

Missing Students

Guidelines for responding to a Report of a Missing Student

1 Definition of Missing Student

1.1 When a student is not at University during term time it can be difficult to determine whether or not they are absent or missing. During the assessment period and reading weeks this is made even more difficult, especially as not all students reliably adhere to the regulation of leaving an address where they can be contacted if they are absent for more than one day. (UWB Rules of Residence, Student Guide 4.2)

1.2 For the purpose of this document the following definition is offered of a missing student:

A student is deemed to be missing from the University when their absence gives rise to concern and as a consequence an individual or individuals express(es) their concern.

The expression of concern may take the form of:-

- a) A student speaking to a member of the University's staff
- b) 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
- c) the student's family expressing their concern
- d) someone outside the University reporting their concern to a member of the University community

1.3 There may still be ambiguity as to whether or not the student is missing or absent and the next phase is to gather and co-ordinate information to clarify the situation. In so doing the University will be discharging its Duty of Care responsibly.

1.4 There may be times when a family member, especially a parent, contacts the University because they are concerned they have not heard from their son or daughter. In most cases all that is required is for the student to be contacted and told of their relative's concern with the suggestion that they make contact with them. The relatives could be told that a message has been passed on to the student. However if the student cannot be contacted a risk assessment should be carried out using the information listed below and, depending on the outcome, a decision taken as to the level of risk that exists, and the best course of action to follow.

2 Co-ordination

2.1 In many cases the initial phase will be carried out within the Academic Department or Halls of 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 Central Services to co-ordinate the activity and to avoid duplication of effort and potential confusion.

2.2 The most appropriate person to co-ordinate the investigation shall be the Head of Student Services, or a nominated deputy. They will ensure close liaison and co-operation between all those involved, be they academic staff, halls staff, support staff or students.

3 Confidentiality

3.1 The processing of personal data about students is subject to the terms and condition of the Data Protection Act 1998. Where there is genuine concern about a student's welfare then information can be shared if this is in the legitimate interests of the student concerned. However, all parties to the information have to be made aware of the need to maintain confidentiality wherever possible.

3.2 In addition there are some professional groupings within the University who are bound to the Code of Ethics of their profession, e.g. the Chaplains, Student Counsellors and the Student Health Nurse. The Student Services Centre has its own service delivery Confidentiality Policy. In responding to critical incidents and related matters the Head of Student Services will seek and impart information as needed.

3.3 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 information which might be pertinent to the investigation should be shared between staff of the University. The decision as to when to involve any external agencies or individuals should be taken by the person leading the investigation in conjunction with key staff involved. In most instances this will be the Head of Student Services.

3.4 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. (See 6.1) However it is important to maintain a degree of flexibility dependant on the circumstances.

3.5 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.

3.6 Students may go missing and when contacted not wish for their whereabouts to be disclosed to relatives or other interested parties. This confidence should be respected. (See National Missing Person's Helpline below)

3.7 If the University is contacted by the student's family it would be necessary to provide an explanation of U.W.B.'s policy on confidentiality in the first instance before proceeding with an assessment of the risk involved.

4 The Procedure

4.1 Some or all of the following steps should be followed once it has been decided to expand the investigation past the initial phase.

- a) Notify Head of Student Services or her deputy. Out of office hours a contact number is available from Security which can be obtained by ringing 01248 352252.
- b) An investigation incorporating a risk assessment should be commenced. See below
- c) The following should be contacted to see if they can provide any useful information:-
 - i. i those sharing term time accommodation, including Hall Wardens/Tutors where appropriate
 - ii. ii staff and students who have contact with the missing student from their Academic Department(s)

- iii. iii Students' Union - particularly if the student is a member of any groups or partakes in any activities/sports
 - iv. iv any other known social contacts
 - v. v Welfare Services within the University which the student might use e.g. Student Counselling Service, chaplains, Students' Union Advice and Representation Service
- d) The following information would need to be gathered:
- i. i checking the departmental registers to check on the student's attendance
 - ii. ii consulting with departmental staff for information regarding the student's academic progress, non-submission of work, personal circumstances etc.
 - iii. iii checking with the Academic Registry to ascertain whether the student has registered for the given semester
 - iv. iv checking with the Assistant Registrar/Withdrawals (Student Services) to ascertain whether the student has withdrawn
- e) All contacts made and information gathered should be documented.
- f) For speed, it may be appropriate for the above tasks to be delegated to a small team.

5 Risk Assessment

5.1 When conducting the information gathering task it is important to find out the following:-

- a) do they suffer from any form of physical or psychiatric condition that makes it desirable to have them considered a high risk? *
- b) 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? *
- c) are they usually resident abroad and have gone missing in the UK? *
- d) are they usually resident in the UK and have gone missing abroad? *
- e) are they aged 65 years or over? *
- f) are there any drug/alcohol related difficulties?
- g) have they stated an intent to harm themselves/others **
- h) have they recently been involved in racial/violent incidents(s)?
- i) have they been a victim of crime, especially harassment, bullying or violence?
- j) do they partake in any hazardous sports or activities?
- k) have they had any recent injuries, especially head injuries?
- l) are there adverse weather conditions?
- m) do they have a previous history of having been missing?
- n) are there known to be family/relationship difficulties?
- o) how long is it since the student was last seen by any member of the University community?

5.2 * Those marked with an asterisk are the factors which the police use to designate a missing person as 'Vulnerable High Risk'. They also have a category which is 'Vulnerable Low Risk' and which is applied when a person is identified as vulnerable but that it is clear the person has left of their own accord and is not believed to be at risk of significant harm.

5.3 ** Though this is not a category in the Police's list of Vulnerable High Risk, it is alluded to in the National Missing Person's Helpline and should be taken seriously.

6 Contact with the Family

6.1 Unless there is a clear reason as to why not, the missing student's family should be contacted once the initial investigation has been conducted.

6.2 A discussion will need to take place regarding contact with the police. The police may be formally contacted by the family or the University as appropriate. The contact should be made with the Police in the area from which the student was reported missing. In most cases this would be Bangor.

7 Contact with External Agencies

7.1 The Community Beat Manager has indicated a willingness to be contacted prior to a formal report of a missing student being lodged with the police. She might be able to offer advice or information. This should be done in conjunction with the Head of Student Services..

7.2 If there is a known mental health problem it may be appropriate to contact the Community Mental Health Team and/or Hergest Unit at Ysbyty Gwynedd.

7.3 Once the initial investigation has been completed and it is agreed the student is missing, the police may be formally contacted by the family or the University as appropriate. All information gathered and any action already taken should be shared with them. It should be made clear to the police whom they should contact within the University. In most instances this will be the Head of Student Services.

7.4 The University Registrar should be notified if the Police are being informed in order to oversee any briefings with the Press Officer should it prove necessary.

7.5 Once the police are involved formally, they will place the missing student's name on the National Missing Person's Helpline. This is a charitable organisation which has contacts throughout the UK and which can obtain publicity and media interest in a missing person enquiry. In addition the N.M.P.H. offers a service for those 'left behind'. This is a support role where practical help, advice and support are offered. The Helpline operates 24 hours a day and the number is 0500 700 700. In addition they also offer a Message Home service for anyone who has, for whatever reason, left his or her home and does not want to be traced. They can send a message home through this service without being traced to lessen the anxieties of those left behind.

7.6 If it is known that the student partakes in certain hazardous activities the appropriate rescue service may need to be contacted: for land based activities, the police, for Coastal or maritime activities H.M.Coastguard.