

PROCEDURES FOR AUTHORISED ABSENCES

(Student route visa holders only)

What is an authorised absence?

It is terminology used to describe permission given by the sponsor (i.e. the University) to allow a student to take a break from studies of up to 60 days, without needing to withdraw sponsorship, and so long as they can still complete their course by the end date on their CAS. During the absence, the student does not need to comply with normal attendance requirements and should not actively be studying. They can remain in the UK or leave the country during an authorised absence. They should not be continuing their studies remotely though; the absence is approved because they need a break from their studies.

The [Student Sponsor Guidance](#) (*sections 7.5.f and 7.10 directly refer*) provides general information on authorised absences. Universities then have some flexibility to further define how they wish to decide on and manage absences. This document sets out the approved University position¹ and provides further information to support staff.

When should I use the term “authorised absence”?

The term has a very specific meaning associated with UKVI Compliance. When used in official University documents and communications an “authorised absence” should always be referring to the UKVI term and not any other type of absence where a student has been given permission to be absent.

What are the acceptable reasons for permitting an authorised absence?

1. To receive minor medical treatment (medical evidence required)
2. To take parental leave (medical evidence required, as well as confidence that temporary withdrawal is not the better route)
3. Illness which would not ordinarily result in an absence exceeding 60 days (medical evidence required)
4. Illness of a close family member/dependent (medical evidence required)
5. Another reason that the University decides it is exceptionally prepared to support (relevant evidence required)

Use of category 5 should be rare and given on a case by case basis. An individual decision will not set a precedent for a new category of approval that would extend to any other student.

Where students are requesting an authorised absence on health and wellbeing grounds, it is recommended that they are referred to the Student Centre for support and a discussion around their options, prior to the absence being agreed.

What are unacceptable reasons for an authorised absence?

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

¹ Add date of UKVI Steering Group approval, once received.

What kind of evidence is acceptable?

It is expected that any medical circumstances serious enough to require a break from studies can be evidenced via a doctor's letter, hospital discharge letter, a letter from a mental health professional or an appointment letter that confirms a course of planned treatment.

It is noted that evidence of someone else's illness or evidence of non-medical circumstances may be more challenging to provide. Reasonable efforts to provide evidence should still be made, as is required for other formal University processes like an exceptional circumstances claim or an academic appeal.

In rare instances it is accepted that it may not be possible to provide evidence. In such cases the decision will be made on the basis of the information the student has provided.

Should this process be used for all known periods of absence, even relatively short ones?

If a student can take a break from their studies but still comply with their core requirements under the [Attendance, Absence and Engagement Policy](#) then they do not need an authorised absence. For example, if a taught student wished to go home for one or two weeks to attend a wedding or a funeral, and had met the attendance requirements preceding the trip and would resume attending as usual afterwards then they are continuing to meet University requirements and are not really taking a break from their studies in the spirit of what is intended via an authorised absence.

Where is the student facing information published?

<https://student.sussex.ac.uk/international/visas/during-studies/changes/break-from-studies>

How should students apply for an authorised absence?

Any student holding a Student visa can apply for an authorised absence; undergraduate, postgraduate taught or postgraduate researcher (PGR). They apply by completing the relevant request form, available for download from the following page:

<https://student.sussex.ac.uk/international/visas/during-studies/changes/break-from-studies>

What is the approval process for an authorised absence?

For PGRs, the form must be approved by the lead supervisor and the Director of Postgraduate Researchers (DPGR), who can consult with the UKVI Compliance Manager in particularly complex circumstances, before signing off on the absence.

For taught students, the form must be approved by the School's/Faculty's Director of Student Experience (DoSE), who can consult with the UKVI Compliance Manager in particularly complex circumstances, before signing off on the absence.

The approver is responsible for communicating the decision to the student and the School/Faculty is responsible for holding all relevant records internally. Such records must be provided during an audit.

Is the maximum 60 days or 60 working days?

It is 60 consecutive calendar days. Weekends, Bank Holidays and University closure dates are included in the 60 days.

How should vacation periods be accounted for?

A UG student would not need to take an authorised absence during long summer vacation because they are not expected to be in attendance. However, the shorter winter and spring vacation periods

may need to be included in the 60 days depending on the reason for the absence and the general timing. We would not approve an absence of 3 weeks prior to Easter, and then a further absence of 4 weeks after Easter, if the circumstances are ongoing over Easter.

A PGT or a PGR is expected to be in attendance during the summer vacation because this is term time for them, and not a vacation period.

What should approvers take into consideration?

