

# Guide to Best Practice in Managing the effects of natural disasters

in ELICOS

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# Guide to Best Practice in Disaster Management in ELICOS



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## Introduction

English Australia wishes to support its members in all areas of ELICOS operation to achieve high levels of professional practice and to this end periodically develops Guides to Best Practice in ELICOS on a range of issues relevant to ELICOS delivery. Sharing best practice in ELICOS leads to improved educational outcomes for all students and enhances Australia's reputation as an ELT provider in the international market. Staff at English Australia member colleges report that the Guides developed by the English Australia secretariat are a highly valued member service.

Australia is a land of extremes. In the past few years there have been catastrophic bush fires, cyclones and floods in many Australian states that have required swift decisions to be made in order to deal with agitated students and staff en masse and possibly to close a college and/or relocate people.

At the beginning of 2011 a number of English Australia member colleges were affected, directly and indirectly, by natural disasters in Australia and overseas. Cyclones and floods in Queensland and Victoria and earthquakes in Japan and New Zealand had the potential to cause considerable disruption to student learning as well as considerable distress to students, staff and their communities. In order to minimise this disruption and distress it was essential for colleges to respond calmly, competently and compassionately and many rose to this challenge admirably.

Through the experience of these events member college staff developed skills and expertise in dealing with such situations which can be shared with staff at all member colleges to minimise negative effects of future events.

The aim of this Guide is to outline key features of **best practice in managing the effects of natural disasters** used by staff at English Australia colleges, in particular principal administrators responsible for budget decisions, and academic managers responsible for staff and student safety.

English Australia would like to thank the members of the project Working Group who made time to share their good practice, particularly Jon Fawcett, the Education Director of Navitas English, whose presentation at the 2011 English Australia Conference in Adelaide formed the basis of this Guide. Jon, together with Steve Knussen, Director of Operations at Kaplan International Colleges, provided the case studies at the end of the Guide which incorporate moving accounts of their experiences that show how forward planning, clear thinking and a calm response meant that hundreds of students and staff were kept safe and well-informed throughout and following very challenging times.

Sue Blundell  
Executive Director  
English Australia  
July 2012

## Scope

The resource aims to help colleges respond to unforeseen situations where large numbers of students or staff are threatened with physical harm and in order to ensure their safety a decision to send students and staff home or even close a college may need to be made.

The resource covers areas such as:

- regulatory requirements and duty of care
- organisational procedures
- communicating with authorities
- communicating with students, staff and other 'stakeholders'
- closing a college
- after the event
- pragmatic issues – staff pay, student time in classes

The resource includes several case studies outlining specific situations where a college has responded to disaster in a particularly successful way.

## Key features of best practice in disaster management

Colleges demonstrating best practice in managing natural disasters to minimise negative effects on students, staff and property evidence the following:

1. **Commitment by principal administrators** to ensure the college has appropriate policies, procedures and sufficient financial and human resources to prepare for and deal with natural disasters.
2. Appropriate **risk analysis** in the context of the operation of the college: the number of students and staff and the location.
3. Thorough **planning** to ensure staff and students are ready to respond to a natural disaster. Key personnel are allocated clear responsibilities.
4. Effective **communication with external bodies** to ensure the college receives up to date and accurate information about the disaster situation.
5. **Communication with staff and students** that is accessible and clear so that all know what to do as the disaster unfolds.
6. Emotional and material **support and understanding** to help people deal with the aftermath of the disaster.
7. **Assessment and evaluation** of disaster situations to inform continuous improvement of processes and policies.

## Types of disaster

There is a wide range of disasters that can befall an ELICOS college, however this resource was written to help staff at English Australia member colleges deal with natural disasters such as floods, cyclones, large-scale bushfires and earthquakes.

## Regulatory requirements

### Duty of Care

As a business providing a service to people, your organisation has a Duty of Care to those people learning at and working for the organisation (the 'responsible party') and otherwise likely to be affected by the organisation's activities. Remaining mindful of Duty of Care considerations provides a helpful context for both the content of this Guide and of decision-making more generally.

While best defined in context by legal professionals, in general business 'the duty of care addresses the attentiveness and prudence of managers in performing their decision-making and supervisory functions'. Organisations providing education to international students have the responsibility to act so as to reduce the risk of harm, where that is foreseeable, and to make sure there is minimal connection between the responsible party's actions (or lack of them) and any harm that might be suffered. Any liability imposed on the responsible party must be fair and reasonable.

