

Policy Guidance on Attendance, Engagement and Absence for Postgraduate Research Students

1. Introduction

Poor attendance and engagement can put Postgraduate Researchers (PGRs) at risk academically. The University monitors attendance and engagement in order to ensure PGRs are successfully progressing, and to be supportive and anticipatory in its approach to carrying out its duty of care to all students. The University aims to ensure that students receive information, advice and guidance at the earliest opportunity to support their efforts in overcoming barriers to their research and reduce the chance of issues escalating.

2. Underpinning Principles

- PGR students need to engage with doctoral supervision and the university research environment in order to progress in their field of study, and a range of services are available to support PGR students in this
- Good attendance and engagement are essential to a good PGR student experience
- PGR students are active participants in ensuring their own success
- Identifying poor attendance and engagement early, and intervening early, are key to helping students progress
- All PGR students are given a fair and equal opportunity to demonstrate academic achievement in accordance with the University's institutional Regulations.

3. Requirements of External Bodies

Good PGR attendance and engagement is also a requirement of external bodies such as Professional Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs), funders or sponsors, and the UK Visas and Immigration department of the Home Office.

The University is able to deliver courses, administer funds to students, and grant Student Route/Tier 4 sponsorship, by fulfilling its responsibilities in relation to these bodies.

Any sanctions for poor attendance and engagement for students benefitting from arrangements with these bodies will be the same as for other students, however further consequences could mean withdrawal of registration, sponsorship or funding, and/or the PGRs being required to return to their home country. Notes on any specific requirements are included in this policy.

Further information on the Student Route/Tier 4 for staff can be found <https://www.sussex.ac.uk/humanresources/business-services/visa> and information for international students

can be found on the International Student Support pages
www.sussex.ac.uk/internationalsupport/immigration

Advice on loans and scholarships can be found here: <https://student.sussex.ac.uk/money/funding>

4. Attendance and engagement requirements

The University's policy is that PGRs are expected to engage with their studies monthly throughout registration, and meet regularly with their supervisor(s) at least once per month.¹ It is acknowledged that different disciplines may require different patterns of engagements, from daily contact (e.g., in laboratory-based PGR projects) to periodic reviews of thesis material (e.g., in humanities).

All staff are expected to familiarise themselves with this guidance document, and are expected to provide PGRs with information to support their attendance and engagement.

4.1 Attendance and engagement records

Supervisory meetings are considered the principal mode of engagement for PGRs and these meetings should be recorded by the student on Sussex Direct and approved by the supervisor. Notes must be provided on Sussex Direct for all formal supervision meetings, for international students these will be required in the event of a Home Office audit.

In addition to these meetings, PGRs may also make contact with the University in a way that supplements, or in some circumstances replaces, supervisory meetings. These will be meaningful contacts and should be sufficient for the PGRs to engage well and be able to progress in their discipline. These contacts must comprise formal academic or pastoral care activities.

A list of activities that could be considered contacts is provided below. Relevant activities should be determined by Schools and evidenced by Sussex Direct or manual records. Manual records of engagement should be kept within the School and be readily available:

- i. a meeting with a supervisor, Director of Doctoral Studies or PGR convenor (face to face or via video conferencing);
- ii. a tutorial (face to face or via video conferencing), laboratory session, workshop or seminar; (this can be for academic or pastoral advice related to progressing with studies)
- iii. a research-method or research-panel meeting, writing-up seminars or doctoral workshops; (this includes staff development workshops)
- iv. an oral examination (viva); or
- v. submission of the thesis;

1. Noting section 5, and frequency of supervision during different stages of registration
vi. draft chapters, coursework as requested by supervisors and/or the Director of

Doctoral Studies or a paper/report;

vii. registration (for enrolment or matriculation).

viii. Ethical approval

Schools must identify the most appropriate types of contacts for their PGRs from the above list, and be able to produce reports showing the frequency of PGRs attendance/engagement. Schools will have their own defined procedures and nominated monitoring personnel in place.

PGRs are responsible for recording their supervision meetings on Sussex Direct within one week of the meeting taking place. Supervisors must approve that record within one further week. If supervisors are making records of meetings with their PGRs this must be recorded within one week of the meeting taking place.

