

University of Sussex

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

1. Introduction

Poor attendance and engagement can put Postgraduate Research (PGR) students at risk academically. The University monitors attendance and engagement in order to ensure PGR students 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 student 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 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 PGR student being required to return to their home country. Notes on any specific requirements are included in this policy.

Further information on Tier 4 for staff can be found on the Compliance web pages www.sussex.ac.uk/compliance and information for international students can be found on the International Student Support pages www.sussex.ac.uk/internationalstudent/support/immigration
The Student Life Centre can provide advice on loans and scholarships
<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/studentlifecentre/funding/>

4. Attendance and engagement requirements

The University's policy is that PGR students are expected to engage with their studies monthly throughout registration, and meet regularly with their supervisor(s) as agreed in consultation with their supervisor(s) and at least once per month¹. 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 PGR students with information to support their attendance and engagement.

4.1 Attendance and engagement records

Supervisory meetings are considered the principal mode of engagement for PGR students 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, PGR students 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 PGR student 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;
- iii. a research-method or research-panel meeting, writing-up seminars or doctoral workshops;
- iv. an oral examination (viva); or
- v. submission of the thesis;
- 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).

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

¹ Noting section 5, and frequency of supervision during different stages of registration.

PGR Students 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 PGR students this must be recorded within one week of the meeting taking place.

Records of engagement are still required when PGR students 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

PGR students 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 (tier 4 only)
Standard registration	1	1	20hrs
Authorised absence* (tier 4 only, 60 days maximum)	1	0	20hrs
Intermission	n/a	n/a	n/a
Fieldwork	1	1	20hrs
Holiday*	1	0	more than 20 hours
Pre-submission / post-submission / corrections	1	Recommended frequency of at least 2 every 3 months (pro-rata)**	20hrs

*although supervision may not occur, 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 School Administrator) should monitor engagement recording on Sussex Direct monthly to identify ('flag') students who have missed an expected contact point. An engagement monitoring report will be emailed to the RECs (or others as designated by the School administrator) and RSAO at regular points each month.

7. Contact, Reporting and Withdrawal for Postgraduate Research Students

Supervisors are responsible for reporting to the REC/DDS/RSAO 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 RSAO. RSAO will establish any reasons for non-engagement, and agree a plan for future engagement in liaison with the School.

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

If the University is unsuccessful in contacting the PGR student over a further month RSAO may take action as follows:

- i. If the PGR student is on a Tier 4 visa, the PGR student will be notified that their sponsorship will be withdrawn within a specified period if they do not contact their supervisor or RSAO. If the PGR student does not make contact, RSAO will move to withdraw the PGR student in consultation with the Head of the Office of Complaints, Appeals and Regulations and the School using the same process as described for the withdrawal of a PGR through Progression Review.
- ii. If the PGR student is not on a Tier 4 visa, RSAO will move to withdraw the PGR student in consultation with the Head of the Office of Complaints, Appeals and Regulations and the School using the same process as described for the withdrawal of a PGR student through Progression Review. The withdrawal of any PGR students may then be reported to the Doctoral Studies Committee.

8. Authorised Absences – Tier 4 students only

Research and Enterprise Co-ordinators should direct PGR students to the policy on 'authorised absences' which can be found in section 21 of the Handbook and Regulations for Doctoral Researchers which is available on the Research Student Administration Office (RSAO) web pages, currently here: <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/rsao/regulations/>.

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

9. Note about Tier 4 students:

The University will be required to justify the continued registration of any Tier 4 student who has missed 10 or more contact points in the event of a UKVI audit, and may take action to withdraw sponsorship from any such students. Any Tier 4 students whose engagement is flagged to the Academic Registry Compliance Manager may be contacted and, if necessary, the withdrawal process may commence in liaison with the School and the Academic Registrar. For such students the reason for withdrawal would be, in accordance with the Regulations, that the student: "has a visa status which is in conflict with the terms of the University's licence as a visa-sponsoring organisation". Withdrawal of Tier 4 students are reported to UKVI within 10 days of formal confirmation of the withdrawal.

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 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 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 the Research Student Administration Office (RSAO) researchstudentoffice@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 Life Centre.

The authorised absence will be logged on the student record and the student will receive confirmation the authorised absence has been approved from the RSAO.

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.

Research Student 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 RSAO to confirm they will be returning on the expected date or they need additional time and need to request temporary withdrawal.