A breach of Duty of Care occurs when the conduct of the responsible party, tested against the standard of a 'reasonable' party, is found wanting. This standard is assessed in the context of a profession or industry.

It is highly advisable to seek legal advice to ensure that college policies and procedures are likely to be found 'reasonable'.

### Attendance

If comments as to the nature of the absence are noted against absences recorded in the Student Management System then these can be referred to in the event of internal and external appeals, as well as during any subsequent reporting via PRISMS.

In the event of centre closure due to threatened or actual natural disasters, it is highly unlikely that regulatory authorities would view non-delivery of part of a course as Provider Default. This notwithstanding, consumer and other legislation may require that missed lessons be made up or reimbursed.

## Organisational procedures

In the overall context of pro-active, structured risk management every college, regardless of size or location, considers and sets out a clear approach to and procedure for disaster management.

Colleges address the following in their procedures:

- critical incident and risk management policies and procedures include natural disasters within their scope;
- key roles and responsibilities are allocated (see below);
- appropriate management training is arranged so that in the event of a natural disaster decision-makers and frontline managers are already conversant with protocols;
- response training is undertaken eg to first aid officers and fire wardens, and procedures for the evacuation of disabled staff/students/visitors are developed and posted;
- students and staff receive appropriate induction in procedures (for guidelines on how to select and present information to students see English Australia Guide to Best Practice in Providing Student Support Services).

Information on what students need to do in the event of an emergency is available in a form easily accessible to all students ie in different languages or in clear, simple English with culturally recognisable diagrams, if used. Statutory authorities may provide this material, however it may require re-writing into a form that students can understand. Communication and information templates are best prepared in advance, and stored accessibly alongside authoritative documentation such as Cyclone Kit lists, Flood Zone maps, Evacuation routes and centres, etc.

The disaster management procedure is evaluated and updated regularly to ensure that risk is managed effectively, particularly following response to a natural disaster.

### Key responsibilities

Within the overall procedure certain key roles are allocated and disseminated, and guidance /training in decision-making provided. Personnel are clearly identified with responsibility for:

- identification of relevant local authorities and how to access emergency information & communications (see separate section);
- communication with staff, students and other stakeholders (see separate section);
- communication with organisational security (if part of a larger organisation);
- students under the age of 18;
- a committee for operational emergency management
- making the decision for college closure;
- ensuring adequate preparation eg maintenance of equipment etc, evacuation notices, response training;
- preparation of a critical incident report, if required
- evaluating any response to a disaster and implementing continuous improvement.

## Communication

College management need to be able to get and relay information reliably and effectively from and to a number of people. College management consider how they will keep people informed on the current situation and also receive information from stakeholders.

### Where can you get information about the disaster?

As well as the national Bureau of Meteorology with its official Weather Warnings, state and/or local area authorities are key to providing accurate and authoritative information needed to make informed decisions.

These authorities include:

- police and fire authorities;
- state/territory-level emergency services:
  - Australian Council of State Emergency Services
  - Australian Capital Territory State Emergency Service
  - New South Wales State Emergency Service
  - Northern Territory Emergency Service
  - Queensland State Emergency Service
  - South Australia State Emergency Service
  - Tasmania State Emergency Service
  - Victoria State Emergency Service
  - Western Australia State Emergency Service
- local authority levels of the above, such as the Cairns Disaster Coordination Centre;
- public transport authorities;
- local utilities providers – electricity, gas, water;
- building/premises managers;
- local media.

Authorities may need to be updated regularly on the situation in colleges and ideally, colleges identify and develop communication with the key authorities in their area. Colleges appoint someone with responsibility to seek them out, identify a liaison and provide updates on the status of the college.

### How do authorities communicate?

As well as identifying the authorities, identifying their preferred communication channels in advance is essential.

Authorities increasingly use **Twitter** feeds and **Facebook** posts to provide rolling updates and advice. Frequently these give access to authoritative information and directives *ahead of* more traditional channels, including **web page updates** or **media conferences** that may be carried live by **local radio and TV**. They are also a rich source of links to relevant related information and resources. If set up in advance, specific disaster-preparedness Facebook and Twitter accounts are invaluable ways of

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aggregating these channels into easy to monitor information streams. A Facebook account which 'Likes' authorities' pages, and a Twitter account which follows authorities' feeds provide two of the richest and most valuable sources of up-to-date authoritative information available. In turn, looking at who authorities 'Like' and follow is an excellent way of identifying further sources of information.

