

INTERRUPTION OF STUDY POLICY (RESEARCH STUDENTS)

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INTERRUPTION OF STUDY POLICY (RESEARCH STUDENTS)

The University's Student Life Teams offer a comprehensive range of supportive services, including counselling, wellbeing resources, disability and dyslexia support, and financial advice. In addition, the Students' Union operate an independent Student Advice service to provide students with neutral support and guidance on a range of personal and academic-related matters. The services in the Centre for Student Life and Student Advice are available to research students and all are free, impartial, confidential and non-judgmental.

If you are an international student and are considering applying for an interruption of study, you are strongly advised to seek guidance from Student Visa Support on potential visa implications before making an application.

1. Scope and purpose

- 1.1 This policy applies to research students for the duration of their candidature, including the 'thesis completion' stage and resubmission period. It does not apply to undergraduate or postgraduate taught (including MRes) students, for which there is a separate interruption of study procedure, or to research students in the '12-week corrections' period, post-viva.
- 1.2 The policy defines 'leave of absence' and 'interruption of study' in the context of research degree programmes. It outlines permissible grounds for an absence and explains the application process and decision-making procedure. The policy also sets out your rights during a period of interruption and explains how you will be supported on your return to study.
- 1.3 Students undertaking Professional Doctorates should refer to this policy only in relation to the research stage of the programme. In the case of Professional Doctorate programmes that do not have distinct 'taught' and 'research' stages, the Programme Director shall determine whether this policy or the separate Interruption of Study Procedure for Taught Students applies, as appropriate to the stage of the candidature.

2. General statements

- 2.1 The expectation is that you will complete your programme of study in a single continuous period and manage your personal circumstances alongside your workload. It is not unusual for doctoral study to involve a level of pressure which may lead to feelings of stress and anxiety. Unless these feelings become unmanageable and cause you to be unwell, it is expected that you will continue with your studies.
- 2.2 We recognise, however, that you may encounter particularly challenging and disruptive circumstances during your programme that have a substantial adverse impact on your ability to study. In such cases, it may be appropriate for you to suspend your studies temporarily.

- 2.3 All absences (other than pre-arranged annual leave) must be reported to your supervisor(s) and your School Office as soon as practicable - ideally on the first day of the absence - via a leave of absence request or an interruption of study application, as explained below.
- 2.4 It is not an automatic right to interrupt your study. Your application and supporting evidence will be closely scrutinised and the request must meet one or more of the permitted grounds for an interruption of study (see section 5).
- 2.5 You may seek time away from your studies due to difficult personal circumstances, or for other reasons, such as to undertake a placement/internship, professional/career development opportunity, or for maternity, parental or adoption leave. The procedure for requesting an interruption of study is the same regardless of the circumstances.
- 2.6 If a School has concerns about a student's medical, psychological or emotional health, the Head of School may initiate the Student Support Intervention Policy and Procedure.

3. Definitions

- 3.1 An interruption of study is defined as the complete cessation of your work for more than 28 consecutive days. If an application is approved by the University, the deadlines for upcoming progress monitoring events and the final submission of your thesis will be adjusted by a period commensurate with the length of the interruption. You will not be required to make a separate application to extend your deadlines. Your programme end date (which is the end of your fees-payable period) will also be amended accordingly (unless the interruption of study is taken beyond the fees-payable stage).
- 3.2 A leave of absence is defined as the complete cessation of your work for no more than 28 consecutive days. The absence may be authorised by your School and will not result in any changes to your programme dates or submission deadlines.¹ This is because you are expected to make up for limited absences within the total period of your candidature by adjusting your Research Plan as necessary. Where this is not feasible due to the cumulative impact of short absences, you may apply to extend your final thesis submission deadline in accordance with the Extenuating Circumstances Policy (Research Students).

4. Absence restrictions

¹ Paternity/Partner leave is an exception. Students are entitled to up to 2 weeks' leave for Paternity/Partner Leave and any leave taken for this purpose will result in an adjustment to the latest submission deadline by a commensurate period. If you are funded by a UKRI studentship and your absence is related to ill health and evidenced with medical certification, your funding end date may be adjusted in line with the UKRI terms and conditions of sick pay.

