

Document Title	Leave of Absence Policy
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Related policies	Withdrawal Policy Attendance and Engagement Policy Academic Regulations Extenuating Circumstances Policy

St Mary's University is committed to improve student retention and maintain accurate student records for internal and external submissions. The purpose of this policy is to ensure students receive appropriate academic, pastoral and financial advice, before the Leave of Absence process is initiated.

This policy works in conjunction with the Withdrawal Policy and Attendance and Engagement Policy and also provides guidance for academic and professional services staff, on how to process requests for Leave of Absence or interruption of study, within a timely manner.

1. SCOPE AND PURPOSE

1.1 The purpose of this policy is to make staff and students on all programmes, aware of the University's policy on Leave of Absence. The policy applies to postgraduate taught, postgraduate research and undergraduate students.

1.2 Academic Regulations applying to the following groups of students:

- a. Section B (20) for undergraduate and taught postgraduate students
- b. Section C (29.3) for BSc Physiotherapy
- c. Section D (15.2) for Postgraduate Occupational Therapy
- d. Section F (7) for PGCE/PfCE with QTS and PGCE non-QTS

1.3 Students considering a Leave of Absence should seek academic advice and guidance as soon as possible, from their Course Lead, Student Services and Professional Services.

2. DEFINITIONS AND TERMINOLOGY

For the purpose of this policy and associated documents.

2.1 Student: any person registered onto a St Mary's programme at undergraduate or postgraduate level, be it full-time or part-time

2.2 Leave of Absence (LOA): a pause in studies when a student temporarily and formally, in agreement with the University authorities, disengages from their studies

St Mary's University deems a Leave of Absence to be a period between one semester and no longer than one academic year

3. BACKGROUND

3.1 The University expects all students to engage fully with their studies, attend all lectures, seminars and teaching as required and submit all work by published deadlines.

3.2 From time to time, students can experience personal, family or health-related problems that may require them to take a period of time away from their studies. In some cases, the University may require that a student takes a Leave of Absence from their studies. Typically, a Leave of Absence may be suggested and ultimately imposed if necessary and after seeking medical advice, when a student's health is giving cause for concern.

3.3 With an approved or imposed Leave of Absence, a student is expected to return to study within the timeframe agreed with the University. Any Leave of Absence that surpasses the agreed timeframe may result in permanent withdrawal from the course.

4. REASONS FOR TAKING A LEAVE OF ABSENCE

4.1 The University recognises that students may wish to take a break from their studies for a number of reasons. The following will be considered as appropriate reasons for requesting a Leave of Absence:

- a. Medical reasons including short-term illness, as recommended by the student's GP or consultant
- b. Maternity/paternity/adoption leave
- c. Bereavement
- d. To undertake work experience not included as a formal course-based work placement but which closely relates to their course of study
- e. Eviction and/or homelessness
- f. Other valid personal reasons

4.2 The following will be considered as appropriate for Postgraduate Research students in both full-time and part-time study:

- a. For part-time students in full-time employment only; a significant increase in workload due to circumstances beyond their control
- b. A gap in supervision, where a supervisor leaves or is absent for more than three months, with no cover in place
- c. A break down in the supervisory relationship, resulting in a material impact on the progress of the project
- d. Difficulties in research beyond the student's control
- e. Failure or unavailability of specialist equipment or resources required for research that causes significant delay to progress

4.3 Students requesting a Leave of Absence may be asked to provide documentary evidence for their request, for example:

- a. Medical certificates from a medical professional/consultant; must be on headed paper, dated and signed
- b. Birth or adoption certificates
- c. Death certificates
- d. Divorce decrees or related relevant paperwork
- e. Contract of employment

4.4 The University reserves the right to decline a request to take a Leave of Absence if insufficient, inadequate or irrelevant documentary evidence is provided.

4.5 In the case of the University requiring a student to take a Leave of Absence, full reasons will be given in writing and will include measures to be taken before the student can return to the University. Typically, the student will be required to produce a note from a GP confirming that they are fit to return to their studies. Where a Leave of Absence is required, the University's Student Services department and Course Lead will meet with the student, to ensure that they are aware of the implications of taking a Leave of Absence.

