



Guidelines on sickness absences

1. The University and sickness absences

The University of Copenhagen supports employees who are affected by personal crisis, sickness or reduced ability to work and is prepared to work actively to prevent sickness absences due to workplace issues. The University will whenever possible prevent an employee having to leave the labour market because of sickness or reduced ability to work. Local managers are required to work with employees to prevent sickness. The University uses quarterly reports to monitor overall sickness absences.

It is important for the dialogue in the workplace about the working environment and occupational disease to be open and trusting. Follow up in the event of absence due to frequent or long-term sickness absences is done by way of dialogue and cooperation with the employees concerned.

Individual workplaces are required to lay down administrative procedures for reporting sickness and to inform all employees of these.

2. Prevention of work-related absence

It is important to work constantly to prevent sickness absences. The most significant efforts should be made locally by creating workplaces in which employees enjoy good physical and mental working environments.

Every third year, the University holds mandatory workplace assessments which also measure employee satisfaction and mental health. As part of workplace assessments, absence due to sickness is measured specifically and any correlation between sickness absences and employee satisfaction and mental health is registered. The collaboration committee is responsible for following up on mental working environment problems and also for following up on other workplace assessment issues.

3. Legal basis

For some years, the University has been focusing on sickness absences and has introduced sickness absences conversations, etc. In so doing, the University complies with the legislative requirement for all state workplaces to address absence due to sickness and to draw up a sickness absences policy¹. An amendment to the Sickness Benefits Act in 2009 means that in future, the University is required to hold absence conversations in the fourth week of sickness, to notify sick employees' local authority of various issues and to draw up retention plans where relevant.

¹ See for example the Collaboration Secretariat's report: Sickness absences - a joint challenge. 2009.

4. Individual employees and sickness absences

Specific follow-up associated with sickness absences should reflect a commitment to the sick employee and a wish to rectify workplace problems and to take remedial action so that the employee can return to work as quickly and with as much understanding as possible..

4.1 Absence/contact conversations

Absence/contact conversations are intended to establish dialogue between the work place and the employee on solving problems that could be associated with sickness absences. It should be emphasized that the employer cannot ask to be notified of the nature of sickness but only about any reduction in capacity and the expected duration of sickness. Conversations are aimed at reducing sickness absences at the University and preventing employees from having to leave the labour market due to illness. It is important that conversations are held in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

4.1.1 Absence conversations - frequent sickness absences

An employee who has had several short periods of absence (a total of ten days' sickness absences or four incidents of sickness within the past six months) will normally be called in for an absence conversation and at least one weeks' notice of this will be given in writing. If the working environment is thought to be a contributory factor for sickness absences, the manager and employee will jointly draw up an action plan for a better physical and mental working environment for the employee concerned with the aim of reducing sickness absences. A follow-up conversation would normally also be arranged.

4.1.2 Contact conversations for long-term sickness absences

When employees have been ill for 2-3 consecutive weeks, they will be called in for a conversation. The conversation is aimed at ensuring employees' return to work as quickly as, and in the best way, possible - and maybe with a partial return to work. The conversation would normally be held within four weeks of the first day of illness. In accordance with 4.1.3, employees are given at least one week's written notice of the conversation. Secs 4.1.3 and 10 set forth the involvement of employee representatives.

If employees are prevented by illness from attending the conversation at the proposed time/date, they should report this as quickly as possible so that a new meeting can be arranged.

If because of illness or practical considerations it is not possible to hold the conversation at the workplace, it can be done by telephone. The manager should be notified if the employee wishes a union representative to be included in a conference call.

For employees suffering from chronic and/or long-term illness and who have notified their manager about this on their own initiative, arrangements can be made with their manager for absence conversations to be specially arranged to fit in with any treatments. However, the legislative requirement for conversations to have been held within four weeks of the first day of illness should normally be complied with.

The manager and sick employee should agree how co-workers should be informed about sickness absences and any other reorganisation of duties, etc.

4.1.3 Notice of absence conversation

At least one week's written notice of an absence conversation will be provided and unless otherwise arranged, the line manager is responsible for arranging this. When employees are called in for a conversation, they should be notified of the following:

- Why they are being called in for the conversation (the background and agenda for the meeting)
- That the conversation is confidential and that minutes of the conversation will be taken
- That the conversation can be held by telephone if it cannot be held at work because of illness or practical considerations
- Who will be participating in the conversation, including the fact that employees have the right to be accompanied by an observer during the conversation, e.g. their union representative
- That as an employee, they are not required to notify what is wrong with them
- That it could be that an option statement and/or retention plan may have to be drawn up as part of the conversation
- The duration of absence by way of a review of registered absence dates.

When being notified of an absence conversation, employees are to be informed that a copy of the notice is being sent to their union representative. Employees not wishing this to be done should notify this within three working days.

Employees called in for an absence conversation may be accompanied by an observer, for example a union representative.

While ill, University employees may at any time request an absence conversation.

4.2 Partial sickness absences

Health problems can mean that for a while, employees may find it difficult to fully manage their workload. There is the option of being granted partial sickness absences for a period rather than taking full sickness absences.

