

STRANMILLIS UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

MANAGEMENT OF ABSENCE

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Stranmillis University College is committed to ensuring that staff members who have a disability or those who may have ill health (including physical or mental illness) are treated with understanding and sensitivity whilst achieving an acceptable level of attendance. The College will demonstrate a sympathetic and supportive attitude towards staff who incur injury, who are abnormally prone to sickness or who suffer longer-term illness.
- 1.2 Reliable data on sickness absence is vital to informing effective policy and practice. A standard procedure for the reporting and recording of sickness absence is therefore an essential requirement so that the College can identify

patterns and trends in absence and take action at institutional or individual levels, where appropriate.

1.3 This policy has been introduced to ensure

- that the College has a fair and consistent approach to the management of sickness absence across all departments and for all categories of staff. Other objectives that the policy aims to achieve are:
 - the promotion of employees' health, safety and welfare;
 - the identification of changes necessary in working practices or environment;
 - ensuring that the College complies with disability discrimination legalisation;
 - effective operational management taking account of the points made above.

It should be stressed that the primary objective of this policy is neither to question the legitimacy of sickness absences nor to pressurise staff into returning to work before they are fully recovered. At the same time it recognises that staff absences do have an impact on other staff and workloads. The College aims to balance the sensitive nature of genuine individual sickness against its needs to be publicly accountable for its resource allocation

1.4 Responsibility for applying the provisions of the policy lies with senior management and line managers as well as HR. The following procedures will at all times be carried out with tact and sensitivity and a realisation that the management of sickness absence is the joint responsibility of the line manager and the individual employee. Anyone dealing with an employee absence, from those taking a telephone call to those conducting a return to work interview should realise that the information is confidential.

1.5 Employees are required to comply with this policy. Failure to comply with the policy may result in sick pay being withheld.

1.5 Advice may be sought from the HR Department at any stage.

2. APPLICATION OF POLICY

2.1 This policy applies to all staff, regardless of category. Whilst it is accepted that the working patterns of academic staff allow a large degree of flexibility, the provisions of the policy must apply to all categories of staff to ensure a consistent and equitable approach.

3: ABSENCE REPORTING

3.1 Members of staff should keep the College informed of the circumstances of their absence and provide such certification as is necessary. All such information will be treated in the strictest confidence.

3.2 The procedure set out below must be followed at all times:

Reporting absence:

- The member of staff must telephone his/her line manager or their nominated departmental administrator as soon as possible, prior to their scheduled start time at the latest on the **first day of absence**. Further contact should normally be made on the **fourth** and **eighth** calendar day of absence (or the next working day should this fall on a College closure day)

The underlying principle is that the employee needs to make contact in a timely manner. If, for example, a lecturer has a teaching commitment which is due to commence at 9.00 a.m., s/he must make every effort to contact the College as early as possible so that appropriate action can be taken to minimise disruption for students.

Given the wide range of working patterns and shifts which are operated in College, it is not within the scope of this policy to specify a required notification time for every working pattern and departmental structure. Line managers should communicate the notification requirements within their department to all staff. If any employee is uncertain about how these requirements apply in view of their own working pattern, this should be discussed with the line manager to ensure that both parties have a shared understanding of what is reasonable in these circumstances.

- The employee should advise the line manager of the nature of the illness or injury and the likely period of absence. Work-related aspects of any absence should be reported at this point, so the College can promptly act to seek to resolve any work related issues.
- If the likely period of absence originally notified is **more** than seven days, it is not necessary for the employee to phone again on the fourth day.
- If the likely period of absence is longer than originally notified, then the employee must contact the line manager on the day on which s/he had stated that s/he would back at work. For example, an employee phones in sick on Monday and indicates s/he will be off for one day. On Tuesday, the employee does not yet feel well enough to return to work. S/he is expected to contact the manager to advise of the longer duration of the absence.
- This will help the line manager determine what reorganisation of work may be required. If the member of staff does not work normal office hours, s/he should contact his/her line manager two hours prior to starting their shift or earlier if at all possible.

Only in exceptional circumstances (e.g., if the employee is in hospital or too ill to make contact) should a friend or colleague call on behalf of the employee.

