

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 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 PGR student 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 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/internationalsupport/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; (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;
- 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 PGR students from the above list, and be able to produce reports showing the frequency of PGR student

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

attendance/engagement. Schools will have their own defined procedures and nominated monitoring personnel in place.

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 (Student route/tier 4 only)
Standard registration	1	1	20hrs
Authorised absence* (Student Route/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, 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 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 is available in Cognos and RECs (or others as designated by the School administrator) should run this monthly. RSAO will audit records of engagement every quarter and will liaise with Schools where there are compliance issues.

In addition to the above, for Student Route/Tier 4 students, 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 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:

If the PGR student is on a Student Route/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 Student Complaints, Appeals and Regulations and the School using the same process as described for the withdrawal of a PGR through Progression Review.

If the PGR student is not on a Student Route/Tier 4 visa, RSAO will move to withdraw the PGR student in consultation with the Head of the Office of Student 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 – Student Route/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 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 Compliance Officer will be contacted and, if necessary the withdrawal process may commence in liaison with the School and the Head of OSCAR.. Withdrawal of Student Route/Tier 4 students must be 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 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 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.

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 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.

Appendix B: New Home Office Engagement Monitoring Requirements

Source: Home Office Student Sponsor Guidance - Document 2: Sponsorship Duties Version 12/2020 1 December 2020

Academic engagement policy for higher education providers

7.9 All sponsors must ensure that sponsored students are academically engaging throughout the period of leave for which the students are being sponsored.

7.10 A student is academically engaging if they are actively and consistently following their course of study.

7.11 This guidance sets out the new academic engagement policy for higher education providers, which replaces the current attendance monitoring policy for such sponsors. Sponsors which are not higher education providers must continue to ensure that their sponsored students are academically engaging by applying the current attendance monitoring policy, set out at rows d. and e. of the 'Changes of student circumstances table'.

7.12 The change for higher education providers takes effect from 5 October 2020.

7.13 Current attendance monitoring policies which meet the attendance monitoring policy requirements will also meet the requirements of the new academic engagement policy.

7.14 Sponsors which are higher education providers must monitor and review students' academic engagement according to the requirements set out in the Bands below and, for deferral of studies, in the "Changes to student circumstances table".

7.15 Where a sponsored student fails to meet the minimum requirements as set out in this guidance for Band 1, or to meet the requirements of the sponsor's own academic engagement policy in Band 2, the sponsor must annotate the student's record with the reason for the lack of academic engagement and the steps taken to ensure the student re-engages with their study.

7.16 Where the student fails to re-engage with their studies within 60 days (30 days for distance learning) of the first contact from their sponsor regarding their lack of academic engagement, the sponsor must withdraw sponsorship except in exceptional circumstances (see row f. in the "Changes to student circumstances table" for examples of exceptional circumstances).

Academic engagement requirements for higher education providers

Band 1 – Study at a higher education provider at RQF level 5 (SCQF 8 and equivalents) and below

7.17 Each student in this band must be required to attend a minimum of 15 hours of daytime (08:00 to 18:00, Monday to Friday) classroom-based study per week. Where the student has not reached 85% attendance of their classroom-based study in any given month, the sponsor must review the reason for the student's absence. The student's record must then be annotated with the reason for the non-attendance and the steps being taken to improve the student's attendance.

7.18 Where a student's attendance falls below 70% for three consecutive months, the sponsor must withdraw sponsorship due to lack of academic engagement unless there are exceptional and evidenced reasons for the non-attendance (e.g. illness).

Appendix B: New Home Office Engagement Monitoring Requirements

Band 2 – Study at a higher education provider at RQF 6 (SCQF 9/10 and equivalents), RQF 7 (Taught and Research) (SCQF 11 and equivalents), and RQF8 (SCQF 12 and equivalents)

7.19 The sponsor must have a single academic engagement policy in place that applies consistently to international students across their institution. This can be the same policy that applies to home students, although there is no requirement or expectation that home students are to be included. The policy may differentiate between levels of study (for instance, doctoral and masters by research students may have their engagement recorded in a different way to undergraduates).

7.20 Academic engagement in band 2 is indicated by activities such as:

- Attending required lectures, seminars or tutorials
- Undertaking required laboratory work
- Undertaking research or fieldwork
- Submitting essays, assignments and attending examinations.

7.21 This is not an exhaustive list and not all courses will contain all these study elements. It is the sponsor's responsibility to decide which study elements are required for a given course and constitute academic engagement and what minimum level of engagement is required for each element.

7.22 The sponsor must be able to produce its academic engagement policy on request and demonstrate:

- how it is being applied
- that systems are in place to monitor academic engagement
- what information is being recorded to confirm that students are academically engaging
- what actions are expected when a lack of academic engagement is identified
- the maximum period of non-engagement before intervention takes place does not exceed 60 days in duration (30 days for students studying by distance learning), excluding post-graduate research and doctoral students
- that they have a robust system in place to identify any student who has ceased to engage with their studies and the action they will then take to support the student to re-engage
- that they have a clear policy on when non-engagement will lead to withdrawal of sponsorship.

7.23 The academic engagement policy must set out the sponsor's policy for retaining contact with students:

- on work placements/research programmes/field research trips if the student is studying at RQF Level 6 or above
- on Postgraduate Doctor or Dentist courses
- on study-abroad programmes (outward from the UK)
- during dissertation periods, where the student has no taught elements during this period
- whilst undertaking official roles as Student Union sabbatical officers

7.24 Sponsors must also notify UKVI and withdraw sponsorship where a student has deferred their studies for more than 60 days, unless the exceptional circumstances set out in the "Changes to student circumstances table" apply.

Band 3 – Exceptions

7.25 During the following periods, the sponsor is not required to monitor academic engagement of their students in any way for immigration purposes:

- During vacation periods

Appendix B: New Home Office Engagement Monitoring Requirements

- During the post-study period
- Whilst the student is on the Doctorate Extension Scheme

Study at more than one level

7.26 When the student's course of sponsored study involves study at more than one level, sponsors must apply the most appropriate academic engagement band for each level of study.

Examples

1) Student is studying a pre-sessional course (RQF3) at one provider followed by an undergraduate degree (RQF6) at a different provider.

Apply band 1 for the pre-sessional and band 2 for the remaining course.

2) Student studying a year-long foundation year programme (RQF 5) before moving onto a degree programme (RQF 6) at the same provider.

Apply band 2 to all study.

Covid-19 and academic engagement

7.27 Students who are no longer attending classroom-based learning or work placements as a result of moving to a distance learning model due to Covid-19, or are absent as a result of Covid-19 related illness or travel, will not be able to meet any requirements to attend physical contact points under a sponsor's duty to monitor academic engagement. Missing expected physical contact points for these reasons does not constitute lack of academic engagement.

7.28 Distance or blended learning is permitted for sponsored students in the 2020-2021 academic year, provided they will transition to face-to-face learning as soon as circumstances allow. Where a student is studying by distance learning, including study overseas, where possible sponsors should use expected online contact points such as logging into online learning portals, attending virtual lectures and tutorials, and online submission of coursework to monitor academic engagement. If a student stops engaging with their distance learning for more than 30 days, whether overseas or in the UK, and fails to re-engage with their studies within another 30 days following intervention, their sponsor must withdraw sponsorship.

7.29 We will not take action against sponsors who are unable to monitor online contact or engagement points due to practical or technical limitations. Sponsors are not required to withdraw sponsorship when students are absent from studies, including online studies, due to Covid-19. If a student has stopped attending their online studies for other reasons, the normal academic engagement policy applies to online learning. For the current Covid-19 concessions see the guidance.