

Aggressive/Challenging Behaviour Guidance for avoiding and dealing with conflict

Rationale

Incidents involving aggressive behaviour by students or members of the public are rare at The Robert Gordon University. However, the risk from such incidents can be minimised by simple precautions outlined in this document.

Please note that this guidance is intended as advice only and is not a substitute for training in techniques for dealing with aggressive or challenging behaviour. It is not exhaustive and is not intended as an authorised procedure. Nor does this guidance supersede any School or Department specific procedures.

General Tips for Dealing with Confrontation and Aggression

- Staff should always try to treat people with respect, regardless of their behaviour.
- Staff should stay as calm as possible; it can keep tensions from escalating and may help defuse the situation. If the member of staff cannot stay calm they should consider suspending or terminating the interview, leaving the vicinity, etc.
- Staff should try to avoid using the phrase "calm down" as this may suggest to the aggressor that the staff member has failed to grasp the gravity or importance of the situation.
- Staff should attempt to show empathy and concern. For example; by saying "I can see your frustration, and I'm frustrated too. Unfortunately, the rules are.....".
- Rather than insisting that they are right and the student is wrong, the member of staff should let the student know they see the situation differently. For example, the member of staff could say "I can see we don't see this the same way". They could also consider bringing in another person who can help.
- If a student is verbally abusive, the member of staff should tell them they will be able to help them better if they lower their voice, and stop attacking. Staff do not have to tolerate abuse.
- Staff must not promise or suggest outcomes which are not possible to get out of a difficult situation.
- Staff should trust their intuition and suspend or terminate any interview or discussion where it appears that the situation might escalate to violence (see section *Suspending or Terminating an Interview or Discussion below*).

Risk Assessment

Where there is a perceived significant risk of aggressive or challenging behaviour the School/Department should conduct a risk assessment to identify the appropriate controls. Such risks may be more inherent during one-on-one interviews, cash handling operations, etc.

Where this risk relates to a specific student then the University's 'Guidelines for Crises Intervention: students causing concern/students at risk' should be consulted. These are available as Appendix 1 of the Personal Tutors Handbook or from the Student Services Department.

One-On-One Interviews with Students (in potentially inflammatory circumstances)

Definition

A one-on-one interview is defined as a meeting between an Interviewer and a member of staff, the public or a student where no-one else is in the room. Some of these interviews may result in potentially inflammatory circumstances. Such circumstances could include discussions regarding:

- Non-payment of fines or fees
- Academic failure
- Misconduct
- Personal problems or difficulties

Interview Scheduling

Staff are under no obligation to see students on a one-on-one basis without a prior appointment. Any student who arrives seeking an immediate interview may be refused. However, the Interviewer should seek to make an appointment to see the student at a later time or date. The interview should take place in a suitable room (see below).

One-on-one meetings should be scheduled so that they begin and end within normal working hours and when there will be sufficient number of people in the vicinity to respond to any potential emergency.

It is recognised that this may not always be possible, for example part-time evening class students. Where this is the case, the Interviewer should attempt to schedule the interview when there are likely to be other staff members working close by.

Please note that this guidance does not attempt to prohibit or preclude any 'open door' policy or practice where students or other persons may visit staff without an appointment if staff are happy to receive them.

Room Set-up

Where there is recognised potential for inflammatory circumstance to occur, the interview will ideally be held in a room where a panic button is available. However, in most Schools and Departments this will not be the case.

The Interviewer should try to sit nearest the door and possibly at the other side of a desk (See Appendix 1). Interviewers should try to maintain a safe distance from the student without appearing stand-offish.

Other precautions

The Interviewer could let another member of staff know that they are going into a one-on-one meeting and how long it is expected to last. This member of staff should interrupt the meeting after the stated time has passed in an appropriate and agreed fashion.

No one-on-one interview should be conducted out with normal working hours (0845 – 1730 hours) unless absolutely necessary.

Suspending or Terminating a Discussion (Help Desk etc) or Interview

Panic alarm

Schools or Departments with panic alarm systems must have appropriate procedures in place regarding the use of and response to alarms. These procedures should be made known to all staff who may have cause to activate the alarm or be involved in the response.