- If the line manager or nominated administrator is not available when the employee phones in to report absence, it is reasonable to leave a message or send an email or a text message, as long as it is understood that the manager may need to phone back to clarify any issues.

- On being informed of the absence, the line manager or nominated administrator must record the absence (i.e., log the absence on ESS or complete a Notification of Absence form as appropriate).
- For sick pay purposes, once an employee has begun work on a day, that day will not count as a day of sickness absence. However, if the employee arrives for work and does no work before going off sick, it is deemed to be a day of sickness absence .. However, instances of a member of staff coming in late or leaving early due to illness will be recorded on MSS by the line manager/nominated administrator. Any potential pattern should be noted by the manager and in the event of a review being required, considered alongside other sickness records.

Certification of absence

- Absences of up to and including seven calendar days should be self certified by the employee using the College Self-Certification form. Self certification must be completed immediately on return to work by the employee.

(a) Staff using ESS complete the Self Certification electronically, and this goes to the line manager prior to the Return to Work interview. The Return to Work record form is completed by the line manager (the employee has access to this form prior to its submission). Both forms then go to HR when the process is completed via ESS/MSS.

(b) Staff who do not have PC access complete a paper Self-Certification form which is available from the line manager or the HR Department. This is then given to the line manager at the Return to Work interview, and forwarded to HR by the line manager with the completed Return to Work interview form.

Shift workers should record on their self certificate the last day of sickness as the end date of a period of absence and notify the line manager of their availability to return to work . This date may or may not fall on a “rest day” (i.e., a day on which the employee was not scheduled to work). This information is required to inform the College’s planning and arrangements for covering and allocating shifts.

- Absences of eight **calendar days**(including Saturdays and Sundays whether these are normally worked or not) or more must be covered by a signed doctor’s certificate (“Statement of Fitness to Work”). The College (i.e., the line manager or HR) should be informed on the eighth calendar day of absence that a this certificate has been obtained and will be forwarded as soon as possible.

The certificate must be sent to the HR Department who will in turn keep the line manager advised of the duration of any further absence. The original can be returned to the employee on request, in which case HR will retain a copy.

- When the employee returns to work, the line manager or nominated administrator must promptly enter on MSS the end date of the period of absence. The self-certification form is then generated by the system for online completion by the employee
- The employee may only return to work within the period noted on the Statement of Fitness to Work if a risk assessment is completed by the employee and line manager before the return to work, and account taken by them of the advice in the statement of fitness to work, including the performance of any relevant safety procedures. Guidance on risk assessments is available at www.hse.gov.uk/risk/fivesteps.htm. Input is to be sought from HR and/or Occupational Health. In such instances, the employee should also attend Occupational Health to ensure that the employee is fit to be back at work before s/he recommences duties.
- If the doctor recommends on the Statement of Fitness to Work that the employee “may be fit for work” subject to adjustments, the College will endeavour to facilitate the recommended adjustments in consultation with the employee. However, if it is not possible to facilitate these adjustments the doctor’s statement will function as if it were a “not fit for work” statement.
- If the doctor has recommended a phased return on reduced hours, the employee will receive full pay for a period of two weeks. If reduced hours are recommended for a period longer than two weeks, from week three onwards the employee will receive normal pay for any hours worked and will receive sick pay for any hours not worked. Any hours for which the employee is paid sick pay, will be deducted from their rolling twelve month entitlement of occupational sick pay. However the sickness period will be counted as only one period of sickness.