5. OTHER AUTHORISED ABSENCES

5.1 All students are expected to attend all lectures, seminars, tutorials and any scheduled sessions according to their timetable. Any absences due to short-term illness, students should in the first instance notify their Personal Tutor and Course Lead. On campus students at St Mary's can additionally record absence for a scheduled lecture via the SMU App. Any absence not communicated to the relevant staff will be recorded as a non-authorised absence.

5.2 For absences up to two weeks to be considered, students must provide sufficient medical evidence from a medical practitioner or consultant. This will need to be approved by the Deputy Academic Registrar and Course Lead.

6. DURATION OF A LEAVE OF ABSENCE

6.1 Normally, it is expected that a Leave of Absence will last for a full semester or alternatively and ideally, a full academic year. This is to enable the student to engage fully with their studies, upon their return and so as to not disadvantage them in terms of learning and taking assessments. In some cases such as pregnancy, it may not be possible to take a semester or an academic year off.

6.2 Requests for a Leave of Absence made more than two weeks after the start of each Semester, will usually not be granted unless approved by the Deputy Academic Registrar or Academic Registrar based on the evidence provided. Where exceptional circumstances are not deemed to exist and the student still wishes to take absence from their studies at that time, any assessments taken on their return will be treated as a repeat assessment and capped.

6.3 Absences of over a year will not be granted initially. In exceptional circumstances, it may be necessary for a Leave of Absence of more than a year to be granted. Requests for absences over a year or an extension of an initial period of absence, must be discussed with the relevant School, following the first period of absence and then made in writing to Registry, for approval. Absences over two years are subject to approval by the Deputy Academic Registrar or Academic Registrar.

6.4 Normally, only one period of Leave of Absence will be granted for the duration of the programme. Any request for an additional period of absence will be reviewed and a decision made by the Deputy Academic Registrar or Academic Registrar.

6.5 It is the student's responsibility to ensure that they are aware of the full financial and academic implications of taking a Leave of Absence, before making an application. See 4.4 in the case of required Leave of Absence.

7. RETURNING FROM A LEAVE OF ABSENCE

7.1 A student returning from an approved or imposed Leave of Absence will be allowed to defer any assessments due for any modules they have completed, before their period of Leave of Absence.

7.2 A student wishing to return from a medical Leave of Absence, whether instigated by them or imposed by the University, should produce a note from their GP or medical consultant, which confirms both their fitness to return to study and to cope with the requirements of university life. If a student is unable to provide satisfactory evidence that they are fit to return, the University may, in exceptional circumstances and with the approval from the Vice Chancellor, formally terminate their studies.

8. COMPLAINTS/REDRESS

8.1 The following Complaints Procedure applies to complaints against the implementation of this policy. Please refer to the [Complaints Procedure](#). Further advice and guidance on procedural matters should be referred to the Complaints office by emailing complaints@stmarys.ac.uk.

9. IMPLICATIONS OF LEAVE OF ABSENCE

9.1 A student must be made aware of the implications of taking a Leave of Absence from their studies, their finances and potentially, their accommodation. The Course Lead should signpost these issues in any conversation with the student considering a Leave of Absence and refer them to the appropriate departments. The initial conversation with the student should cover the following:

- a. All of the options available to the student including taking a shorter break, repeating the year, changing course, changing optional modules, deferral or withdrawal
- b. Financial implications, with clear advice that the student should contact Student Finance departments and/or any other funding agencies or sponsors
- c. Available support, in the case of health-related or personal reasons
- d. Academic implications upon their return to study including changes in the programme or modules that may occur, whilst they are away
- e. Proposed duration of the Leave of Absence

9.2 Implications on their accommodation; students in St Mary's accommodation should be directed to Accommodation Services. Those in private, rented accommodation who are concerned about their liability for continuing rent, can be referred to Student Services who should be able to advise

10. IMPOSED LEAVE OF ABSENCE

10.1 From time to time, the University may decide that it would be in the best interest of the student and/or University community to impose a Leave of Absence. The decision will be made with reference to the University's Fitness to Study Policy. The most likely reason for requiring a student to take a Leave of Absence, is mental health.

10.2 When a Leave of Absence is required, the University will establish the initial duration of the period of absence, in conjunction with the student. Regular communication will be established between the link staff member allocated by the University and the student, during the period of absence.