If a panic alarm is available, it should normally be activated when the staff member feels that the situation may escalate out of their control. However staff members may elect to use the strategies other than the alarm (see below) to suspend or terminate an interview or discussion dependant upon their assessment of the situation.

Schools or Departments considering the procurement of a panic alarm system should contact the Occupational Health and Safety Office before deciding on hardware requirements.

Other techniques:

The member of staff may simply explain to the student (or member of the public) that the interview or discussion is being suspended or terminated and leave the room/reception desk etc. Where a member of staff feels that terminating the interview or discussion might inflame the situation further they can opt to make up an excuse to leave the room/reception desk etc such as:

- fetching another colleague who may be able to assist in the discussion;
- getting a drink for themselves or the student;

- requiring the use of the bathroom
- politely excuse themselves giving no reason

The member of staff may then return to continue the interview or bring a colleague or colleagues to assist with the interview or inform the student that the interview has been terminated.

Individual Students Causing Concern

Where a member of staff feels uncomfortable in a one-on-one with a specific individual student but is not subjected to abusive behaviour this should be reported to the Head of School/Department. Whether or not any disciplinary action is taken, consideration must be given to ensuring that at least two staff members are present during any meeting with this student in future.

Similarly, where a member of staff has repeated contact with a specific individual student which makes them, or other persons, feel uneasy, threatened or intimidated this should be reported to their Head of School/Department. Such contact may include: teaching; general conversations; or inappropriate behaviour when passing in the corridor.

Heads of School/Department who receive such reports should consult the University's "Guidelines for Crises Intervention: students causing concern/students at risk" available as Appendix 1 to the Personal Tutor Handbook or from the Student Services Department. They may also wish to take advice from Student Services, Academic Affairs and/or Human Resources with regards to taking appropriate action and/or offering appropriate support. Where health issues are a suspected cause of the problem CenSA may also be consulted.

Money Demanded with Menaces/Robbery

Should any person demand money or other assets with menaces, staff members should give serious consideration to handing over the articles demanded. If violence is explicitly threatened or a weapon is produced University owned money must be handed over to the robber immediately and without argument. Staff members should attempt to observe as much detail as possible during the incident in order to assist the police with their enquiries.

No member of staff should attempt to engage in physical or verbal confrontation with anyone.

Dealing with Physical Violence

The above guidance is indented to prevent a situation escalating to physical violence. Where a member of staff suspects that violence might ensue they should suspend or terminate the discussion or interview immediately by the above noted means. However, should a member of staff be physically assaulted:

- The member of staff should attempt to get away from the attacker at the first available opportunity, preferably into another area where there are other people.
- The member of staff should attempt to push the panic button, if available and/or make as much noise as possible and shout for help.
- The member of staff is permitted by law to use reasonable force to defend them self. This should be a last resort.

Reporting of Incidents

Internal reporting of aggressive behaviour

Any incidents where the Interviewer feels threatened or is assaulted in any way must be reported to Line Management. In addition, they should be reported to the Occupational Health and Safety Office via the Accident/Incident Report Form or immediately by telephone depending on the severity of the incident.

The Head of School/Department or nominee must also be informed (possibly via a copy of the RGU Accident/Incident Report Form) and will pursue disciplinary action against those involved if their behaviour warrants it.

Reporting to the Police

If a serious incident is in progress or has occurred, the police must be telephoned immediately. The Ancillary Services Manager, Estates and Property Services (ext 3305) and the OHS Office must also be informed. Such incidents may include:

- Assault
- Theft
- Criminal damage
- A perceived risk that a person presents an immediate danger to them self and/or others

All staff are requested to cooperate fully with investigations by the police concerning incidents on University premises.

Where an assault has taken place, the University recommends that the police are asked to press charges. However, the final decision as to whether charges are pressed will rest with the injured party or the police.

A student may be subject to disciplinary action by the University regardless of any ongoing police investigation or whether police charges have been dropped. (see Academic regulation A3 Section 6 Disciplinary Procedure for Non-Academic Misconduct).

Theft of and Criminal Damage to University Property

If University property has been damaged or stolen by criminal action or intent, the Financial Services Department and police should be informed immediately. The appropriate School or Department will then submit a written report to the Financial Services Department detailing the incident and loss for insurance purposes.

