



Education Quality and  
Policy Office

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## Document cover sheet

<b>Title</b>	Guidance on ensuring teaching continuity in event of unplanned teaching staff absence
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# Guidance on ensuring teaching continuity in event of unplanned teaching staff absence

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## The purpose of this guidance

The purpose of this guidance is to provide advice in case of unexpected extended staff absence impacting teaching of Tripos and taught postgraduate programmes (e.g., MPhils). In the case of short absences or minimal teaching disruption (e.g. 1 or 2 lectures), the Department should take appropriate mitigation measures.

**Important note:** This guidance is not intended to apply to teaching disruption due to industrial action; the relevant University policies and mitigations should be followed in this instance.

As a guiding principle, it is important that solutions adopted to mitigate unplanned staff absences **must create no disadvantage to students**. This applies both in relation to intra-cohort equity, and to the cohort's onward progression, where loss of teaching limits, or is perceived to limit, future course options or applications.

In the following, advice is provided regarding:

- Ensuring reasonable course flexibility
- Ensuring teaching delivery and continuity

## Nature of the problem

It is the duty of the University to ensure teaching continuity for students. Teaching continuity must be ensured in relation to:

- 1) the material that has been advertised to students at admission stage; and,
- 2) the information provided to admitted students through written and oral communication, the website, course handbook etc.

Failing to ensure teaching continuity represents a reputational risk for the university, creates the potential for student complaints, and, ultimately, possible legal action being taken against the University.

This guidance identifies and evaluates potential actions departments could take in situations where an unplanned teaching staff absence (i.e., the staff directly delivering teaching) creates a challenge in delivering the teaching of advertised lecture courses (or modules).

Unplanned, unexpected or sudden teaching staff absence may be due to (but not restricted to):

- a notice period being unexpectedly shorter than anticipated (e.g., through early retirement or resignation);
- extended sickness absence;
- Unexpected caring responsibilities; or,
- The death of a member of teaching staff.

Sudden or unexpected teaching staff absence requires action from the Department to ensure teaching will be delivered as advertised. General legal context

Course information provided by the University forms part of the legal contract between the University and student meaning, the University becomes legally bound to provide what was offered.

Each student applying for a course is protected by consumer law and by the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA). Applying for and studying a course (undergraduate or postgraduate) is a significant investment of time and money. Consequently, the information provided to applicants must be as complete and accurate as possible in representing the course. This is necessary for the applicants to make an informed decision about taking up a place, especially in relation to choosing between Higher Education Institutions.

When accepting an offer, applicants can legitimately expect that the course will be delivered in line with what has been communicated to them. In this context, an unexpected staff absence is not considered a situation beyond the control of the University (i.e., is not a force majeure) that grants the University diminished liability. As a result, it is the University's duty to find solutions that ensure teaching continuity.

### **Ensuring reasonable course flexibility**

The basis for ensuring teaching continuity in general is to be mindful of what is advertised and communicated to potential students at the point of their application and to ensure some degree of flexibility in the regulations.

To reiterate, all communications sent to students form the basis of their expectations about the course; this includes websites, emails, and more formal University documents such as regulations, course handbooks or programme specifications.

### **Advertise only the high-level aspects of the course**

*Consider whether it is necessary to advertise the titles of elective modules* – this will allow more flexibility if it is necessary to change or remove a module at the last minute.

#### Potential issues:

- + Core modules (i.e., non-optional modules that students have no choice but to take) do need to be named.
- + Lack of specificity compromises ability of applicants to make informed decisions about taking the course.
- + Could make degree less appealing to potential applicants if described without sufficient specificity.
- + Applicants may request specific detail on the provision of courses they are interested in taking.

#### Risks against CMA:

- + Important to provide enough information to allow applicants to make informed decisions.

Give details of present modules as indicative, but not prescriptive, of what will be taught in future years

*Making the present/past taught module list available has the advantage of providing specific details about the kinds of topics that are taught and may be combined with a suitable disclaimer that modules may change year to year.*

**Potential issues:**

+ The communication needs to be very clear that courses listed are indicative of what might be on offer and not a promise of what will be on offer.

**Ensure flexible course regulations**

*Aim to write course regulations in a sufficiently flexible way to allow reasonable short-term changes in the course delivery and content. This will allow flexibility up until the course begins (but not afterwards).*

Potential issues:

+ Rewriting course regulations can be a time-consuming process.  
+ Programme specifications must also be updated.

Risks against CMA:

+ Regulations must be seen as fair for students: flexibility must be tempered with reasonable detail.

**Ensuring teaching continuity**

When considering implementing a solution, the impact on students must be considered. For example:

- How will it impact on students submitting work for assessment?
- Will it prevent students from being able to demonstrate that they have met particular learning outcomes?
- Will students miss teaching that may be examined?
- Will external regulatory or accrediting body requirements be impacted? If in any doubt, the relevant body should be consulted. Will critical dates be affected, for example dates by which students need results in order to have places confirmed on post-graduate courses or further professional studies?
- Will there be a differential impact on groups of students, e.g., those with disabilities?

Clear, timely and transparent communication with students is essential. A combination of the alternatives outlined below may be considered.

**Change the course timeline: reschedule modules in the following term(s)**

*Aim to reschedule the affected lecture course/module in the following term(s), either:*

- *once staff are back at work and able to deliver the teaching, or*
- *in order to create time to implement another solution, e.g., finding replacement teaching cover.*

**Potential issues:**

+ This solution is only practical for modules originally scheduled in Michaelmas or in Lent Terms.  
+ Rescheduling could impact the assessment timeline and cause coursework deadlines to become bunched together.  
+ Rescheduling into the Easter term might enter in conflict with other exams and with research projects.  
+ It might be difficult to find a suitable venue for the rescheduled course, especially if it has a practical component.  
+ Rescheduling a module later in the year might break the educational consistency of the course and disadvantage students who will then potentially not have acquired basic skills to successfully follow more advanced courses or courses with prerequisites.

