

STUDENT PROTECTION PLAN



This document sets out the policy and procedures for applicants, offer holders and students.

Version	1.2
Executive Sponsor	Deputy Vice Chancellor Engagement and Pro Vice Chancellor Education
Consultation Process	Executive
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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The University is required to assess the risk of potential interruption to studies on a regular basis and, in common with all other Higher Education providers, is required to submit an estimate of risk and a Student Protection Plan (SPP) as part of its registration with the Office for Students (OfS).
- 1.2 The SPP explains:
- What might interrupt your studies, and what action the University will take if this happens
 - How likely it is that any risks will happen
 - What the University will do to mitigate the impact of any risks that occur
- 1.3 The purpose of a Student Protection Plan is to set out a wide range of risks that could occur, and to give you the reassurance that the University has thought about these risks and how they could be addressed. By including risks in this SPP the University is not suggesting that they will occur but is explaining to you the plans to address them should this be necessary.
- 1.4 If the University's SPP should need to be implemented the University will communicate with affected students at the earliest opportunity. Communication may be via email, the University student portal (MAP) and/or the University's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), known as Blackboard.
- 1.5 In following the measures set out below, the University will take into consideration the needs of all students, including those with disclosed disabilities, those registered with the University's Enabling Team and those studying off-campus or outside of the UK. The Plans set out below are reviewed on an annual basis. The review process is supported by the Aston Students' Union and the University Senate.

2. BUSINESS CONTINUITY

- 2.1 This SPP has been developed to align with the key aims and principles of Aston University's Business Continuity Policy, ensuring students are central to our thinking. The key aims and principles are:
- The protection of people, assets, reputation and value of the University and its key stakeholders.
 - Compliance with regulatory and governance frameworks following an unforeseen incident.
 - Ensuring that plans are fit for purpose.
- 2.2 In meeting these aims the University is committed to providing appropriate training for staff and necessary resources. The University undertakes to carry out an annual review of the SPP, alongside the Business Continuity Policy. This ensures best practice is embedded into the work of the University, mitigating risk to students, and supporting you appropriately should the need to implement the SPP arise.
- 2.3 The Business Continuity Policy adopts a tiered approach, depending on the risk and impact of a particular event. Further it clearly outlines roles and responsibilities at each level of the organisation, across academic Colleges and a range of central services, to ensure the impact on you is minimised.

3. COMMUNICATION

- 3.1 If the SPP should need to be implemented, the University will communicate with affected students at the earliest opportunity.
- 3.2 The Communication Plan, and responsibility for enacting this, will vary depending on the specific scenario but includes multiple channels of communication to ensure clear and accurate information is received by affected students in a timely manner. The specific communication plan will also include targeted communication to relevant staff to ensure holistic support for affected students.
- 3.3 Communication may be via email, the University student portal (MAP) and/or the VLE (Blackboard).
- 3.4 Depending on the scenario, the Communication Plan might include:
- Inviting you to discuss changes to your programme of study with the relevant Head of Department and/or Programme Director.
 - Asking you to arrange to meet with your Personal Tutor to discuss the situation and the impact that it might have on you.
 - Asking you to discuss the situation with appropriate staff from your College Programme Office.
 - Giving you the opportunity to discuss the situation with a member of the Enabling Team.
 - Directing you to support from the Careers+Placements Service.
- 3.5 To enable effective support for you, staff will be informed through normal University communication channels should the need to implement the SPP arise.
- 3.6 The SPP is published on the University website and is therefore available to all beneficiaries and staff.

4. POTENTIAL RISKS

4.1 Risk of University Closure

The risk of the University closing is **low**.

In the event of the closure of the University, or part of the University (for example a College, School or Department), the University will put in place the relevant business continuity plans and mitigate the risks by:

- Using reasonable endeavours to revise the delivery timetable to allow programmes to be taught in buildings that remain available and safe for teaching and learning activities.
- Considering the use of other suitable temporary accommodation within a reasonable distance of the University.
- Working with other Higher Education Institutions (as registered with the OfS) to enable programmes to be delivered, or implement gradual closure to allow students to complete their studies.