## How will *you* communicate?

College management identify who they need to communicate with and then set up a communication strategy to cover these groups. Groups may include:

- students;
- staff;
- homestay hosts;
- students' families and guardians;
- agents;
- embassies and consulates;
- their own larger organisation (if relevant).

College management may also be approached by the media for comment on the situation and a media response strategy can be formulated for the person nominated to deal with this type of communication.

College management considers the most effective way to communicate with stakeholders: this will depend on individual preference as well as available technology.

Staff and students will need to do their own communication with friends and family and can be assisted in preparing for this in information provided during induction or in the lead-up to a disaster.

In an emergency crucial information may be disseminated in a number of ways and colleges are confident in using as many of the following as possible to make sure they're fully informed:

- Facebook posts
- Twitter feeds
- mass email and SMS to student accounts
- internet – updates to specific disaster-related websites
- answer phone messages.

Colleges who have experienced disasters have found that **mass SMS and social media** are the most reliable medium of communication, especially with students: mobile/smart phones are ubiquitous and people may not have access to computers to access emails or landlines for phone calls. State authorities and national information services provide extensive information via Twitter.

Colleges should consider becoming accustomed to using social media now as they will only grow in type and application.

As a priority, colleges set up or adapt services which enable effective use of mass SMS and bulk email for targetted student and other groups as this may take some time and/or require higher level authorisation within the organisation.

## Ensuring your communication channels stay open

In a natural disaster it is possible that power may be lost and/or physical access to a centre not possible for extended periods. It is therefore imperative that communication channels and access to centre data do not depend on access to centre hardware which will fail in the absence of power. UPS back up is unlikely to provide secondary power for long enough to manage a significant event.

In the event of a catastrophic disaster where fatalities may have occurred, the immediate priority has to be checking whether all staff and students are safe, which is particularly challenging when communications and power are likely to be down.

Colleges ensure they have mitigation strategies for consideration ahead of such an event which may include:

- use of off-site or cloud back up servers
- reliance on sister-centre or head office equipment
- remote access to servers, student management systems and email
- telephone call-forwarding and re-routing.

## Closing the college

When things get very serious college closure must be considered. This is a difficult decision to make but the following factors indicate this is necessary (in order of imperative):

- there is a threat to the physical integrity of the building and a probability that all or part of it may suffer damage that will lead to physical harm of those inside or near it;
- the power or water supply is not guaranteed;
- there is a probability that public transport may shut down, and staff and students may not be able to get home if they don't leave immediately;
- the homes of staff and students are at risk and they may be unable to return if they don't leave immediately;
- there is advice from authorities to close;
- authorities direct the college to close, in which case the decision is out of your hands.

As with any risk analysis the key question for the decision-maker is 'What is the risk to staff and students if I DON'T close the college?'

If a college's premises become inaccessible because of the event a **temporary office** needs to be opened in order to enable students to have face-to-face contact with staff. This can be an invaluable source of information as well as comfort at a difficult time (see Case Study 2).

## After the event

### People

Once the disaster has passed and the college has re-opened or a temporary office/alternative location set up, there is still important support that may need to be offered to staff and students who may be traumatised to varying degrees from having their lives disrupted or threatened to grieving for lost homes and loved ones.

People need to talk about the experience, to debrief together with space to express their emotions, to get a sense that they were not alone in the experience. In extreme cases staff and students may require significant psychological counselling. Support for these can be accessed from:

- trained counsellors on staff;
- staff experienced in counselling;
- fee-for-service private providers/grief counsellors<sup>1</sup>;
- community service organisations;
- state mental health services.

Colleges keep up-to-date contact details of these providers, which can be managed by an identified staff member.

ISANA has prepared a [critical incident kit](#) for helping college staff deal with the unthinkable event of a staff or student fatality.

### Processes

To ensure effective future management of individuals and resources colleges take time to reflect on the response to the event and to enhance / change procedures as part of continuous improvement, getting feedback from all stakeholders including external authorities.