4: MANAGING SICKNESS ABSENCE

- 4.1 As an employer the College has a responsibility to ensure that all its staff are aware of their responsibilities in respect of the sick pay scheme and that the sick pay scheme is operated effectively.
- 4.2 Monitoring absence in a systematic fashion also facilitates an early identification of an employee's health problems and instances of working practices or environments, which may be contributing to sickness absence. In dealing with sickness absence, the College should ensure a consistent approach between departments and various categories of staff. The HR Department will, therefore, play an important role in advising departments how to manage a particular case.
- 4.3 High levels of sickness absence, whether short-term and intermittent or long-term, can be categorised in one of the following ways:
- a one-off absence (e.g. minor operation);
 - a series of absences due to one diagnosed cause;
 - serious long-term illness;
 - absences due to minor unrelated illnesses.
- 4.4 Each of these may require a different approach. In the first case, for example, a period of recuperation, and possibly therapy, following the operation will usually be sufficient to enable a complete return to work. The College may refer an employee to the University Occupational Health Service prior to, or upon, return to work.
- 4.5 Absences falling into the second category may require an exploration of the possibility of redeployment of an employee into another job or re-designing the employee's current job.
- 4.6 Absences falling into the third category, which do not lend themselves to adaptation of job duties or redeployment, may lead to ill-health early retirement or termination of employment and will be dealt with in accordance with the guidelines regarding long-term absence (see page 8).
- 4.7 A series of absences due to minor and unrelated illnesses will normally be discussed with an employee at Return to Work interview, at which time referral to the University Occupational Health Service may be considered, to ascertain if there are any underlying problems. In serious cases, where there is no improvement as a result of such action, this may lead to the formal action under the terms of this policy.. It should be stressed that the aim of any counselling or warning associated with absence would not be to cast doubt on the legitimacy of absences.
- 4.8 Absences may take the form of self-certificated absences and/or a combination of self-certificated and GP certified absences.
- 4.9 There may be instances in which the College will automatically refer the individual to Occupational Health, regardless of the length of absence.

Examples may include absence/illness relating to back pain/injury or work-related stress.

(a) Return to Work Interview:

4.10 It is the responsibility of the line manager/supervisor and employee to ensure that a return to work meeting is held to discuss the absence with the employee on returning to work after any period of sickness absence, regardless of the duration of the absence. This meeting should be carried out sympathetically, in private, by a manager or a supervisor and should be aimed at confirming the cause of the absence and indicating the University College's interest in the welfare of the employee. Advice on the conduct of such conversations can be obtained from the HR Department. The following guidance should be taken into account:

- The manager should check the employee's absence record and review whether his/her absences have been frequent, regular or repeated.
- The manager should be alert to the possibility of any pattern, for example frequent absences on Mondays.
- Managers should, however, remain open-minded and not jump to any hasty conclusions about an employee's absences.
- The manager should invite the employee to attend a Return to Work interview normally within three working days of the employee's return to work, and preferably on the employee's first day back at work.

The manager should:

- explain to the employee that the purpose of the interview is to manage and monitor all employees' absence and attendance in order to identify any problem areas, offer support where appropriate and manage performance;
- inform the employee that the fact of his/her absence has been recorded;
- ask the employee about the reasons for his/her absence, ensuring that the question is asked in a supportive way without any suggestion that the employee is 'to blame' for the absence;
- ask the employee whether or not he/she has consulted a doctor or attended hospital or if referral to Occupational Health may be appropriate or helpful;
- ensure that the employee completes a self-certification form for the period of sickness absence and that the dates are correct.
- where the absence has been for 8 or more calendar days, that a "Statement of Fitness for Work" has been provided;
- complete the return to work interview record as set out in Section 3. Staff with ESS have access to the completed form via the system. Staff who do not use ESS should be given a copy of the completed form and the manager should also send a copy to HR.

(b) Identification of potentially problematic or unreasonable absence

- 4.11 Where an employee's attendance record is considered by the College to be unreasonable or problematic, or where it creates a particular operational difficulty, or it has gone on for a considerable length of time the procedure will be operated as detailed below. The line manager should, with the assistance of HR, assess the situation and all the facts relating to it and then take appropriate action depending on the circumstances.
- 4.12 Formal action in relation to short-term sickness absence may be triggered by any of the following which may be a cause for concern.
- 5 separate periods of absence in a rolling 12-month period or 3 or more periods of absence totaling 15 or more working days of absence (pro-rata for part-time staff) in a rolling 12-month period;
 - Regular* Monday/Friday absence, additional days before or after a holiday or other regular* pattern of absence;
 - Regular* absence at certain times that coincide with work pressures or deadlines; or
 - any combination of the above.