This is further supported by work with the Midlands Innovation group. This is a group of registered Higher Education providers across the Midlands who are committed to sharing good practice and offering support to each other, when required, to ensure the protection of students.

4.2 Risks due to Covid 19

The risk of the University being disrupted due to Covid 19 is **high**.

Disruption to Covid 19 could occur for a number of reasons. It could be because the University is required to close buildings due to imposed government or Public Health England (PHE) restrictions; it could occur because staff are required to isolate due to testing positive for Covid 19; it could occur because placements or activities off campus have to be cancelled due to business, Government or Public Health England Covid 19 restrictions.

If there is disruption, the University will put in place the relevant business continuity plans and will mitigate the risks by:

- Moving teaching that was scheduled to be held in person to online delivery where it is not safe/possible to offer in person teaching.
- Rescheduling teaching activities where staff illness or government/PHE restrictions necessitate this.
- Finding alternatives to placements and activities off campus or virtually where the offer is able to achieve the same learning outcomes as the scheduled off campus/in person activities.

4.3 Risks due to the closure or suspension of programmes

The risk of programmes being closed or suspended is **low**.

A programme is an approved course of study that provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads to credit and a qualification.

Any decision to close or suspend a programme must be approved by either the Programme Approval Steering Committee or (for recruitment) the Admissions Steering and Strategy Committee. If a decision to close or suspend a programme is approved, the University will advise applicants, offer-holders, prospective students, current students, and other key stakeholders (such as employers and placement providers), as soon as is reasonably possible. The University will also amend any marketing and publicity materials and advise the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) as soon as is reasonably possible.

The University will mitigate the risks by:

i. Prospective students

Applicants who have been made offers, but have not yet accepted them, will be advised of course closures or suspensions and that they may be able to choose another programme or provider.

Where the University has made an offer to an applicant which has then been accepted a contract exists between the University and the student. Therefore, decisions to close or to suspend recruitment to a programme where there are already offer holders may only be made in extreme circumstances and subject to the provisions of the University's Policy for Withdrawing a Programme or Suspending Recruitment to a Programme.

ii. Current students

The University will mitigate the risks to current students by taking the following measures:

- Make arrangements to 'teach out' current students to ensure the programme of study can be completed by all students currently enrolled on the programme
OR
- Use all reasonable endeavours, which may include working in partnership with other providers, to deliver a modified version of the same programme
OR
- Transfer students internally to a similar programme
AND/OR
- Support students in seeking another registered Higher Education provider to enable them to continue their studies.

Students will be informed of their options and the University will provide information and support to assist students in deciding which option to follow. The students on any programme that needs to be taught out will continue to be monitored under the University's standard quality assurance review procedures to maintain, as far as is reasonably practicable, the intended quality of student experience, and to enable the stated learning outcomes to be achieved.

The above procedures apply to all University students irrespective of where they are studying or their mode of study. For research students, if the area of research can no longer be supervised internally, the University will aim to transfer students to a supervisor at another Higher Education provider.

4.4 Risks due to material components of programmes changing

The risk of a material component of a programme changing is **medium**.

Material components of programmes are those elements of a programme that the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) has defined as being the information students need to make an informed decision about which programme to follow.

Material components include the programme title; the duration of the programme; the programme's core modules, the expected workload; the methods by which the programme is delivered; the general level of experience of the staff involved in the delivery; overall methods of assessment; location; award and the awarding body; whether the programme is accredited and by whom, and tuition fees if they alter beyond any provisos included in offer letters or the Terms and Conditions of Enrolment.

