

Birkbeck – University of London

Department of Biological Sciences

POLICY ON ¹LONE AND/OR UNSUPERVISED WORKING IN LABORATORIES

1 GENERAL POLICY

- 1.1 Birkbeck has a duty under the Health and Safety at Work Act (1974) to ensure safe access and egress from its buildings for employees and others at all times.
- 1.2 Birkbeck has a duty under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (1999) to carry out risk assessments of the activities conducted on its premises and to control any risks to health and safety identified during the risk assessments.
- 1.3 It is the responsibility of Heads of School/Department to ensure that ²competent persons, generally project supervisors or lab managers, carry out the necessary risk assessments pertaining to activities within their areas of responsibility and to ensure that all control measures necessary to minimise identified risks are implemented.
- 1.4 The Department of Biological Sciences recognises that there will be a desire or requirement for staff and postgraduate students to work late and/or alone in its buildings from time to time or indeed regularly in some cases.
- 1.5 Bearing in mind the duties and responsibilities outlined in the paragraphs above, it shall be departmental policy that no late and/or lone working is allowed to take place unless a suitable and satisfactory risk assessment has been carried out as required by 1.3 above which shows that a system of controls to ensure the adequate safety of staff and students is in place – and is recorded in writing on a COSHH/risk assessment form. The risk assessment should take into account that a lone worker is more vulnerable when the unexpected happens.

2 CATEGORIES OF LATE AND/OR LONE WORKING

- 2.1 There are three categories of lone and/or unsupervised working within Biological Sciences laboratories:

¹ Lone working is defined as working when no other person is within earshot/line of sight. Although lone working is more likely outside the main hours of lab operation (say 09.00–18.00), it is also a possible situation during such hours e.g. during a seminar that others are attending or during lunchtime.

² Competence is a combination of relevant: training, qualifications, general and specific experience, local knowledge and maturity. The latter is not simply a matter of age (young persons are more prone to risk taking than their elders) but also of character. For instance has the individual been known to take risks or cut corners?

2.1.1 Work where there is a risk of sudden serious injury, ill health or death should a procedure go accidentally wrong or if safety procedures are not followed. **Such work should never be undertaken alone.** For example – open beam work in X-ray Crystallography³, work with explosive or highly flammable substances, highly toxic materials, live high voltage equipment, etc. A second person who knows what specific action to take should an accident occur will be required at all times.

2.1.2 Work where there is a risk of serious injury, ill health or death in due course or serious damage to expensive equipment should a procedure go accidentally wrong or if safety procedures are not followed. Examples are: work with toxins, carcinogens, etc. Such work can be carried out in a lone and unsupervised situation by very competent staff or by less experienced staff if adequately supervised by a very competent member of staff. The level of supervision to be exercised can be decreased as the person under supervision increases in competence. Accordingly, supervision might move from being (i) directly beside the person to (ii) being present in the lab and checking from time to time to (iii) being within the department and available to provide guidance on request and finally to (iv) unsupervised working. However, it may still be considered that the work can only be carried out when other workers – though possibly not engaged in the same project - are present in the lab in case first aid or other emergency assistance is required.

The decision on which level of supervision is required and lone working is allowed should be taken by the more competent member of staff in conjunction with the lab manager and the person under supervision. As degrees of supervision and lone working are relaxed this should be noted on project's COSHH/risk assessment form.

2.1.3 Work that has been risk assessed and deemed as being low risk due to the type of work itself i.e. the processes, materials or equipment being used would pose only a risk of relatively minor injury or ill health e.g. cuts from broken glassware, if an accident occurred or procedures were not followed. Such work can be carried out with similar levels of lone working and supervision as set out in 2.1.2 though moving along the scale of competence might proceed at a faster pace. As degrees of supervision and lone working are relaxed this should be noted on the COSHH/risk assessment form for the project.

3.0 OTHER LONE WORKING

3.1. Work or activity that is of a very low risk nature, for example work in a computing or office environment. Such work may be carried out alone at any time as long as the individual is known to be aware of the fire

³ i.e. where there is a risk of contact with an open X-ray beam during alignment – a process only undertaken by a very restricted number of authorised staff. All other X-ray Crystallography work in Biological Sciences falls into category 2.1.2.

procedures to be followed within the particular building. This will entail visiting workers having to be made aware of those procedures by a competent member of Birkbeck staff – and this must be recorded as having been delivered.

- 3.2 In addition, a person with a disability that might impair their recognition of the fire alarm or their response to it should not work alone in any circumstance until a Personal Emergency Evacuation Plan (PEEP) has been drawn up with them. The College Health and Safety Officer can advise on drawing up PEEPs.

4. USEFUL LINKS

- 4.1 Birkbeck COSHH form <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/so/forms/COSHH>
- 4.2 Risk assessment guidance <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/so/guidance/RISK>
- 4.3 Fire Evacuation information for students and visitors.
<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/so/guidance/fireinfo/STUDENTFIRE>