

University of Oxford student protection plan

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Student protection plan for the period 2020-21

1. An assessment of the range of risks to the continuation of study for your students, how those risks may differ based on your students' needs, characteristics and circumstances, and the likelihood that those risks will crystallise

We have assessed that the following risks to continuity of study *could* occur in the event that unforeseen circumstances arise causing the University to make unexpected changes:

- we decide or are forced to discontinue a specific course;
- we stop teaching a particular discipline;
- appropriate supervision is no longer available for particular research activities;
- we decide or are forced to close the location (Department building or College) in which the course is taught;
- we can no longer provide the course for any other reason, for example:
 - we cease operating through no choice of our own;
 - we lose the right to provide the course or qualification; or
 - we lose our tier 4 licence.

We believe that the overall likelihood that the above risks would crystallise is low. The University currently has no plans, for example, to cease teaching a particular discipline altogether.

The risk that the University as a whole is unable to operate is considered extremely unlikely, this is demonstrated by our long history, global reputation, triple A credit rating and significant balance sheet reserves.

Unexpected course changes, issues with buildings (whether they be permanent or temporary) or the availability of appropriate supervision are issues that could arise. The University's approach is to take mitigating action to ensure that students are able to progress their studies. Our approach is governed by the following principles:

- being open and transparent with students should any risk to continuity of studies arise, informing them in a timely manner;
- taking reasonable steps to preserve continuity of study should we need to discontinue a course or discipline or close a location (i.e. Department building or College) where a course is taught;
- considering students' views, where appropriate, before deciding to implement any substantial changes to a course or discontinuing it, or stop teaching a discipline or closing a location;
- taking into consideration the needs of all our students and the impact on them of any proposed changes and considering any protective measures that should be taken; and

- informing the OfS of any changes that may necessitate a review of the plan or any measures contained within it.

The University's Student Protection Plan is enshrined in our existing policies and procedures. We will respond to the above scenarios, as appropriate, by following a robust process in accordance with our existing procedures.

We consider that, while the overall likelihood of any of the above risks crystallising is low, certain groups of students (such as disabled or international students) would be more significantly impacted than others in the event that the University was, for example, to lose its Tier 4 licence or a Department building needed to be closed and relocated. However, as set out above, the University would take all reasonable steps to preserve continuity of study, take protective measures and respond appropriately in line with existing procedures, whilst taking account of special circumstances, including mobility issues and special educational needs.

An example of the University's ability to react to unforeseen circumstances was seen in the recent and unexpected closure of the Tinbergen Building (part of the facilities of the Departments of Zoology and Experimental Psychology). In response, the University took a number of steps to mitigate the impact on students' continuity of study which included:

- relocating lectures at short notice to other University space;
- resequencing teaching to mitigate the impact, for example, on practical learning due to the temporary loss of laboratories.
- building new temporary accommodation to house specialist teaching laboratories and research/office space; and
- sourcing alternative accommodation for the medium-term relocation of the Departments of Zoology and Experimental Psychology

2. The measures that you have put in place to mitigate those risks that you consider to be reasonably likely to crystallise

The University's approach in the face of possible course, department or college closures will generally be to mitigate the impact on students and ensure that they are able to continue on their course of study. The University's *Vested Interests* guidance, which forms part of the 'Policy and Guidance on new course and major changes (including closure)'¹, envisages prior student consultation for all types of changes (excluding minor textual corrections) through the normal mechanisms such as the Joint Consultative Committees.

The University has a Permanent Private Hall Supervisory Committee (established by Council Regulation 15 of 2002²) which monitors the financial performance of Permanent Private Halls (PPHs) to ensure they remain solvent and to ensure that any potential risks of insolvency can be identified and contingency plans put in place.

The College Accounts Committee (also established by Council Regulation 15 of 2002³) reports to the University's General Purposes Committee on a regular basis having reviewed in detail the financial sustainability of all of the colleges.