The University will mitigate the risks by:

i. Applicants, Offer Holders and Prospective Students,

If the University is unable to deliver material components of programmes the University will amend relevant publicity material as soon as is reasonably possible and advise applicants and offer-holders of those changes.

Prospective students will be advised of the changes made, and informed of any alternative programmes of study they might wish to consider. Prospective students will be allowed to cancel their contract with the University.

ii. Current Students

If the University is unable to deliver material components of any programme it will communicate with all students promptly, setting out what measures will be taken to, wherever is reasonably possible, assure the quality of the student experience, and outlining what alternative arrangements have been made to enable the stated learning outcomes to be achieved. Students will be informed of their options and the University will provide information and support to facilitate students in deciding which option to follow.

4.5 Risks due to Placements being cancelled

The risk of a placement being cancelled is **high** due to the Covid 19 pandemic.

In the event of an employer or provider no longer being able to offer an agreed student placement, there is a range of support mechanisms to enable suitable alternatives to be found, provided by the Careers+Placements team.

In the event of a student not being able to find a placement, or where a placement has been withdrawn and an alternative cannot be secured, the University will mitigate the risks by:

- Offering students the option to transfer to a non-placement version of their degree (if applicable).
- Working with the students to provide an appropriate alternative (including virtual placements) if the placement is a compulsory part of the degree.

4.6 Risks due to Degree Apprenticeship being made redundant

The risk of a degree apprenticeship being made redundant is **medium**.

If a student undertaking a degree apprenticeship is made redundant, the University's Careers+Placements team will provide support to that student to try to find alternative employment that will allow them to continue with their studies.

If it is not possible to find alternative employment the University will mitigate the risk by:

- Offering the student the opportunity to suspend their studies until alternative employment is found.
- Working with the Apprentice to allow a programme of study to continue using government funds whilst they seek alternative employment, in accordance with the apprenticeship regulations.

4.7 Risks due to a programme losing accreditation

The risk of a programme losing accreditation is **low**.

A number of the University degree programmes are accredited by external Professional, Statutory and Regulatory bodies. The University will mitigate the risk of losing accreditation by working closely with accreditation bodies to ensure that their requirements are continually met.

If accreditation of a programme is lost the University will mitigate the impact by:

i. Applicants

The University will inform applicants, offer holders and prospective students of the loss of accreditation status and will support them in transferring their application to another University, should they wish to do so.

ii. Students

Where a programme loses its accreditation with immediate effect the University will use their best endeavours to recover the accreditation before the end of that academic year and specifically aim to ensure that no final year students receive an unaccredited degree. Should this not be possible the University will seek to transfer all affected students to appropriate degree programmes at other providers.

Medical students have the additional protection of an arrangement with the University of Leicester which will allow students to transfer their studies to the University of Leicester should there be any removal of General Medical Council authority to deliver the MBChB Medicine programme.

4.8 Risks of a partner institution being unable to teach a collaborative programme

The risk of a partner institution being unable to teach a collaborative programme is **medium**.

The University works in collaboration with a number of overseas institutions to deliver Aston awards through Transnational Education (TNE) programmes.

The University also works with Further Education colleges and other providers to deliver Aston awards in the UK.

Collaborative Agreements between the University and the delivery partner include arrangements, if necessary, for the planned termination of a programme, cessation of recruitment and the organised 'teach out' of the programme to protect existing students.

If a partner cannot deliver a planned 'teach out,' the University and the partner will, wherever possible, mitigate the risks to current students by:

- Working with other educational institutions in the country where the students are based to continue delivery of the programme.
OR
- Working with the partner to identify other suitable locations for delivery of the programme by either the partner or Aston's staff.
OR
- Providing the remainder of the programme through synchronous and asynchronous online learning, if this is an appropriate way of delivering the learning material.

The University and the partner will provide advice and support to students and to employers of the students (if relevant) before and after termination of a Collaborative Agreement and during a 'teach-out.' The programmes remain subject to the University's standard quality assurance mechanisms until all students have completed their studies. This assures the quality of the student experience during 'teach out.'