- 4.1 The period of absence should be the briefest possible that allows for the circumstances to resolve. The maximum period for any single interruption of study is 12 months. A further application that would extend the same period of absence beyond 12 months will be considered only where circumstances are compelling. This may be the case where, for example, there is clear medical evidence demonstrating that you remain unfit to study, or the evolving nature of your caring responsibilities are such that you are unable to devote any attention to your thesis at this time.
- 4.2 Applications for interruptions of study must include an expected return to study date: open-ended interruptions will not be approved. In all cases, return to study should be anticipated and – barring any unforeseeable circumstances – achievable by the requested return date. Where the likelihood of returning to study is doubtful or unknown, other options, such as withdrawal from the programme, should be considered.
- 4.3 An interruption of study will not be permitted where this will result in the total length of your candidature exceeding the overall time limit for the programme stipulated in the Research Degree Regulations.²
- 4.4 Taking an interruption of study may affect any loan or studentship that you receive. Where there is objective justification, some funders will not permit an interruption of study of any significant period (where a project must be completed within a specific timescale, for example). It is essential that you familiarise yourself with the terms and conditions of your funding before submitting an interruption of study application.
- 4.5 If you are a visa holder, taking an interruption of study may affect your right to remain in the UK: the University is obliged to report any absences of more than 60 days to UK Visas and Immigration. You should seek guidance from Student Visa Support before making an application.

5. Grounds for a leave of absence or interruption of study

- 5.1 You may request a leave of absence or make an application to interrupt your studies on one or more of the following grounds:
- .1 Ill health: a serious time-limited illness or injury, or a long-term health condition or disability that has been newly diagnosed or has worsened or is fluctuating, for which a clear break in study is either required or strongly advised by a suitably qualified medical practitioner or University Support Service.
 - .2 Compassionate grounds: a substantial change in your personal, domestic or family circumstances, such as the death of a close family member or significant person, an unanticipated change in caring responsibilities (ill health of a dependent, for example), severe financial issues, or being a victim of a serious crime.

² This applies only to candidates commencing their studies from 1 October 2019.

- .3 Exceptional professional commitments (part-time students only): an unexpected and unavoidable change to your work commitments, if you are a part-time student working alongside your studies. Taking up employment is considered a normal outcome of doctoral study, and new employment-related grounds are not permissible when a student (regardless of their mode of study) is in their thesis completion stage.
- .4 Placements/internships, work experience, or professional/career development opportunities: a placement/internship, period of work experience, or other professional/career development opportunity supported by your supervisor during the fees-payable period. In the case of a placement/internship, an interruption of study will be justified if the placement is not considered to be integral to your programme and within its planned timeframe.³ Both you and your supervisor must confirm that interrupting your studies will not adversely affect the timely submission of your thesis.
- .5 Unavoidable practical/logistical difficulties: unavoidable and disruptive difficulties beyond your control that affect your progress for a discrete period of your candidature.
- .6 Maternity, Parental, Adoption, Paternity/Partner Leave: see Policy on Maternity, Adoption, Paternity/Partner and Parental Leave for Research Students. Note that Paternity/Partner Leave applies to leave of absence requests only.
- .7 Jury service or compulsory military service
- .8 Sabbatical office

5.2 An interruption of study will not be approved on any of the following grounds:

- .1 Minor illness or ailment, such as a cough or common cold, which in an employment context would not satisfy the requirements for sickness leave.
- .2 Holidays, weddings or other family-related occasions, religious events, or house moves, since annual leave should be used for this purpose.
- .3 Professional (work) commitments when registered as a full-time student, or as a part-time student choosing to take on new

³ Students in receipt of UKRI funding are advised to check the terms and conditions of their studentship regarding placements before applying for an interruption of study. Student Visa holders are not permitted to undertake placements, work experience or internships that are not integral to their programme, except if the activity takes place wholly outside of the UK. Where the activity is outside of the UK, an application for an interruption of study may be made: note that if the duration is more than 60 days, the interruption of study will be reported to the Home Office.

employment or a planned new work role during the thesis awaited period.