** Regular: 3 or more times may indicate a pattern which needs to be raised with the employee.*

(c) Action when absence threshold is reached - Formal Absence Management Review

- 4.13 The ESS/MSS system permits managers and staff members to view absence details for the employee. Staff who do not have access to computers may request a print out of their absence history from the manager, nominated departmental administrator or a member of the HR team.
- 4.14 In the case of an employee having a pattern as outlined in section 4.12, the line manager will formally raise the matter with the member of staff and investigate any particular circumstances concerning these periods of sickness absence, as noted at paragraph 4.11. A member of the HR department will attend the meeting and will take notes. The employee has the right to be accompanied by:
- a trade union official who is employed by a trade union; or
 - a lay trade union official
- or
- a fellow College employee.

If appropriate, the member of staff may be referred to the University Occupational Health Service and may be asked for permission to contact the employee's doctor. Where an employee refuses to attend the University Occupational Health Service and refuses the College or the Occupational Health Physician access to medical evidence, the employee will be told in writing that any decision will be taken on the basis of the information available.

4.15 The formal interview should be completed in a timely fashion. The aims of the interview will be to:

- a) identify the frequency and reason for the absences and ensure that the employee is aware that their absence record is giving cause for concern.
- b) advise the employee to seek medical attention if a medical problem is indicated. The employee should at this stage be referred to the HR Department so that a formal referral to the University Occupational Health Service is made, in order to obtain a professional medical opinion.
- c) remind the employee of the College's sickness absence policy.
- d) give consideration to any problems raised by the employee and consider possible ways of helping the employee to resolve them (the HR Department may be able to advise on these matters).
- e) agree a reasonable period of time over which the employee's attendance can be monitored (this reasonable period will take all factors discussed into account).
- f) Indicate what the next step will be if the member of staff's attendance does not improve. Targets for improvement should be specified and be realistic, giving consideration to ongoing illnesses. (Advice from the HR Department may be sought in relation to target setting.)

4.16 Following this meeting, a letter will be written confirming the facts, the action to be taken, a relevant timescale, and specifying what will happen if attendance is not improved. This will be handed to the member of staff or sent to his/her home address by recorded delivery mail. A copy of this letter will be kept on the individual's personal file in the HR Department.

4.17 If at the end of this monitoring period there is still no satisfactory improvement and there are no good medical reasons, then disciplinary action, following the College's Disciplinary Procedure, should be initiated. It should be noted that this could, in certain circumstances, ultimately lead to dismissal of the employee. The line manager must ensure that all relevant information has been taken into account (e.g., the employee's performance, likelihood of a change in attendance, the availability of suitable alternative work and the effect of past and future absences on the daily work of the Department/Section). Guidance must be sought from the HR Department if disciplinary action is being initiated.

(d) Long-term absences

4.18 Managers and/or the HR Department should stay in touch with a member of staff throughout a period of absence. This is especially important when the leave is extended. A reasonable amount of contact is important not only to enable the College to appreciate how long the absence might be likely to last,

but also to help reduce the sense of isolation often felt by employees who are unwell for a prolonged period of time.

4.19 Referral to University Occupational Health Service

If the absence extends beyond one month, the College will aim to make formal contact with the employee with the intention of referring him/her to the University Occupational Health Service and may be asked for permission to contact the employee's doctor (this permission will normally be sought by Occupational Health – the employee can choose to give or not to give consent for contact to be made with his/her own doctor. If consent is not given, the Occupational Health Service will make its recommendations based on the information available at the time a report to the College is being made). This referral is in turn intended to provide the following information:

- a) a prognosis of the employee's illness in terms of when s/he is likely to be fit to return to work;
- b) whether adaptation of the job, working hours or environment might facilitate an early return to work;
- c) an early indication of whether a return to any form of work is unlikely.

The action that follows a referral will depend on the nature of the report and will be decided after discussion with HR.

4.20 Redeployment and Accommodation of Disability:

As a matter of policy and in accordance with the provisions of disability discrimination legislation, the College will endeavour as far as is reasonably practical to accommodate an employee in his/her current post if s/he experiences ill health or has a disability. Accommodation may involve re-designing the individual's job, adapting the working environment or changing the hours of work. If accommodation proves impossible or not economically viable, every reasonable attempt will be made to redeploy the employee into a position for which s/he is capable. In pursuing its policy of attempting to accommodate or redeploy staff the College will make full use of the advice and assistance of the University Occupational Health Service. Employees will also be fully consulted regarding such options and may be accompanied by a trade union representative or work colleague if so s/he wishes. Ill Health Early Retirement/Termination of Employment:

4.21 Where a member of staff is unable to return to their job and accommodation and redeployment are not viable options, ill health early retirement or termination of the individual's employment will be the only alternatives. No decision on these alternatives will be taken without first reviewing the medical evidence and consulting with the employee. The employee may be accompanied at review meetings by a trade union representative or work colleague if so s/he wishes.