A critical incident report may be required by government institutions and larger organisations to ensure that procedures were followed and lessons learnt.

Information may need to be entered on individual student files.

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<sup>1</sup> These may be in short supply if the disaster was widespread so colleges may need to rely on their staff

## The bottom line

Provider obligations to students and staff following college closure are complex. General points for consideration have been provided below but **individual colleges will need to seek legal advice to determine their options**. Colleges with Enterprise Agreements will have specific conditions relating to salaries and leave.

### Student tuition

The college is aware of its obligations regarding compensating students for missed classes and these are expressly set out in the students' enrolment contract. Classes may be made up in a number of ways, and staff and students are aware of this.

Caution: many enrolment forms include a *force majeure* clause exempting the provider from providing services if prevented from doing so by a chance occurrence or an unavoidable accident. Although a college may not be obliged to provide the services during the situation it is usually obliged to compensate for this lack of service in some way.

### Staff salaries

This is a sensitive area. Managers will be dealing with staff who may be in stressful situations dealing with damage to their property or that of their neighbours, friends or family, or worse injury or death. Management of staff expectations is important and it is best practice to be explicit with staff, outlining conditions clearly in their contracts of employment or enterprise agreement. Colleges in areas prone to disaster should take particular care to ensure their staff are made aware of salary conditions in a sensitive and appropriate way, with due consideration given to flexibility and support which may build loyalty and good will over the longer term.

Where a centre is temporarily closed down, ongoing and fixed-term teaching staff may be required to take annual leave, depending on their contract and/or any enterprise agreement. Note that the Educational Services (Post-Secondary Education) Award 2010 includes as Clause 25.5:

*An employer may specify up to two close-down periods each year, during which the employer may require an employee to take annual leave subject to the requirement that the employee is given notices as soon as practicable of the employer's intention to close down.*

It is possible that a closedown caused by a disaster may be seen as falling within this clause.

There may be provision that, should an organisation's productive capacity be affected such that employees cannot usefully be employed, then stand-downs without pay can be considered. There must be a specific provision, either contractual or statutory, which would authorise an employer to withhold payment in such circumstances. If on the other hand teachers receive pay during a closedown, they are not being stood down in the technical sense.

On return of business operations **teachers** (other than those employed on casual contracts) might be asked to make up any teaching commitments they would have had during the closedown period, on the basis that this will be without any additional pay.

In many cases **non-teaching staff** may more readily work from home or another business location, or if unable to work from any location may take either paid leave (where available) or be stood down without pay, provided that this is supported by either their contractual or statutory obligations.

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The requirement to pay **casual staff** who do not work over a closedown period this will depend on the college Enterprise Agreement.

## Case studies

### Navitas' response to Cyclone Yasi, Cairns, January 2011

Navitas English Cairns college staff identified the Bureau of Meteorology Cyclone Warning through local media well ahead of the eventual landfall. When it became clear that a significant natural disaster in the immediate area was likely, with considerable disruption to students and staff, a crisis management group (CMG) was established, with the General Manager as Chair joined by representatives from the Cairns college, Navitas national operation management and marketing. Authorities' communication channels such as the Queensland Police Service (QPS) Twitter feed (used extensively during the prior Brisbane floods) and SES Facebook page were re-identified as the source of useful updates and responsibility for monitoring them assigned.

In classes, Cairns Disaster Coordination Centre and Queensland SES-endorsed information was distributed to students, including a Cyclone Emergency Kit list, what to do before during and after a cyclone, and Cyclone Evacuation Centre details. Teachers discussed and explored this information with their students in class, keeping the focus on calmly preparing for the worst while hoping for the best.

Centrally, the CMG prepared a one-page communication channel handout including the details of the local Cairns Disaster Management cyclone emergency information webpage and the Navitas English Twitter feed and Facebook page along with other useful websites and emergency telephone numbers. As the communication handouts were distributed, we updated student contact details, checking mobile phone numbers, emails and addresses against the student database.

Based on Queensland Police and SES advice, a decision was taken to close the centre during the business day. Students were again reassured, reminded of necessary preparations and re-advised of how to stay in touch as events took their course. Staff were sent home. Agents, homestay and other stakeholders were advised of the closure using customised bulk email, followed up with telephone calls from Head Office staff.