10.3 Two months before the student is scheduled to return, the University will contact the student and arrange for a medical report to be produced, indicating whether the student is fit to return to their studies and University life. Planned ongoing support will be established, at a pre-returning meeting or by email correspondence. This may include referral to support services external to the University.

11. VOLUNTARY LEAVE OF ABSENCE

11.1 If the student has requested a Leave of Absence, they should submit a change of status request through their online portal on e-Vision. This will trigger emails to be sent to their programme and Registry Services, to approve the request. The student will be able to submit any documentary evidence associated with their request.

11.2 Once the request has been submitted and approved, the student will be notified through the online portal. University staff can submit a Leave of Absence request, on behalf of a student.

11.3 Where the issue leading to an application for a Leave of Absence is highly sensitive and if the student has been in contact with Student Services, Wellbeing Services may be asked to provide supporting evidence.

11.4 A student must not request a Leave of Absence during the period of or just before assessment deadlines and examinations. For Undergraduate students with an Autumn start date, this will fall between April and May and for Postgraduate students with an Autumn start date, between July and August. Where a student is unfit or unable to partake in a scheduled assessment, they should make an [Extenuating Circumstances](#) claim.

12. DURING THE LEAVE OF ABSENCE

12.1 During the period of voluntary Leave of Absence, a representative of the programme team should contact the student at least twice by email, to enquire about the student's welfare and their plans to return to St Mary's. The correspondence must also cover any support needs or questions the student may have, relating to their course or any additional academic support they may need upon their return, so that appropriate arrangements can be made. In addition, any changes to the programme, modules or assessments that occur after the student has begun their Leave of Absence, must be communicated to them swiftly.

12.2 Any student on a Leave of Absence should inform Registry Services immediately, if their circumstances or contact details change whilst they are on leave.

12.3 Registry Services will contact the student two months before their planned return, to discuss arrangements for and confirm their return.

12.4 Any student who plans to return to St Mary's accommodation, must be included in all communications from Accommodation Services, regarding any updates and application deadlines.

13. RETURN FROM LEAVE OF ABSENCE

13.1 Upon returning to studies, students returning from a Leave of Absence are required to complete their online re-enrolment.

13.2 When a student returns from a Leave of Absence, they should meet their Course Lead to discuss the plan for the year, any concerns they have following their period of leave and to identify any academic or pastoral support needs.

13.3 The Course Lead should initiate the meeting and send reminders, if no response is received.

13.4 Registry Services will be responsible for providing each Faculty with the names of all students who are taking or due to return from a Leave of Absence.

14. REFUSAL OF A REQUEST FOR LEAVE OF ABSENCE

14.1 In the event a request for Leave of Absence is refused, the student should receive a letter from the Course Lead and/or Registry Services giving the reason for the refusal, within five working days of their discussion.

14.2 The student may appeal to the Head of School within five working days of receipt of the notification, enclosing additional evidence, if appropriate. A panel comprising Registry Services staff and Faculty representatives will review the decision and respond to the student, within ten working days of receipt of the appeal.

15. EXTENSION TO LEAVE OF ABSENCE

15.1 In the case of an imposed Leave of Absence, if the appointed medical consultant does not deem that the student is fit to return to study as per the Fitness to Study Policy, it may be necessary to extend the period of Leave of Absence further. In such cases, ongoing support will be vital to facilitate the student's return, once they are able to do so.

15.2 Any request to extend the Leave of Absence beyond an academic year must be approved by the Deputy Academic Registrar or Academic Registrar.

15.3 In the case of a voluntary Leave of Absence, a request to extend beyond an academic year should be submitted in writing and addressed to the Deputy Academic Registrar or Academic Registrar, with reasons and evidence to support the request.

16. FEES AND FUNDING

16.1 Students taking a Leave of Absence will be liable for the fees for the Term/Semester in which their leave commences. For students with financial support such as Student Finance England, the University is obliged to inform the funding body of the student's Leave of Absence, of which payments will be suspended during this period.

16.2 Upon return to studies, the University will inform the relevant funding body, to allow funding to resume once the student has re-enrolled and re-commenced study. Self-funding students will be informed of any updates and/or changes to payments and deadlines, by the Fees office.

16.3 Further information on fee charges for students on an absence from study can be found in the Refund Policy.