- .4 Insufficient academic progress or poor time management, where a request is being made solely to 'stop the clock', and it is either apparent or can reasonably be assumed that you intend to continue studying while on a formal interruption of study.
- .5 General pressure of your studies, since this is expected and common to all students. Unless this causes you to become unwell, the expectation is that you will progress with your work in line with your Research/Completion Plan.
- .6 Where the application is insufficiently evidenced or late (i.e. the requested start date of the absence or interruption of study has passed) without justifiable reason.

6. Interruption of study during the 'thesis completion' stage

6.1 Whilst you are required to maintain contact with your supervisors during the thesis completion stage and your progress will be monitored, you may not be working on your thesis at a regular pace. However, if you need to take a clear break from your studies for a defined period (if you are seriously unwell or wish to take maternity or parental leave, for example) you may apply for an interruption of study.

6.2 The following are not eligible grounds for an interruption of study during the thesis completion stage:

- Taking up new employment;
- Undertaking a placement/internship, work experience, or professional/career development opportunity.

7. Applying for an interruption of study

7.1 You should apply for an interruption of study either before (in the case of planned absences) or on the first day of the proposed interruption. Where this is not possible, you will be asked to explain the reason(s) for the lateness as part of your request. Retrospective applications will only be considered where there are compelling grounds to do so.

7.2 While you are not required to share your application with your supervisor or to disclose the reason(s) for the request, you must notify them of the absence, and you are encouraged to discuss your situation with them – if you feel able to do so – before submitting a request. This is so that they can explore options with you, and you can be confident that you are making an informed decision regarding the absence and any potential implications surrounding your return to study (see section 13).

7.3 You should complete a Research Student Absence Form detailing the reason(s) for the absence and the requested period. Your statement must be

supported by current and relevant independent documentary evidence, which must be:

- submitted on documentation that is recognisably authentic and should be signed and dated by the relevant authority: if the evidence is not on headed paper or from a recognised authority, you should submit the evidence that is available to you and explain why this evidence is submitted;
- provided in English or Welsh (translated into English/Welsh and authenticated, if necessary) and ideally unaltered. Some minor redaction is acceptable for confidentiality purposes where personal data relate to other individuals and this does not impact the legibility or usefulness of the evidence. You are responsible for covering the costs of providing the documents, including the translation, if relevant.

7.4 In the case of placements/internships, work experience, or professional/career enhancement opportunities, you should provide a statement that outlines the main skills and knowledge you will acquire and how the experience will help to support your career prospects or broader development as a doctoral researcher. You will be asked to confirm that your supervisor supports the interruption on these grounds and that your ability to submit your thesis within the (adjusted) time limit will not be adversely affected.

7.5 The information that you submit will be treated sensitively and shared only with staff involved in processing your request. If you would prefer to provide part or all the application directly to a decision-maker (as outlined below), your School Office will be able to provide instruction on how to do this.

7.6 If you disclose a disability or support issue, you will be encouraged to meet with the relevant university support service so that they can help you and, where appropriate, discuss reasonable adjustments with you.

7.7 If you are unable to do so (due to hospitalisation or incapacitation, for example) or if it is otherwise considered to be in your best interest, your Head of School may apply for an interruption of study on your behalf. This may be on health or academic-related grounds.

8. Decision-making process

8.1 Your School's Director of Postgraduate Research will consider your application in the first instance. They may contact you to discuss your application and/or seek additional information or clarification to enable them to reach a decision.

8.2 A recommendation regarding your request will be made within 7 days of receipt of the application (or within 7 days of any supplementary information being submitted by you, where requested by the Director of Postgraduate Research).