4.22 Where an employee is a member of either the Northern Ireland Local Government Officers' Superannuation Scheme or the Teachers' Superannuation Scheme and is permanently incapable of performing his/her normal job duties, the College will refer the case for ill health early retirement with associated pension benefits (with the employee's consent) to the administrators of the relevant pension scheme. Whilst the decision is

pending, the employee will normally remain in the College's employment. For employees who are ineligible for an ill health pension under the terms of NILGOSC or TSS, the sole option in the absence of redeployment or accommodation possibilities will be termination of employment.

If the College is considering dismissal due to ill health the Statutory Dismissal Procedure will apply and the employee will therefore have the right to appeal a decision which may result in their dismissal.

5: PRE-EMPLOYMENT HEALTH ASSESSMENT

5.1: All appointments to the College are subject to pre-employment health screening by the University Occupational Health Service. (Appendix 1 – Pre-employment Health Questionnaire is sent with offers of employment and must be completed and returned to the College by the successful candidate).

5.2 Aims

- (i) To ensure the fitness for work of prospective employees, in the light of their state of health and the proposed employment.
- (ii) To ensure that there is no significant risk of adverse effect of the proposed job on the employee's state of health, particularly in the case of individuals with pre-existing health problems.
- (iii) In the event of disability, to advise on reasonable modifications to the job in order to enable the prospective employee to take up the post.

5.3 Process

- (i) When making the offer of appointment, the HR Department will indicate to the successful candidate that the offer is subject to satisfactory health screening. The HR Department will then send a copy of the job description where appropriate and the sealed envelope containing the successful candidate's health questionnaire to the University Occupational Health Service.
- (ii) All pre-employment health questionnaires will be scanned by the University Occupational Health Service.
- (iii) Where the pre-employment health questionnaire does not raise any concerns in respect of the proposed employment, immediate notification to this effect will be sent to the HR Department. The University Occupational Health Service will aim at a turnaround time of one week.
- (iv) Where a concern is raised by the health questionnaire – this may arise from the following sources:
 - a) Past history of prolonged sickness absence or recurrent sickness absence.
 - b) Chronic or recurring illness likely to impact on the job or to be exacerbated by the proposed job. (This may require liaison by the Occupational Health Service with the line manager to clarify the job description or to determine

risks adherent in the job).

c) Any history of malignancy.

d) Any history of serious psychiatric illness, including stress-related conditions.

If further information is required from the employee, the Occupational Health Service will attempt to obtain this by telephone or in writing. If further information is required regarding the job, the nurse will attempt to obtain this from the HR Department or a line manager by telephone. If necessary, a job description may be requested, where this has not already been provided.

Where points of concern arising from the above categories are identified the Occupational Health Service will address the issue raised.

a) Occupational Health Service appointment with prospective employee or

b) physician writing to prospective employee (e.g. if employee resides at a distance).

Assessment should take the form of further clarification of the problem, with particular reference to the impact on proposed employment. Assessment may require background medical reports to be obtained from the prospective employee's GP or hospital consultant. Such reports will be obtained with the written consent of the prospective employee, under the requirements of the Access to Medical Reports Act 1988.

At the time of writing for such reports, a copy of the written consent should be enclosed, since this will indicate whether the individual requires sight of the report or not. The original report should be kept with the employee's file.

