PROCEDURE FOR DEALING WITH REPORTED CASES OF MISSING STUDENTS

1. PURPOSE OF THE PROCEDURE

This procedure is intended to provide guidelines and define responsibilities for dealing with reported cases of missing students studying at the University of Kent, and the necessary action that should be taken by University staff.

2. INTRODUCTION

The University’s General Regulations governing the registration of students state that:

**Absence During Term:** Any student prevented by illness or other emergency from being in the University should immediately notify his/her School Office.

Students are also required to be present in the University, as required, to meet any specific conditions of attendance set down in their programme of study and to participate in University life. The General Regulations state that:

**Attendance at Seminars, Supervisions, Examples Classes, Laboratory and Other Practical Classes and Lectures:** All students must attend such seminars, supervisions, examples classes, laboratory and other practical classes and lectures as may be individually required of them. Any student who wants to miss a compulsory class should obtain the prior permission of the person responsible for taking the class in question or, if that was not possible, report to the same person, or to the Head of his/her School, the cause of his/her absence without delay.

From time to time students are reported as ‘missing’ and concerns are raised about their wellbeing that go beyond a report of absence, and the person reporting the missing student has taken all reasonable steps to contact the student. Concerns may include:

- unusual or unexplained absences from seminars, supervisions, classes, lectures or laboratory and other practical classes
- reports of non-attendance from placement supervisors
- non-response to important communications from the University
- non-response to attempts to make contact by fellow students
- absences from University accommodation or private residences noted by Residents’ Support Officers, College Masters and/or flatmates
- concerns raised by staff in Student Support and Wellbeing
- concerns raised by people external to the University (family, friends, landlords/landladies).

Many missing person reports involve students who have voluntarily left their accommodation (either on-campus or off-campus) for personal reasons, while other missing person reports are often unfounded or quickly resolved. However, there are some instances in which students disappear for unexplained reasons and under circumstances where they may be considered at risk. The roles of **Campus Security** and the **College Masters** are critical in identifying the circumstances surrounding missing students and in identifying those students who may well be at risk.
PROCEDURE FOR DEALING WITH REPORTED CASES OF MISSING STUDENTS

The system in use at the University ensures that:

1) staff or student members of the University who suspect that a student has gone missing report the matter to the relevant College Master;

2) All reports of missing students be given serious consideration and attention by members of Campus Security and the College Masters, and this will include careful recording and investigation of factual circumstances surrounding the disappearance;

3) particular care be exercised in instances involving students:
   a) who may have special psychological needs;
   b) with physical disabilities or serious medical conditions and;
   c) other circumstances listed under the following procedures.

3. PROCEDURE

3.1 Initial Report Taking

The initial report taker must gather as much relevant information as possible in order to properly classify a missing person report and initiate a proper response (using Report Form MSP1). This may include some of the following information; some information may have to be obtained from the central computerised student records system.

- Name, term time address, age, course, year of study, nationality, physical description of the student
- Name, address, telephone number of the reporting party and the relationship to the missing student
- Time and place of last known location and the identity of anyone accompanying the student
- The extent of any search for the student
- Whether the student has been missing on prior occasions and the degree to which the absence departs from established behavioural patterns, habits or plans
- Whether the student has been involved recently in domestic incidents; suffered emotional trauma or life crises; demonstrated unusual, uncharacteristic or bizarre behaviour; is dependent on drugs or alcohol or has a history of mental illness
- The current physical condition of the student and whether the person is currently on medication.

3.2 Reporting of a Missing Student

University staff or students should contact the relevant College Master if they are informed or become aware of a student who has ‘gone missing’. A student may be declared ‘missing’ when his/her whereabouts is unknown and unexplainable for a period of time that is regarded by knowledgeable parties as highly unusual or suspicious in
PROCEDURE FOR DEALING WITH REPORTED CASES OF MISSING STUDENTS

consideration of the student’s behavioural patterns, plans or routines. This may be more than a few days or where the circumstances give immediate rise for concern.

The Master’s Office will take immediate action to:
- Determine the cause of the student’s absence
- Locate the student as quickly as possible
- Ensure his/her safety
- Avoid raising unnecessary alarm
- Ensure that as so far as is possible, investigations remain confidential in order to protect the student’s privacy.