Records of engagement are still required when PGRs are at a different study location e.g. on fieldwork, and Schools will have their own defined procedures and nominated personnel in place to ensure monitoring.

5. Registration Status, attendance and engagement

PGRs are required to engage with their studies at least once per month, during any registration status. While supervision is the principal mode of engagement, the frequency of supervision may vary, as follows:

Registration Status	Minimum engagement per month	Minimum supervision per month	Working Permission for Student Route/Tier 4 students
Standard registration	1	1	20 hours
Authorised absence* (Student route/Tier 4 only, 60 days max)	1	0	20 hours
Intermission	n/a	n/a	n/a
Fieldwork	1	1	20 hours
Holiday*	1	0	More than 20 hours
Pre-submission / post submission / corrections	1	Recommended frequency of at least 2 every 3 months (pro-rata)**	20 hours

*although supervision may not occur, Student route/Tier 4 sponsored students are required to maintain one monthly contact with the Supervisor during any period of authorised absence or holiday.

**unless otherwise explicitly agreed and documented to reflect specific circumstances.

6. Identifying poor attendance and engagement

Research and Enterprise Co-ordinators (RECs) (or others as designated by the Senior Research Manager) should monitor engagement recording on Sussex Direct monthly to identify students who have missed an expected contact point. An engagement monitoring report is available in Cognos and relevant staff should run this monthly. The UKVI Compliance team will audit records of engagement every quarter and will liaise with Schools where there are compliance issues.

In addition to the above, for those sponsored under the Student Route, UKVI require that where the student fails to re-engage with their studies within 60 days (30 days for distance learning) of the first contact from the university regarding their lack of academic engagement, the University must withdraw sponsorship except in exceptional circumstances.

7. Contact, Reporting and Withdrawal for Postgraduate Researchers

Supervisors are responsible for reporting to the REC/DDS/UKVI Compliance Team when there has been no contact or missed supervision meetings with individual PGR students for a month (unless the PGR student is on an authorised leave of absence) or where there is a pattern of absences which are affecting the PGR student's research project or causing concerns for the PGR student's wellbeing.

RECs (or others as designated by the School Administrator) are required to intervene where an expected contact point has been missed. Where two engagement points are missed the student must be reported to UKVI Compliance Team. Supervisors will establish any reasons for non-engagement, and agree a plan for future engagement in liaison with the School and the UKVI Compliance Team.

All parties will signpost students to the services of the university (Student Support, Students' Union etc.) where relevant.

If the University is unsuccessful in contacting the PGRs over a further month the UKVI Compliance Team may take action as follows:

If the PGR is on a Student Route/Tier 4 visa, the PGR will be notified that their sponsorship will be withdrawn within a specified period if they do not contact their supervisor or the UKVI Compliance Team. If the PGR does not make contact, the team will move to withdraw them in consultation with the Head of Student Administration and the School using the same process as described for the withdrawal of a PGR through Progression Review.

If the PGR is not on a Student Route/Tier 4 visa, the Records Office will move to withdraw the PGR in consultation with the Head of Student Administration/Appeals and the School using the same process as described for the withdrawal of a PGR through Progression Review. The withdrawal of any PGR may then be reported to the Doctoral Studies Committee.

8. Authorised Absences – Student Route/Tier 4 students only

Research and Enterprise Co-ordinators should direct PGRs to the policy on 'authorised absences' which can be found in section 21 of the Handbook and Regulations for Doctoral Researchers which is available here: <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/rsao/regulations/>.

For further information about the Authorised Absence policy please refer to Appendix 1.

9. Note about Student Route/Tier 4 students:

The "Tier 4" immigration system was replaced by a new "Student" immigration route on 5 October 2020 and all references to Student Route visa holders apply equally to holders of Tier 4 visas. Student Route/Tier 4 students should be flagged and contacted in line with the guidance in 'Identifying Poor Attendance and Engagement' and 'Contact, Reporting and Withdrawal' sections.