4.9 Risks of the University losing its Student Sponsor Licence

The risk of the University losing its Student Sponsor Licence is **low**.

The University has a Student Sponsor Licence, which permits it to admit international students for study. If the University lost its Licence it would mitigate the impact on students by:

- Working with UKVI (UK Visas and Immigration) to ensure students can complete their current year of study.
OR
- Allowing those students already in receipt of a visa based upon an allocated Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies (CAS), to enrol and commence their studies.
OR
- Offering students the opportunity to postpone their study until the matter has been resolved.
OR
- Offering students the option to switch to another sponsor.

4.10 **Risks that the University lost, or had restrictions placed on, its degree awarding powers**

The risk of the University losing, or having restrictions placed, on its degree awarding powers is **low**.

The University has in place rigorous governance and quality assurance processes to ensure that it is complying with the OfS' regulatory framework. The University mitigates the risks of losing its degree awarding powers by:

- Complying with all conditions set by the OfS.
- Internally monitoring compliance with the OfS requirements on a regular basis.
- Keeping a risk register, and monitoring all areas that are deemed internally to be potential risks for OfS compliance.

4.11 **Risks of studies being disrupted due to industrial action**

The risk of studies being disrupted by staff taking industrial action is **high**.

The University recognises trade unions, and a number of staff belong to trade unions. If a dispute occurs between the University and a trade union (either locally or at a national level) staff might choose to take industrial action. The University will mitigate the impact on students by:

- Taking all reasonable steps to avoid or limit disruption to students.
- Providing clear and regular communications with students as soon as it is aware that studies are likely to be disrupted by industrial action.
- Rearranging teaching wherever possible, and offering alternative ways to access content and learning materials where appropriate.
- Providing alternative study spaces if usual study spaces cannot be accessed.
- Assuring that standards are maintained, and students not disadvantaged by any required changes to assessment.
- Working closely with the trade unions to resolve any dispute as promptly as possible.

5. **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Where a student needs to transfer programme, or, move to another provider there may be implications for a student's financial arrangements and the University's Advice Team accessed via the Hub Reception, will be notified of students affected in the event of any the above scenarios. The team will contact affected students and provide detailed information, advice and guidance based on their individual circumstances.

If the University is unable to maintain continuation of study, the refund of tuition fees and other relevant costs will initially be considered in principle by the University's Programme Approval Sub-Committee (PASC), which also has within its terms of reference responsibility for considering the withdrawal of programmes of study. The Chair of PASC will then consult with relevant University Officers, and, depending on the individual circumstances, will

determine the level and nature of any compensation to be provided to student(s).

The University's Tuition Fee Charging Policy makes provision for the refund of tuition fees in the usual course of a period of study, for example, withdrawal or a leave of absence, and will take the following into consideration when it is no longer able to preserve continuation of study:

- The University carefully considers losses on a case-by-case basis. The University accepts that these losses can include additional tuition and maintenance costs where students have to transfer courses or provider due to a discontinuation of study.
- Students have a legal obligation to take reasonable steps to mitigate their loss. This means that if the University puts forward a reasonable alternative way of delivering the content or activities affected by the discontinuation of study, students will be expected to take it up. If they choose not to, then they may not be able to recover any or part of the loss attributable to the discontinuation of study.
- The University will pay any refunds to the account that originally made the payment. If a student has their fees paid through the Student Loan Company or equivalent, or an employer/other sponsor, the refund will be made to the Loan Company/employer/sponsor. The University has well-established procedures for making payments to the Student Loans Company in respect of students who have taken out tuition fee loans who are deemed to be entitled to a refund of their tuition fees.

6. COMPLAINTS

If you are not content with the proposed measures taken by the University to protect the continuation of your study and wish to make a complaint, you are able to do so in accordance with the University's published Students' Complaints Procedure.

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