As soon as the Master’s Office has been notified that a student has been reported as missing, the College Master will immediately begin an investigation. The College Master will keep the relevant members of School/Centre staff fully informed of the progress of the investigation (normally the Student Support Officer/Adviser or equivalent role in the School/Centre).

3.3 Investigation – Stage I

The College Master will initiate a preliminary investigation intended to (i) gather additional information, (ii) take those steps that will aid the location of a missing student and (iii) make a decision as to whether further enquiries should take place. This preliminary investigation should normally take place as soon as possible following the student’s disappearance being notified to Campus Security or the College Master. In the initial stages it may involve contacting the University Nursing Service, Medical Centre, University staff (including from the Accommodation Office, School/Centre Student Support Officer/Adviser (or equivalent role) or the designated Academic Adviser), students who may have had frequent contact with the student or the parental home/next of kin, to obtain further information about the student before declaring the student a ‘missing person’.

The College Master will inform the student’s School/Centre, and check if the School/Centre can provide any input into the preliminary investigation. They will work closely with the School/Centre Student Support Officer/Adviser (or equivalent role) to make further enquiries in the Colleges and beyond. This may involve emailing a number of staff and students or interviewing students who have had frequent contact with the missing student.

3.4 Investigation – Stage II

If preliminary enquiries fail to establish the whereabouts of the missing student, then the College Master, in consultation with the Security Manager (or his/her deputy) in Campus Security will decide how to extend the investigation. Based on the outcome of initial inquiries, a decision will be made concerning the potential danger posed to the missing student and the urgency of the University’s response. Extensive enquiries will follow if it is suspected that the missing student:
PROCEDURE FOR DEALING WITH REPORTED CASES OF MISSING STUDENTS

- May be the subject of foul play
- Has special psychological needs or a medical condition that may be potentially life threatening if left untreated/unattended
- Is considered potentially dangerous to himself or others
- Has demonstrated the potential for suicide
- Other circumstance which in the opinion of the College Master requires an in-depth investigation.

The College Master will:

- Inform the Director of Student Services, the Director of Corporate Communications, Director of the International Development Office (for international students only) and the Director of Commercial Services (if the student is in University owned or nominated accommodation) about the disappearance of the student
- Order a search of University buildings and grounds
- Hold extensive interviews with students and staff who were in regular contact with the student on the day of his/her disappearance
- Post a bulletin on the University web site to ask for information (in consultation with Corporate Communications staff), if required
- Inform the Police in accordance with the protocol agreed between Campus Security and the Police.

3.5 Police Investigation

After the Police have been informed, the Security Manager will liaise with them and keep the relevant College Master, Director of Student Services, the Director of Corporate Communications and the Director of Commercial Services (where applicable) informed of developments in the case. The Director of Student Services will ensure that members of Executive Group are kept abreast of developments.

The procedures outlined above, define the appropriate staff members who should be contacted at various stages in the reporting and investigation of a missing student. It is important that the skills and expertise available across the University are used, and decisions quickly made on a rapid and accurate division of duties in accordance with the exigencies of the particular situation. A range of diverse scenarios is possible, therefore, it is important that this clear set of procedures are in place to avoid confusion, duplication, or mis-information which may lead to additional distress for staff, close friends and relatives.

4. CONTACT WITH THIRD PARTIES AND DISCLOSURE OF INFORMATION

Great care should be taken in respect of disclosure of information, both within the University community, and in particular, to those external to the University. This includes those who are, or claim to be, close personal friends, or family members, recruitment agents, employers, landlords or even the Police or other government employees.
PROCEDURE FOR DEALING WITH REPORTED CASES OF MISSING STUDENTS

Whenever possible and appropriate, all such contact should be delegated to the College Master in order to ensure that there are no breaches of the Data Protection Act and, more importantly, that information is not inadvertently passed on to those whom the student may not wish to be informed of their circumstances or whereabouts.

If staff members are in any doubt about the appropriate way to proceed in response to requests for information about students from external parties, please consult the University’s Information Compliance Officer prior to taking any action.

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