The University will be required to justify the continued registration of any Student Route/Tier 4 student who has not met the minimum engagement specified above and may take action to withdraw sponsorship from any such students. Any Student Route/Tier 4 students whose

engagement is flagged to the UKVI Compliance Team will be contacted and, if necessary, the withdrawal process may commence in liaison with the School and the Head of Student Administration. Withdrawal of Student Route/Tier 4 students must be reported to UKVI within 10 days of formal confirmation of the withdrawal.

Version number	Approved	Date
v.1	OSCAR	December 2020
V2.	UKVI Compliance Manager (DS) Head of Student Administration Head of Doctoral School	March 2023

Appendix 1

Authorised absence policy – Research Students

In order to retain current students and register international students in the future, the University has to comply with the terms of its Student Route/Tier 4 sponsor licence and this document sets out the policy for authorised absences.

1. What is an authorised absence?

In line with Home Office policy, it allows the University to continue sponsoring Student Route/Tier 4 students who need to take a short break from studies for a period not exceeding 60 days. Acceptable reasons for permitting an authorised absence are as follows:

- To receive minor medical treatment (medical certificate required)

- To take maternity/paternity leave (birth certificate or official medical certificate required)
- Illness which would not ordinarily result in an absence exceeding 60 days (medical certificate required)
- Illness of a close family member/dependent (medical certificate)

Authorised absences cannot be used to undertake employment, and the reason a leave of absence is required should not be so great that a student would be required to suspend their studies.

Authorised absences will only be permitted where we as the sponsor can assure ourselves it will not have any negative impact on the student's academic progression, the student will be able to complete their studies within their current leave to remain and the University can continue to meet its engagement responsibilities with the student and keep records of how the authorised absence was authorised and monitored.

Like intermissions (temporary withdrawal) retrospective applications are not permitted. If a student cannot return to studies after taking a period of authorised absence (up to a maximum of 60 days) the student will be required to intermit and the University will withdraw sponsorship resulting in the curtailment of the student's visa. It is only in exceptional circumstances that the University can continue sponsoring a student for more than 60 days and this is normally where a student is too ill to travel.

Where students require an absence exceeding 60 days they will be required to intermit and the University will withdraw sponsorship resulting in the curtailment of the student's visa. Please refer to the intermission policy for more information.

2. Application and approval process.

Students can request the authorised absence application form from email researchstudentvisas@sussex.ac.uk. The application form needs to be approved by the lead supervisor and Director of Doctoral Studies. Where students are requesting authorised absences on medical grounds, students must provide medical evidence to support their application and prior to returning to their studies medical evidence which confirms they are fit to return to studies must be provided. We encourage students who are experiencing personal difficulties to seek advice and support from the University's Student Advisors.

Appendix A: Draft revised Academic Engagement Policy

The authorised absence will be logged on the student record and the student will receive confirmation the authorised absence has been approved from the Records Team/UKVI Compliance Team.

Only one period of authorised absence will be permitted during a course of study.

3. Students' responsibilities during an authorised absence.

During an authorised absence students must continue to meet the conditions of their visa and maintain contact with the University via the main supervisor, this includes keeping contact details up-to-date in Sussex Direct.

4. Fees and end dates.

PGRs fees will cease to be accrued during the sole permitted period of authorised absence, and the course end date will be extended by the length of an absence.

5. Right to work during an authorised absence.

The restrictions on work that apply during term time also apply during an authorised absence i.e. the student must not work more than 20 hours per week.

6. Returning from an authorised absence.

Ten working days before the student is due to resume their studies, they should contact the School/UKVI Compliance Team (researchstudentvisas@sussex.ac.uk) to confirm they will be returning on the expected date or they need additional time and need to request temporary withdrawal.

Appendix B: Home Office Engagement Monitoring Requirements

Source: Home Office Student Sponsor Guidance - Document 2: Sponsorship Duties Version 09/21

Academic engagement policy for higher education providers. See Section 7 - External publication:

[sponsorship duties \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

Version number	Approved	Date
v.1	OSCAR/RSAO	December 2020
V2.	UKVI Compliance Manager (DS), Head of Student Administration (HB)	January 2023