- 8.3 Where the Director of Postgraduate Research is also a member of your supervisory team, the recommendation will be made by the Head of School/nominee.
- 8.4 The application and recommendation will be passed to Education Governance (PGR Quality and Operations) who will act as follows:
- .1 Refer the application to a Senior Officer who will take a decision in accordance with this policy, where the request is:
 - for an interruption of study of up to 12 months, and
 - the duration of interruptions taken on the programme of study, including any approved previously, will not exceed 12 months in total (periods of maternity, parental or adoption leave are not included in the total), and
 - the Director of Postgraduate Research recommends approval of the application.
- or
- .2 Refer the application to the PGR Extenuating Circumstances Adjustment Panel: a panel comprising the Dean for Postgraduate Studies from each of the three Colleges, which meets regularly to consider remedy requests. The Panel will take a decision in accordance with this policy, where the request is:
 - either to extend an interruption of study or to take a new interruption of study which would result in the total duration of interruptions taken during the candidature exceeding 12 months (excluding periods of maternity, parental or adoption leave), and/or
 - not recommended by the Director of Postgraduate Research for approval.
- 8.5 The Senior Officer may choose to refer any application, regardless of the duration of interruption requested or previously approved, to the Panel for decision.
- 8.6 One Postgraduate Dean will act as Chair of the Panel and will record the Panel's decisions. The Panel will be supported by members of Education Governance (PGR Quality and Operations) who are suitably experienced in postgraduate research and extenuating circumstances matters.
- 8.7 The Panel will meet regularly (typically monthly) to review applications. Meeting dates will be agreed on an annual basis and publicised to Schools for planning purposes. Any pressing matters will be addressed by the Chair of the Panel on an ad hoc basis as executive action at the Chair's discretion.

9. Communicating the outcome of your application

- 9.1 You will be informed of the outcome in writing within 7 days of a decision being taken by the Senior Officer or the Panel. The decision will be as follows:
- Approve an interruption of study for the duration requested; or
 - Approve an interruption of study for an alternative duration; or
 - Refer the application back to you or your School for additional information (which may include the requirement to provide further supporting evidence); or
 - Reject the application, where the request is not permitted in line with this policy.
- 9.2 The approval of an interruption of study may include conditions which must be satisfied before you will be permitted to return to your studies. It is important that these are understood and followed at the appropriate time.
- 9.3 Where an application is rejected, the rationale for the decision will be outlined in a notification letter which will be sent to your university email address from Education Governance (PGR Quality and Operations). The letter will explain your options, including the opportunity to request a review of the decision. (See section 16.)

10. Extending an interruption of study

- 10.1 If you are unable to return to study on the agreed date, you may apply to extend the interruption in accordance with section 7 of this policy. A new application must be submitted in advance of the original expected date of return and ideally as soon as you are aware that you will not be able to resume your studies at the anticipated time.
- 10.2 You will again be required to submit supporting documentation as part of your application. Depending on the circumstances, this may be fresh evidence (such as a new 'Statement of Fitness to Work' from your GP) or recent, existing documentation which confirms that your circumstances are both ongoing and fluctuating.
- 10.3 You should not assume that your School's Director of Postgraduate Research or the decision-maker (Senior Officer or the Panel) will be aware of your situation, and they will not refer automatically to documentation submitted as part of previous applications.

11. Your rights during a period of interruption

- 11.1 During a period of interruption of study, you will remain a current student at the University, but you will be suspending engagement with your research degree programme, and access to some university services will be curtailed.

Your student record will reflect that you are not actively engaged with your programme for the duration of the interruption.

11.2 For the period of interruption, you will:

- retain IT login, email and intranet access, including SIMS;
- retain access to electronic library resources;
- have public access to libraries and university buildings;
- have access to the Students' Union Student Advice;
- have recourse to the student complaint, review and appeal procedures;
- have limited access to Student Support and Wellbeing Services;
- retain access to the University's Day Care Centre;
- retain access to all Council Tax Certificates which have been issued to you. (Some students on an interruption will be entitled to a new certificate, but this is dependent on the Council Tax Regulations in force at the relevant time.)

11.3 However, for the period of interruption, you will not:

- receive supervision, either through meetings or correspondence;
- be subject to progress monitoring;
- be permitted access to laboratories, work or office space in your School, or to workspace in the Doctoral Academy;
- be permitted to engage in training workshops, research seminars or events delivered or facilitated by your School or the Doctoral Academy ('Keeping in Touch' (KIT) and 'Shared Parental Leave in touch' (SPLIT) days may be an exception);
- be permitted to undertake activities that relate to professional researcher development;
- normally be expected, or be supported, to attend conferences, though there may be some circumstances where this is appropriate;
- receive information about employment or voluntary opportunities available during the period.