*A decision was taken to close the centre during the business day. Students were again reassured, reminded of necessary preparations and re-advised of how to stay in touch.*

Over the following days the CMG met as often as hourly, preparing and authorising updated communications as decisions were made and new information came to hand. As it became evident that the police were managing evacuations of areas of the city to shelters, staff outside Cairns telephoned every student living independently to assess the situation at their accommodation and ensure that the risks were being taken seriously.

As the weather normalised after the cyclone's passage to the south, the CMG considered when to reopen the centre. Staff were contacted to assess how they were positioned to return to work, and where damage to property or the need to care for friends and family took priority, special dispensation to release leave entitlements was exercised.

Once back at college, counselling sessions and other support were arranged for students and staff. Some students moved to alternative accommodation while their homestay families were taking care of more extensive damage.

In a central review, the CMG codified lessons learned into a revision of the organisation's critical incident framework. Within weeks, the improved approach was deployed as Cyclone Carlos bore down on Darwin.

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For specific questions on issues in this case study, English Australia member college staff are welcome to contact Jon Fawcett, Education Director, Navitas English via [jon.fawcett@navitas.com](mailto:jon.fawcett@navitas.com).

## Kaplan International Colleges' response to the Christchurch earthquake, New Zealand, February 2011

The magnitude 6.3 earthquake that struck Christchurch at 12.51pm on Tuesday 22 February, killed 185 people and caused extensive damage to the city, especially in the city centre and eastern suburbs. A previous earthquake in September 2010 had caused some damage to the city and had resulted in the temporary closure of the Kaplan college there, which had led to the development of a procedure in the event of a further quake. However, it would be fair to say that no resident of Christchurch was prepared for the magnitude of the February earthquake and the extent of the devastation it brought to the city.

On February 22, Kaplan had 245 students enrolled, and as the earthquake struck after lunch, the majority were in class at the time, although fortunately a 50-strong study tour were on an excursion outside the city. Earthquake evacuation drills had become routine for staff and students since September, and students were led to the assembly point in a nearby park.



*The Kaplan building immediately after the earthquake*



*The street outside Kaplan building immediately after the earthquake*

Power and telecommunications were immediately affected, and staff in the regional head office, located in Sydney, were unable to contact their colleagues on the ground. However, it became clear from media reports that fatalities had occurred, so the Sydney management decided that the first priority was to account for every student and staff member, and check on their well-being.

A simple message in basic English was sent out through group emails and SMSs requesting all students to email/text back their full name, and whether they were safe or needed help. Recent college closures caused by the September earthquake, the Brisbane floods and the Cairns cyclone had taught us the importance of constantly maintaining accurate student contact details. Further messages were sent out to Kaplan's staff and network of homestay families. Messages were also posted on Facebook, and all students who contacted us were requested to check the school page regularly for updates.

All replies from students were recorded, including information as to their whereabouts, whether their accommodation had been affected, and whether they were planning to leave the city. Second-

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hand accounts of a student's well-being were recorded but not replied upon, and staff continued attempting to make contact with a student until they had responded in person.

Regular updates were sent out to Kaplan's overseas sales staff throughout the day, as well as to a list of those agents who had been identified as having students in the college at the time.

Understandably, we had to field a large number of requests for information from worried family members who had not heard from their loved ones.

As power and communications were gradually restored to various parts of the city in the hours afterwards, more and more students contacted Kaplan to inform us they were safe, and by the following morning, all but 13 had been accounted for. The final student made contact with Kaplan on Wednesday evening, 30 hours after the earthquake.

As more students became accounted for, attention focused on offering support and counselling, as well as practical measures such as ensuring they had somewhere safe to stay. The two residences that Kaplan used were both in the city centre, which had been cordoned off, leaving them homeless and without access to their possessions. Kaplan staff and homestays rallied round to provide temporary shelter, with one homestay family taking in six 'refugees' from a city centre hostel.

It became apparent that the city centre would be closed for a considerable time, so a decision was made to open a temporary office in a less affected suburb, and the college Principal generously offered to open up his house as his internet connection had just been restored. Students were informed through a Facebook feed that had been embedded into the Christchurch page of the Kaplan website. This measure was taken more for concerned family and friends overseas who, it was felt, were more likely to turn to our website for information rather than Facebook.