¹ <https://academic.web.ox.ac.uk/new-courses>

² <https://governance.admin.ox.ac.uk/legislation/council-regulations-15-of-2002#/>

³ <https://governance.admin.ox.ac.uk/legislation/council-regulations-15-of-2002#/>

The University's student terms and conditions⁴ set out how the University will deal with situations where it is desirable or necessary for the University to make changes in course provision, either before or after enrolment. As set out in our terms and conditions, we retain the right to make specified changes to course content, delivery and teaching provision because of developments in the relevant subject, enhancements in teaching or assessment practice, requirements of external accreditation processes, changes in staffing, resource constraints or changes in the availability of facilities. Such changes may not in themselves warrant the triggering of student protection measures (e.g. where the changes are minor), but where appropriate we will take account of the principles set out in this plan. The University also retains the right to make other changes in accordance with our terms and conditions, including substantial changes to courses more than three months before enrolment. In such circumstances, offer-holders will be notified of the change and offered the opportunity to withdraw from the course.

In the event that any of the identified risks do materialise, the University will take one or more of the following measures to protect students' continuity of study:

- whenever possible, we will make arrangements to 'teach out' current students where we have voluntarily decided to leave the market or close a course. This means that we commit to ensuring the course of study can be completed by all currently enrolled students, even though the course is being discontinued and we will not be taking on new student cohorts;
- where applicable, we will seek to secure a new or alternative location in which studies can take place;
- should a college or Permanent Private Hall ('PPH') be subject to closure, then the University would seek to facilitate the transfer of students to another College or PPH within the collegiate University;
- where absolutely necessary, we will support students in seeking transfer to another provider and continuing studies or research activities with them, utilising student transfer arrangements as appropriate.

We would seek to make arrangements to facilitate a student's transfer to either another College/PPH or separate institution/provider on a case by case basis.

3. Information about the policy you have in place to refund tuition fees and other relevant costs to your students and to provide compensation where necessary in the event that you are no longer able to preserve continuation of study

As previously stated the University will always seek to put in place mitigating actions to ensure that students are able to complete the courses on which they are enrolled. In the majority of cases the University would expect to 'teach out' and in the exceptional case of a college/PPH closure the University would facilitate the transfer of affected students to another college/PPH within the collegiate University.

The University therefore expects circumstances where it is not possible to provide continuation of study to be extremely rare. Save for the limited circumstances where a refund may be granted to students who have been suspended or have withdrawn from their studies⁵, the University does not operate a specific refunds and compensation policy but would consider the need to award compensation on a case by case basis and in line with the OIA's guidance on distress and inconvenience payments. Circumstances where we might elect to award compensation to students include:

- where we consider there is a legal obligation to do so, e.g. where the University considers it has breached its contractual or tortious liabilities;

⁴ <https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/new/contract?wssl=1>

⁵ See section 3 of the Appendix I to the Regulations on Financial Matters (<https://examregs.admin.ox.ac.uk/Regulation?code=ai-ronfinamatt>)

- where payment of compensation is recommended to address any distress, inconvenience or other service issues identified as a result of an investigation of student complaints by the Proctors on behalf of the University.

4. Information about how you will communicate with students about your student protection plan

The University's Student Protection Plan is a summary of existing policies and procedures which are already communicated to students and staff. However, we will in addition:

- identify a communications strategy to publish the key elements of the Student Protection Plan (which will capture key messages from our existing policies and procedures) to students and staff on our website and intranet pages;
- make the key elements of the Student Protection Plan available to applicants alongside other material that is available to applicants when we make an offer to study;
- draw the attention of current students to the key elements of the plan on a regular basis; and
- include the plan as an item on relevant staff training events and in appropriate briefing materials for staff.

The Student Protection Plan will be included in the existing annual review of applicant and student-facing documents which will ensure that it remains accurate, up-to-date and unambiguous. We already have processes in place which ensure that students' views are considered when drafting and revising our framework of policies and procedures which form the basis of the Student Protection Plan. The Student Protection Plan will also be formally signed off by Council, which includes 3 student members elected to represent the student body as a whole.

The University's collegiate structure provides a supportive environment which allows students to flourish academically and within which appropriate support structures are provided, for example support for disabled students, support for international students and financial advice and guidance. We already commit to notifying students of any changes which may affect their studies in a timely manner.

Advice and support is offered in the first instance by the student's College office or Departmental office, depending upon the subject of the query. Additional, independent advice and support is available from the Student Information team in the first instance (student.information@admin.ox.ac.uk).

Should students have concerns about the way in which the University has implemented the Student Protection Plan, they would be entitled to make a complaint in accordance with our existing complaints procedures⁶.

⁶ <https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/complaints?wssl=1>