

Policy for the use of Laptops/ Tablets/ Notebooks/ Cellphones or any other portable and communication device in the Laboratory



Purpose

This policy is designed to ensure the safety of personnel, prevent contamination, and uphold the integrity of laboratory operations at the Chemistry Department by prohibiting the use of laptops, tablets, notebooks, cellphones, and any other portable electronic communication devices — hereafter referred to as "Communication Devices" or "CDs" — within the laboratory environment.

Scope

This policy applies to all staff, students, and visitors, including technicians and contractors, who work in Chemistry laboratories. The policy is a collaborative initiative between the H3D Chemistry Health and Safety (H&S) team and the CEM OHSE Unit.

To mitigate the risk of chemical contamination, prevent damage, and reduce the likelihood of accidents caused by distractions, the use of both work-issued and personal Communication Devices in laboratories is strictly prohibited.

However, laptops or PCs that are permanently stationed in designated clean zones or integrated into lab equipment for display or programming purposes are permitted.

Reason for prohibition

Safety concerns: The prohibition of Communication Devices in laboratories is primarily driven by safety concerns. These laboratories are potentially hazardous environments, containing chemicals, corrosive solvents, and biological agents that pose significant health and safety risks if not managed properly. The use of Communication Devices can lead to distractions, increasing the likelihood of accidents. Additionally, damaged laptop components and exposed wires can create electrical sparks, presenting a fire hazard. Furthermore, laptops and their accessories, such as power cords, can contribute to tripping hazards.

Cellphones, in particular, may generate static electricity, and the lithium batteries commonly found in modern devices can spontaneously ignite under certain conditions. Therefore, adherence to this policy is essential for maintaining a safe and efficient laboratory environment.

Asset damage: Laptops and other electronic communication devices are not inherently resistant to laboratory conditions and may sustain damage from spills, exposure to liquids, chemicals, or corrosive agents, as well as their fumes. It is important to note that personal devices damaged due to corrosive chemical fumes or spills are not covered by the University of Cape Town's (UCT) insurance policy.

Contamination risk: All portable communication devices have the potential to become contaminated with hazardous chemicals, biological agents, or other materials. If these devices are taken outside the laboratory or placed on surfaces in offices or homes, they could pose a significant health risk and contribute to the spread of contaminants.

Charging of Devices - Charging cell phones and other personal devices within the laboratory is strictly prohibited. The risk of battery overheating or sparking during charging can lead to ignition and result in an uncontrollable fire.

Use of Entertainment Devices - Engaging in entertainment activities, such as watching Netflix, YouTube, or listening to music, while in the laboratory is strictly forbidden.

Laptop Usage Guidelines:

- Administrative tasks which require a laptop should be done in the designated write up area.
- For specific activities such as data acquisition or electronic notebook usage, fixed laptops located in designated clean zones must be utilized.
- Adhere to glove usage signage when working with laptops in the laboratory.
- Communal laptops are not to be used for administrative tasks such as report writing, manuscript preparation, or meetings

By following these guidelines, we can ensure a safe and productive laboratory environment.

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Guidelines for Visitors, Technicians, and Contractors

Chemists are responsible for ensuring a safe and conducive environment for technicians to perform their tasks, as well as for the secure placement of their essential tools, which may include communication devices. This protocol is formally outlined in the laboratory induction booklet and must be thoroughly addressed during the induction training.

Important Notice: All external technicians and University of Cape Town (UCT) technical staff are required to adhere to the established procedures regarding the use of communication devices. Specifically, phone calls, text messages, and emails must be conducted outside of classified laboratory spaces and chemical or solvent storage areas. Such communication is permitted only when it directly pertains to the task or instrument being addressed.

Permissible Use of Communication Devices in Laboratory Spaces

Internal technical staff or students may utilize communication devices under the following circumstances, which are considered exceptions to the general policy:

- Capturing photographs or videos of instrument maintenance issues, errors, or malfunctions to share with external technicians for evaluation and support.
- Engaging in phone calls, video calls, or messaging with technicians during real-time troubleshooting to collaboratively resolve instrument-related issues.
- Conducting real-time investigations, searches, or references to troubleshooting sections in manuals or online/offline resources, particularly in cases involving complex or uncommon technical or software challenges.
- Remotely monitoring or controlling laboratory instruments and preparative instruments.
- Disseminating critical information or alerts across laboratory sites when an instrument issue may: a) impact samples belonging to staff, or b) involve incorrect settings applied to the instrument, thereby facilitating prompt corrective action.
- Sending **brief** updates or notifications regarding the operational status of an instrument (e.g., "Instrument X is out of order" or "Instrument X is now available for use").

External Technical Staff Guidelines

- External technicians may need to utilize CDs while conducting diagnostic or maintenance tasks within the laboratory.
- During troubleshooting, technicians reach out to off-site colleagues for consultation on technical issues that require additional expertise or support.
- It is essential to provide technicians with a clean and stable surface for their setup. Movable cupboards or wheeled drawers can be utilized to create an appropriate and organized workspace.

Compliance with Policy

All individuals performing duties in any laboratory environment must adhere to the policy prohibiting the use of work or personal communication devices within the laboratory.

Reporting Non-Compliance

If you observe any violations of this policy, please report the incident to your OSHE Representative, supervisor or line manager.

Responsibilities of OHSE Representatives, Supervisors and Line Managers

- Ensure that all students and staff members are informed and comply with this policy.
- Provide necessary induction training and take corrective measures when required.
- Ensure students and staff are aware that violations of this policy may result in disciplinary action.