The workplace and employee can arrange a gradual return to work, with duties being adjusted in line with what he/she can manage. The arrangement could for example be for how many hours a day or week the employee should work, how quickly the number of hours should be increased and the length of the period over which this should be done.

The same procedure for conversations, etc., should be observed for partial sickness absences as for full time sickness absences.

The manager and the sick employee should agree how co-workers should be informed about sickness absences and any other reorganisation of duties, etc.

5. Option statement

In October 2009, a new option statement replaced the "medical certificate of incapacity" used previously when reporting sickness. It is still possible to ask the doctor to certify that sickness is the reason for absence and the duration of the sickness. The option statement focuses on the options open to the sick person for continuing to work while ill. The aim is to cut the number of people off sick from totally dropping out of the labour market. The option

statement is split into two parts, with one part for completion by the manager and employee and the other for completion by the employee's doctor. Option statement fees are borne by the workplace.

An option statement² is used in instances when following a conversation with the employee, the manager is in doubt about how to deal with the employee's health issues and how best to enable the employee to return fully or partially to work. The manager and employee jointly complete their parts of the option statement during the absence conversation. The statement should make it clear if the manager and employee have differing points of view. The employee should then discuss the statement with his/her doctor who should then complete the statement.

The manager will have set a deadline for the option statement to be returned. The part of the statement completed by the manager /employee consists of a description of the employee's reduction in capacity, the duties accepted and any remedial issues that have been agreed upon. The doctor's part of the statement gives an assessment of this description, their proposal for remedial initiatives and the expected duration of the period during which duties should be modified or whether absence from work is wholly or partially required. A doctor's assessment should always be accepted even though it might differ what has been agreed between the manager and employee.

The manager can decide to use option statements at any time during the course of an illness. The statement can also be used in the event of frequent sickness absences. The University therefore encourages the use of option statements as a retention tool when felt appropriate.

6. Retention plan

As part of an absence /contact conversation, the manager and employee usually draw up a specific retention plan for the quickest way the employee can fully or partially return to work. This will vary according to the circumstances, including the health options of the individual and his/her duties at work. For example, there could be agreement on the following:

- A temporary or permanent reduction in hours of duty
- Job rotation/ internal change of duties
- Reorganised workplace
- Reassignment to other duties
- Partial sickness absences
- Sec. 56 agreement for the chronically sick with reimbursement from the first day of illness
- Transfer to flexible working³
- Retraining

It is essential for the manager and the employee to take joint responsibility for decisions and solutions and for the retention plan to reflect their shared expectations.

² Option Statement (In Danish): <http://star.dk/da/Indsatser-og-ordninger/Sygefravaer/Sygefravaersguide-til-arbejdsgivere/Hvordan-udfyldes-mulighedserklaering.aspx>

³ As per procedures for switching to flexible working

Employees can decide to include a union representative or an adviser to assist with possible solutions/agreements.

If employees wish for a retention plan and their manager does not feel that one is needed, reasons for this should be given to them.

7. Role of managers and employees

Managers are responsible for establishing a healthy working environment that helps prevent work-related sickness absences. Managers are responsible for proper procedures for reporting sickness and for registering sickness absences and they are required to monitor unit sickness absences figures and to react quickly in the face of inappropriate trends. Employees and managers should jointly endeavour to alleviate problems when they are identified, which would include high levels of sickness absences in the workplace.

The University wishes to support employees who are affected by sickness or crisis and will work with employees to solve any problems so caused. Employees are expected to be proactive in dialogue about this in the workplace. This would include attending absence conversations since these are a significant precondition for the University's retention options.

8. Role of co-workers

Sickness absences does not just involve sick employees but also their co-workers. Everyone is expected to show understanding for co-workers who are wholly or partially affected by long-term sickness absences, while they are ill and when they return to work again.

Managers are responsible for ensuring that co-workers show their understanding for the situation of the person who is off sick and that they are aware of arrangements made with respect to return to work, to attending to the duties of the sick employee and the like.

9. Role of the Collaboration Committee

The collaboration committee is responsible for systematic follow-up on workplace assessments and is required to routinely discuss occupational health and sickness absences statistics and to draw up specific action plans for the mental working environment. Any initiatives and input should be coordinated with the occupational health and safety council and the occupational health and safety organisation at the University.

Every quarter, the General Collaboration Committee considers the overall statistics for sickness absences at the University.

10. Role of union representatives

The University's union representatives play an active part in sickness prevention and health so as to create the framework for a healthy workplace. Their duties include the reduction of sickness absences in places where it is thought to be too high.

Union representatives play an important part in instances of sickness absences and they are involved as part of specific activities for alleviating workplace problems.

When being notified of an absence conversation, employees are to be informed that a copy of the notice is being sent to their union representative. Employees not wishing this to be done should notify this within three working days.

11. Validity and termination

The guidelines take effect on adoption by the General Collaboration Committee, HSU.

Termination is required to comply with the rules in the collaboration committee's circular according to which either of the parties may give three months notice of termination of the established guidelines. Before termination, the collaboration committee shall endeavour to amend the present guidelines so as to make them satisfactory for the parties in the collaboration committee.

Replaces the guidelines adopted on 10 December 2008.

Considered and adopted at the HSU meeting on 9 December 2009.



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