber.ac.uk		