(v) It should be noted that cases where concern under (iv) is raised happen relatively infrequently, but that there are implications for the employer in those instances where this does occur.

a) Probability of several weeks delay in the recruitment/appointment process:

this could arise from a delay on the part of the prospective employee in returning consent form/delay in GP to completing report giving specific medical information/delay by prospective employee in seeing his/her GP within the statutory 21 days if s/he wishes sight of the report before dispatch to an Occupational Health Physician.

b) Prospective costs incurred for provision of GP's report (to be borne by employer/Occupational Health Service):

It is important that at assessment no specific indication should be given to the prospective employee regarding employability. Following receipt of the GP's report, the Occupational Health Physician will make a decision on the employability of a candidate, if necessary advising "reasonable adjustments" within the meaning of the Disability Discrimination Act. Alternatively, the Occupational Health Physician may find the prospective

employee “medically unfit to take up proposed post” and, if so, will inform the employer accordingly and record factors leading to this decision. The decision on employability will be made at the end of medical assessment, or following the receipt of requested reports.

- (vi) At the end of the process notification must be given by Occupational Health to the HR Department regarding the outcome of the pre-employment health assessment.

6. REVIEW OF POLICY AND PROCEDURE

- 6.1 The policy and procedure will be periodically reviewed.
- 6.2 This document should be read in conjunction with the College's Sick Leave and Sick Pay Scheme.

SUMMARY OF SICK PAY ENTITLEMENTS

Appendix 1

Occupational Sick Pay

Members of the teaching staff are entitled to receive occupational sick pay for the following periods:

During 1st year of service	1 month's full pay and (after completing 4 months service) 2 month's half pay
During 2nd year of service	3 months full pay and 3 months half pay
During 3rd year of service	4 months full pay and 4 months half pay
During and after 4th year of service	6 months full pay and 6 months half pay

Members of the support staff are entitled to receive occupational sick pay for the following periods:

During 1st year of service	1 month's full pay and (after completing 4 months service) 2 month's half pay
During 2nd year of service	2 month's full pay and 2 month's half pay
During 3rd year of service	4 month's full pay and 4 month's half pay
During 4th and 5th year of service	5 month's full pay and 5 month's half pay
After 5 years service	6 month's full pay and 6 month's half pay

Please note that:

- These entitlements are inclusive of Statutory Sick Pay.
- The period during which sick pay will be paid, and the rate of sick pay, in respect of any period of sickness absence will be calculated by deducting from the employee's entitlement on the first day the aggregate of periods of paid absence during the twelve months immediately preceding the first day of absence.
- Failure to comply with the College Management of Absence procedure may result in the withholding of sick pay.

Statutory Sick Pay

SSP is paid to employees who are unable to work because of sickness. It is paid by the employer for up to a maximum of 28 weeks. SSP is not paid for specific illness or treatment but to all employees, who are incapable for work and who satisfy the conditions for payment.

ABSENCES NOT COVERED BY THIS POLICY

Appendix 2

The following categories of absence are not covered by this policy:

- Annual leave
- Authorised leave of absence (for example, bereavement or compassionate leave)
- Pregnancy-related absence or illness
- Absence connected with a condition as defined by the Disability Discrimination Act
- Absence connected with an injury at work
- Emergency time off for looking after dependants
- Adoption leave
- Maternity leave
- Parental leave
- Paternity leave
- Any other relevant absences, for example, education and training courses, absence on public duties, and on trade union duties and activities

Stranmillis University College
A College of Queen's University Belfast

Notification of Absence

(To be completed by the Line Manager and forwarded to the Human Resources Department, Main Building)

Department: _____

Name of staff member: _____

Date of first day of absence: _____

Reason for absence: _____

Likely date of return: _____

Signed: _____
(Line Manager)