**Risks against CMA:**

+ Provided students do receive the expected teaching and are not disadvantaged in their progression, there is minimal risk.

#### **a. Ask an existing UTO (or combination of UTOs)**

##### **Potential issues:**

- + It might be difficult to find another UTO with cognate expertise, particularly for specialised Part II/III and MPhil-level courses as opposed to modules offered in years 1 and 2 (where there may be more knowledge of the material amongst teaching staff).
- + It might be necessary to reschedule the module to fit with the alternative UTOs' availability.
- + Equitable management of UTO workload.
- + A UTO on sabbatical may be asked to help but are under no obligation to agree. (NB Impacted sabbatical leave may need to be rescheduled.)

##### **Risks against CMA:**

- + Provided the module material remains only marginally changed, there is minimal risk.

#### **b. Engage an existing Cambridge University postdoc in a relevant field**

*An alternative lecturer can be contracted and paid through the [Cambridge Casual Worker System \(CCWS\)](#). Standard lecturing rates are available annually from the HR website ([Substitute Teaching Rates](#)). Please note that retired UTOs cannot be employed and paid via CCWS for this purpose.*

##### **Potential issues:**

- + It might be difficult to find a replacement with cognate expertise, particularly for specialised Part II/III and MPhil-level courses.
- + Replacements may not have experience of the teaching and examining style of the course.
- + It might be necessary to reschedule the module to fit with the replacement's availability.
- + Potential education quality issue, if the course is provided by an inexperienced postdoc. This could be mitigated via mentoring support from an experienced teaching officer.

##### **Risks against CMA:**

- + Provided the module material remains only marginally changed, and the teaching delivered meets the expected quality standard, then there is minimal risk.

#### **c. Find an external replacement lecturer**

*A replacement lecturer could be engaged via two routes: Payment at an hourly rate to cover specific lectures (via CCWS as in 2.2b above) or advertising and hiring a temporary UTO (particularly if multiple lecture courses across the year are impacted or the replacement is required for >1 year). Any hiring would need to follow University recruitment policies and processes. If the contract is less than 6 months the role would not have to be formally advertised, but longer contracts would require pre-approval at School level. Additional time to complete recruitment would need to be factored into this solution.*

##### **Potential issues:**

- + It might be difficult to find an external lecturer with suitable expertise, particularly for Part II/III and MPhil-level courses.
- + External lecturers might not have experience of the teaching and examining style of the course.
- + It might be necessary to reschedule the module to fit with the guest lecturer availability.
- + If this arrangement includes travel lecturer costs, this may prove financially prohibitive but could be mitigated by partial online delivery.
- + The replacement lecturer must have the right to work in the UK

##### **Risks against CMA:**

- + Provided the module material remains only marginally changed, there is minimal risk.

## ***Change the mode of course delivery or assessment***

### **a. Use lecture recordings with live question/answer sessions**

*Replace the missing lectured session (part or all of the course) with a recording of last year's lecture(s) and provide question/answer sessions run by others.*

#### **Potential issues:**

- + A full module/paper cannot be taught in this way, but it may be a suitable substitute for one or two lectures.
- + Lecture recordings must be up-to-date and the lecturer's permission secured.
- + Qualified teaching staff must attend the question-and-answer sessions.
- + Q&A sessions could be supplemented with Office hours and/or additional small group teaching sessions

#### **Risks against CMA:**

- + Provided the module material remains only marginally changed, there is minimal risk.

### **b. Minor amendments to the means of assessment**

- This could include
  - increasing or decreasing the number of questions set;
  - Offering greater flexibility across the paper by removing restrictions on choice or requirements to answer compulsory questions;
  - replacing long questions with shorter ones if not all the material in a topic has been covered.

#### **Potential issues:**

- + Materials changes to assessment cannot be made without further approvals. However, the 'form and conduct' of an assessment can be amended locally providing academic standards are maintained. The responsibility for maintaining academic standards via assessment lies with the Chair of Examiners.
- + Might require additional resource to assess students in an alternative way and be difficult to implement.
- + Amending the means of assessment must be consistent with:
  - learning outcomes of the course
  - course regulations
  - programme specification

## **Change the course structure**

### **a. Cancel the module**

#### **Potential issues:**

- + This will potentially create a discrepancy between the delivered course and the regulations/programme specification; consequently, this is only implementable (1) before the start of term or at the very beginning of term and, (2) if the course documentation did not state that this module was part of the course (i.e., if the module is optional rather than a non-optional 'core' module).
- + Only suitable if students can still achieve their learning outcomes, which will have been communicated to students at the point of application.
- + Not possible for core modules (i.e., non-optional modules).
- + Issues on progression might arise if the affected module occurs in Part I or II and/or is deemed a pre-requisite for a module in a subsequent year.

#### **Risks against CMA:**

- + If the modules have already been advertised to the students, then all students following the module must agree to the proposed change. If one student does not agree, this solution will not be acceptable.

+ Even with acceptance by the cohort, there is still a risk of complaint especially if a student fails the course or is on the lower side of a grade boundary.

**b. Replace the module with another in a cognate area**

**Potential issues:**

- + Necessity of finding suitable UTO or alternative lecturer with expertise in a cognate area.
- + It might be necessary to reschedule the module to fit with the lecturer's availability.
- + Will be suitable at the beginning of the term but not in the middle/end of the module.

**Risks against CMA:**

- + All students following the module must agree the proposed change. If one student does not agree, this solution will not be acceptable.
- + Even with acceptance by the cohort, there is still a risk of complaint especially if a student fails the course or is on the lower side of a grade boundary.