Post Incident Care

Following an incident, Line Management should ensure that the staff involved are aware of the University's confidential employee helpline. Depending on the severity of the incident, Managers may wish to contact the Human Resources Department for guidance on any other support necessary.

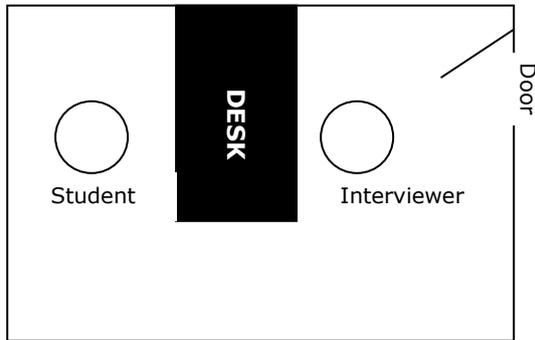
Any students adversely affected by the incident should be made aware that they can discuss any issues with their Personal Tutor and that the University's Counselling and Wellbeing Centre is also available to them.

Occupational Health and Safety Office
The Robert Gordon University
July 2006

Appendix 1: Room Set-up Examples

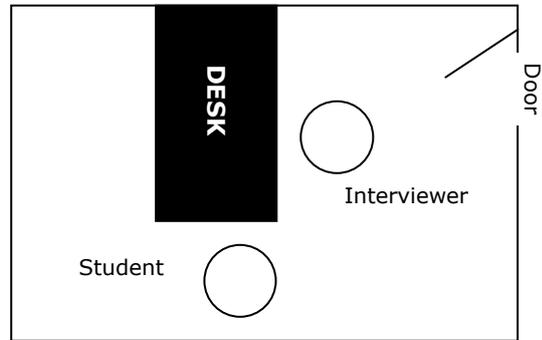
Interview room (for potentially inflammatory circumstances)

✓ Suggested



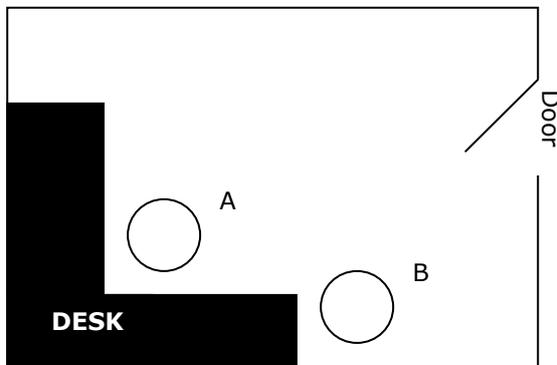
The Interviewer is nearest the door and the student is on the other side of the desk.

✗ Not Suggested

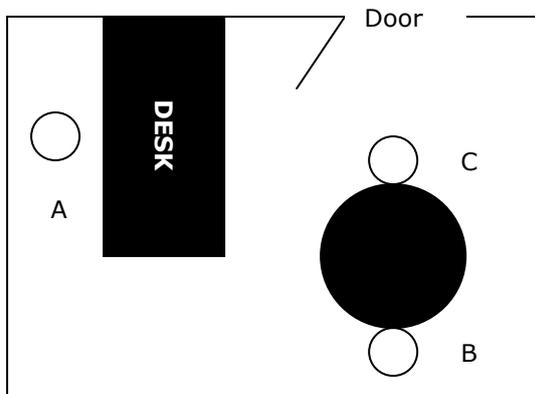


The Student is too close to the Interviewer and could theoretically make physical contact if the Interviewer tries to terminate the interview and leave.

One-on-one in office



Chair A is the Interviewer's normal chair. Chair B is spare. Should a student come to the office for a meeting, the Interviewer should stand up, greet the student and subtly direct the student to Chair A. The interviewer then sits in Chair B nearest the door. Chair B may be repositioned if necessary.



Chair A is the Interviewer's normal chair. Chair B and C are round a table. Should a student come to the office for an interview, the Interviewer should stand up, greet the student and subtly direct the student to Chair B. The interviewer then sits in Chair C nearest the door.