This temporary office proved invaluable over the following fortnight, and in the absence of being able to provide professional counselling that was clearly more needed elsewhere, it allowed students and staff the opportunity to talk through their feelings and experiences. Given the transport difficulties the city was facing with a number of roads being impassable, we were surprised by the large number of students who turned up at the office, and there were a few regular attenders who clearly felt the need for face-to-face contact with college staff.

The Principal's garage was also turned into a storage room for the luggage of the 50 study tour students, who decided not to venture back into the city from their excursion. Their homestay families packed up their luggage, which was collected and stored in the garage before being shipped overseas.

Students were informed of the four choices they had regarding their enrolment: a refund of all unused tuition fees, a transfer to our Auckland college, a transfer to one of our Australian colleges, or a deferment to see whether the college would re-open. Although like most colleges, Kaplan has a *force majeure* clause in its Terms and Conditions, it was thought that, due to the traumatic nature of the disaster, the offer of a refund had to be made. This offer was also extended to those students who had initially transferred to another Kaplan college, but subsequently wished to return home early. Excluding the study tour students who were about to depart anyway, two fifths ultimately chose a refund, just over half transferred to Kaplan Auckland, a handful transferred to a KIC Australia college, while only two students chose to remain in the city, and their fees were ultimately transferred to another college. Of future enrolments, a significant number chose to cancel their course rather than accept the offer of changing to Auckland or Australia.

*The Principal's garage was also turned into a storage room for the luggage of the 50 study tour students, who decided not to venture back into the city from their excursion.*

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For the hundred or so students who chose to transfer to Kaplan Auckland, the opportunity to receive professional counselling was provided, and they were encouraged to participate in the numerous fund-raising activities that took place for the earthquake victims. A number of Christchurch staff flew up to Auckland to help their colleagues with the sudden influx of students, and the students who transferred were pleased to be welcomed by staff they already knew.

In the days immediately afterwards, the fate of the college was not known, but it was clear from the number of refund requests and cancellations that if it did re-open, there would not be enough work for all the teachers. Casual staff were given a termination payment, based on their length of service and the average number of hours they had worked in previous weeks. When it was announced that the city centre would be cordoned off for several months and that Kaplan would not be able to gain access to its building, the staff were informed that the college would not re-open in the foreseeable future, and redundancy packages of between three and six months' salary were offered to all the contracted teachers and some administrative staff. Kaplan was fortunate in being able to offer its Christchurch staff employment in other colleges around the world, and two staff chose to head north to Auckland, while another two left for the UK.

The city continued to suffer a number of significant aftershocks that led to further damage, and a decision was taken to close the college permanently, rather than re-open in another location and expose new students to danger. Four Shared Services staff who also had responsibility for the Auckland college were retained, and a small office was set up in the suburbs to house them. At the time of writing (May 2012), Kaplan has still not been able to access its building, which is close to Cathedral Square and in the cordoned-off Red Zone, except for a couple of brief opportunities to retrieve valuable items and students' and staff's possessions.

Kaplan owes much to its Christchurch staff who went beyond the call of duty in putting their students' needs first under very emotional and exhausting circumstances. Kaplan is fortunate in being a large organisation that was able to draw on resources in other locations and coordinate events from afar, a task that would have been extremely challenging for staff on the ground. We were also extremely fortunate that our staff and students were unharmed. Tragically, not all ELT colleges were, with 70 students and 9 staff from Kings Education losing their lives when the CTV building collapsed.

*For specific questions on issues in this case study, English Australia member college staff are welcome to contact Steve Knussen, National Manager, Kaplan International Colleges Australia, via [Steve.Knussen@kaplan.com](mailto:Steve.Knussen@kaplan.com).*

## Appendix

### Disaster management checklist

- My organisation has undertaken risk analysis and prepared disaster management protocols.
  - I understand the legal concept of Duty of Care and can apply it in assessing our responsibilities in the event of a disaster.
- I know the roles and responsibilities of our disaster management working party and who fulfils the roles.
- Our college has a clear communication strategy that outlines how we will communicate with our stakeholders.
- I know all the disaster authorities in my city and they are aware of the college.
- When my building is inaccessible and without power we are able to access our databases and communicate with all stakeholders.
- I know the circumstances in which my college will be closed.
- We can evacuate and secure the premises within one hour, if required.
- If my centre has to shut down all concerned parties are aware of which staff will get paid and whether students are entitled to a refund.