11.4 If you are employed by the University, we may also need to suspend your employment contract if you are interrupting on the grounds of ill health.

11.5 If you are living in university accommodation you should seek advice from Residential Services in advance of your application, as you may be required to leave the accommodation, depending on the duration of the interruption. If this is the case, your contract will be adjusted without penalty, and you will be provided with notice to quit in accordance with your accommodation contract. Student Life Services will be able to advise you on alternative accommodation, should you require assistance.

11.6 If you are on maternity, shared parental, or adoption leave, you may wish to participate in activities relating to your research or doctoral training, such as attending a conference or workshop, or meeting with your supervisor or members of your research lab. 'Keeping in Touch' (KIT) days or 'Shared Parental Leave in touch' (SPLIT) days should be agreed in advance with

your supervisor(s). KIT days must not amount to more than 10 days across the total period of maternity or adoption leave. SPLIT days must not amount to more than 20 days across the period of Shared Parental Leave.

12. Short absences (up to 28 consecutive days): leave of absence requests

- 12.1 Your School can authorise a leave of absence of up to 28 consecutive days. You should complete a [Research Student Absence Form](#) and submit it with relevant supporting evidence for consideration by the Director of Postgraduate Research.
- 12.2 Unlike interruption of study applications, requests for short absences are considered by your School (Director of Postgraduate Research) and are not forwarded for higher review.
- 12.3 You will be notified of your School's decision within 7 days of the decision being taken by the Director of Postgraduate Research. Where the outcome is that your leave of absence request is rejected, your School will communicate the reason(s) for the decision to you in writing and it is open to you to request a review of the decision, as detailed in section 16.
- 12.4 If a leave of absence is approved and you find that you are unable to return to study within 28 consecutive days, you must apply for an interruption of study which can be backdated to the beginning of your absence: the retrospective period cannot be more than 28 days. If an interruption of study is approved, your thesis submission deadline will be extended in line with the full duration of your absence.

13. Returning from an interruption of study (absence of more than 28 consecutive days)

- 13.1 Approximately 3 weeks before your expected return date, you will be asked to indicate your intention via the SIMS Online task. (Note that this will not happen if the absence is for 28 consecutive days or less.) If you have decided not to return to study, you must inform the University, via the online task, of your intentions.
- 13.2 At this point (if you have not already done so), you should contact your lead supervisor to either arrange a return to study meeting or notify them of your intention to submit a request to extend the interruption of study. A return to study meeting must take place with your lead supervisor within 7 days of your return date: it may be held prior to your return should you prefer.
- 13.3 If you are granted an interruption of study for reasons of ill health, you may be required to provide evidence that you are fit and able to resume your studies before being permitted to return. This requirement will be communicated to you as part of your application approval notification to allow you sufficient time to source the documentation before your expected return date. Required evidence may include statements from a GP or treating practitioner and/or an occupational health assessment.

Return to study meeting

- 13.4 The return to study meeting is an opportunity for you to discuss with your lead supervisor any concerns that you may have about resuming your work and to consider how the University can best support you when you return. Your supervisor will signpost you to any relevant university support services.
- 13.5 If your lead supervisor is unavailable at the time of your return, the meeting will be held with another member of your supervisory team or your School's Director of Postgraduate Research.
- 13.6 Depending on the duration and reason for the interruption, a phased return to study may be appropriate. This may follow maternity leave, be advised by a GP or other treating practitioner on health grounds, or it may be recommended following an occupational health assessment. Phased returns are normally limited to a 4-week period following the return and are likely to apply to long-term absences only.
- 13.7 Where agreed, a phased return should form part of a written plan to returning to work on a full-time (or part-time) basis. Phased returns must not be used where there is a clear need for a permanent transfer to part-time study.
- 13.8 Either prior to or immediately following the return to study meeting, a referral may be made to Student Occupational Health to ensure that you are well enough to return and to identify any adjustments that may need to be made, temporarily or permanently, to assist you.
- 13.9 At the return to study meeting, your supervisor will discuss any required modifications to your Research Plan to ensure that you remain on track to submit a viable thesis within the regulatory time limit. This will take into account the currency of your data and factor in any agreed period of phased return.
- 13.10 Following the meeting, your supervisor will confirm your return to your School's Director of Postgraduate Research and School Office and will communicate to them any agreed adjustments.