Date: _____

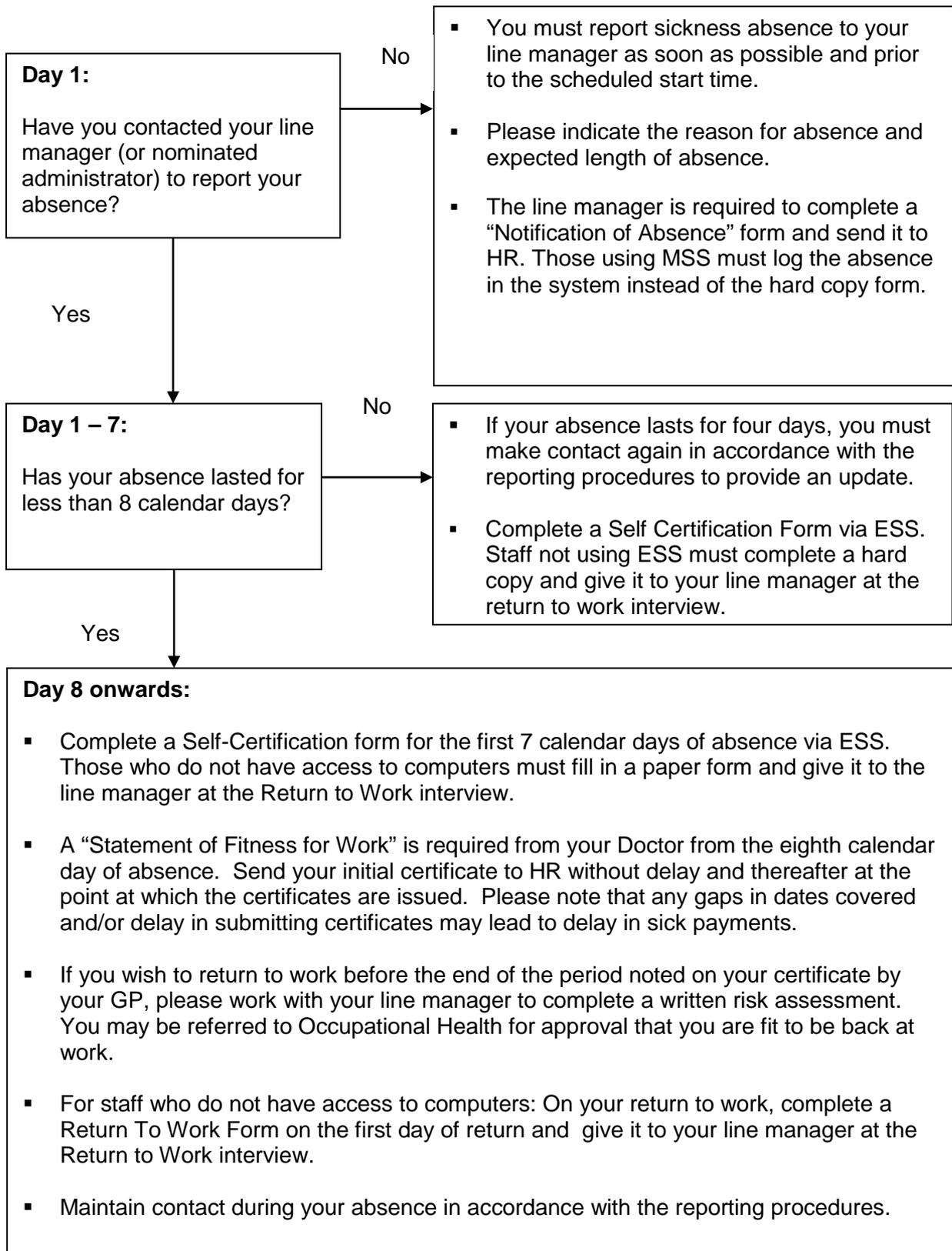


STRANMILLIS UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
A College of Queen's University Belfast

RETURN TO WORK INTERVIEW RECORD

Name of employee			
Job title			
Date of return to work interview			
Length of employee's absence			
First date of employee's absence			
Date of employee's return to work			
Reason employee gave for absence:			
Did the employee properly notify the employer of his/her absence and provide the required certification?	Yes	No	
Did the employee consult his/her GP?	Yes	No	
Did the employee indicate that factors at work may have caused or contributed to the absence?	Yes	No	
If so, please explain:			
If so, what action is to be taken to support the employee (e.g., referral to Occupational Health?)			
Is this absence part of an overall pattern?	Yes	No	
If so, please explain:			
Does the employee have any type of disability?	Yes	No	
Any further comments from the manager:			
Signature (manager):			
Date form completed:			
Copied to employee		Copied to HR	

REPORTING SICKNESS ABSENCES FLOWCHART



a

Please note: You must follow the above guidelines about reporting and certifying absences, otherwise non-payment of sick pay and/or disciplinary action under the relevant disciplinary procedures may result.