Authorised absences must only be permitted where we as the sponsor can assure ourselves that the reason for the request is genuine, that it is the best way of handling the situation (i.e. that intermissions (temporary withdrawal) is not the better solution) and that it will not have any negative impact on the student's academic progression, i.e. that the student will be able to complete their studies within their current sponsorship dates.

A UG taught student will be much more limited in their ability to take an authorised absence given the frequency of assessment submissions. In any conversation with the student staff must be clear about the potential implications for non-submissions. Advice regarding Exceptional Circumstances claims should be given but it must be noted that evidence required for ECs may be different from what is required for an authorised absence and if the issue is not sudden, unforeseen or temporary, the EC claim may not be approved.

What are some appropriate scenarios for which an absence could be authorised?

1. A PGR is juggling caring for their children with part time work, and their studies. They are approaching burnout. With evidence from a doctor or a mental health practitioner, an authorised absence could be approved to allow them to take a break from their studies and rest for a period of time.
2. A PGT student's family member in their home country is very ill and they want (or need) to go and see them/support them. With evidence of the illness, a trip of several weeks could be agreed.
3. A PGT student has had a baby. They feel strongly that they can manage to take care of the baby and maintain their studies but they need a few weeks after the birth to rest and recover. With evidence of the birth, up to 60 days could be agreed, if the timing was such that they would not miss most of a semester of teaching.
4. A UG student becomes very unwell unexpectedly (e.g. suffers an illness needing hospital admission or has a significant mental health episode) and it is sufficient that a break from studies would allow them time to recover whilst still being able to stay on track. With evidence, and if the timing was such that it could be managed without issue, then an authorised absence could be agreed.

In all scenarios, the authoriser would need to feel confident, based on their conversations with the student and information about their progress on their course to date that the student can return and complete their studies within the existing dates. Each scenario may need testing against whether an EC claim is better or a TWD is better.

Can a retrospective absence be approved?

No. This means the absence was unauthorised and a compliance breach has occurred. As with intermissions/temporary withdrawals, retrospective applications are not permitted. Before going any further, you should speak to the UKVI Compliance Manager to ensure we manage the situation without creating further risk for the student or the institution.

Does the student maintain their right to work in the UK during an authorised absence?

The same 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.

Does the student continue to pay fees during an authorised absence?

Yes. Authorised absences may be for periods of only a couple of weeks or up to a maximum of 60 days but regardless, as registration is not paused, fee liability remains in place. This is something for the student to take into consideration when applying for an authorised absence as opposed to a temporary withdrawal. Students whose fees are being paid by an external funder may need to check with their funder that a period of absence is acceptable.

What are the student's responsibilities during an authorised absence?

Students will remain registered and will continue to be sponsored. They must continue to meet the conditions of their visa (i.e. they must not work more than 20 hours per week during term time and most keep their contact details up to date in Sussex Direct). Finally, they should maintain informal contact with the University via their main supervisor or Academic Advisor or DoSE so that we can continue to support them and offer relevant advice.

What happens if a student cannot return to their studies within the required 60 days?

The student will be required to intermit (take temporary withdrawal), and the University will withdraw sponsorship resulting in the curtailment of the student's visa.

Are there any exceptions?

There is some discretion to permit an authorised absence of longer than 60 days if:

1. There are exceptional and justifiable reasons, supported by valid evidence.
2. The University has assured itself that the student can return at a later date and still complete their course within their existing period of sponsorship.

An example might be where the student is too ill to travel back to the UK but not so unwell that intermission is the logical next step. The UKVI Compliance Manager should be consulted in all cases where the student is saying they are not able to return so that appropriate guidance can be given to support a reasonable resolution for both the student and the University.

What is required for the return from an authorised absence?

Ten working days before the student is due to resume their studies, they should contact their lead supervisor, Academic Advisor or Director of Student Experience (whomever authorised the absence and/or whomever they have been maintaining contact with) to confirm they will be returning by the agreed date.

If they were absent on health and wellbeing grounds, consideration should be given as to whether the [Fitness to Study process](#) should be followed.

Student Records do not need to be informed, as the registration status does not change.

The UKVI Compliance team do not need to be informed, as their sponsorship has not changed.

The School/Faculty must verify that the student has returned and has resumed their studies, including meeting attendance and engagement requirements. If there is any doubt about this, the UKVI Compliance team must be notified.

What records must be kept for an authorised absence?

During an audit, the UKVI will expect a complete paper trail relating to an authorised absence. This must consist of:

- The fully completed form
- The evidence used in the decision making
- The notification of approval to the student
- Evidence of the return from the authorised absence
- Any additional internal communications that may be relevant

Therefore, any email trail and communication with the student should be retained by the School/Faculty, in a central, shared location rather than someone's personal emails.

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