14. Refusal of return to study request

- 14.1 In exceptional circumstances, you may not be permitted to return to study temporarily or permanently. This decision will be made by your School's Director of Postgraduate Research in consultation with your supervisor for one or more of the following reasons:
 - .1 Where medical evidence or a report from Student Occupational Health indicates that you are not fit to study at this point. The University has a duty of care to its students and in such cases, you will be advised to submit a new application for a further interruption of study (unless you have exceeded the time limit for your programme).

- .2 Where there are serious and compelling academic or related concerns regarding the currency of your research or the viability of your project following a long-term absence, such that your project is no longer feasible.
 - .3 Where practical limitations prohibit the continuing of your project or the support that the University can provide to you. This may be the case where funding is no longer available for your research, or one or more members of your original supervisory team are no longer available and replacement supervisors cannot be found.
- 14.2 The School will communicate this decision to you in writing within 7 days of the decision being taken by the Director of Postgraduate Research. You may appeal the decision not to permit your return to study in accordance with the University Review Procedure.

15. Withdrawing from your programme

- 15.1 If you decide not to return from an approved interruption of study or if you feel that you are unable to continue with your studies at this time due to adverse circumstances, you should notify your supervisor(s) and your School of your intention to withdraw from the programme.
- 15.2 Withdrawal may be appropriate if you have taken multiple or lengthy periods of interruption and extended time away from your studies would be beneficial for your wellbeing, or to enable difficult personal circumstances to be resolved.
- 15.3 The option to withdraw from the programme and re-apply to the University at a later date may be suggested to you if an interruption of study request is not approved (if the overall time limit for the programme has been exceeded or a realistic return to study date cannot be determined, for example) or if it is otherwise considered to be in your best interests in line with the University's duty of care responsibilities.
- 15.4 Your School may be prepared to re-admit you to the programme with 'advanced standing' in future, in recognition of your prior experience – though there is no requirement for them to do so and re-admission should not be assumed.

16. Appealing a decision

- 16.1 If your interruption of study application or leave of absence request is not approved, your student record will remain unchanged. Any unauthorised period of absence will be dealt with under the Unsatisfactory Progress or Engagement Policy and Procedure (Research Students).
- 16.2 You may request a review of the decision not to approve your application (or to approve it for a different duration to the period requested), or to refuse your return to study, under the University Review Procedure. You are

advised to seek independent support and guidance from Student Advice on your rights and responsibilities and the procedure to submit a review request.

- 16.3 Review requests must be made within 14 days of receiving the decision, unless you can demonstrate why it was not possible or reasonable for you to submit the review request within the specified timescale. You are expected to provide evidence in support of the reason(s).

Appendix: Alignment with the Expectations and Core Practices of the revised UK Quality Code for Higher Education

This policy and procedure aligns with the following relevant Expectations and Core Practices of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education:

Expectations for standards	Expectations for quality
	From admission through to completion, all students are provided with the support that they need to succeed in and benefit from higher education.
Core practices for standards	Core practices for quality
	The provider has sufficient appropriately qualified and skilled staff to deliver a high-quality academic experience.
	The provider has sufficient and appropriate facilities, learning resources and student support services to deliver a high-quality academic experience.
	The provider actively engages students, individually and collectively, in the quality of their educational experience.
	The provider has fair and transparent procedures for handling complaints and appeals which are accessible to all students.
	Where the provider offers research degrees, it delivers these in appropriate and supportive research environments.
	The provider supports all students to achieve successful academic and professional outcomes.
Common practices for standards	Common practices for quality
	The provider reviews its core practices for quality regularly and uses the outcomes to drive improvement and enhancement.
	The provider engages students individually and collectively in the development, assurance and enhancement of the quality of their educational experience.