

**SMUO Leave of Absence Policy**

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| **Date Effective** | 21 November 2023 | |
| **Approved By** | Academic Strategy, Portfolio and Student Experience Committee | |
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| **Related Policies** | Refund Policy | Withdrawal 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 that students receive appropriate advice, academic, pastoral and financial, before the Leave of Absence process is initiated.

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

**Scope and Purpose**

The purpose of this policy is to make staff and students on Distance Learning programmes aware of the University’s policy on Leave of Absence. The policy applies to all undergraduate and postgraduate students on Distance Learning and Online programmes.

A student retains the right to permanently withdraw or request an interruption of study from their programme, however guidance should be made available to assist the student in exploring alternative options.

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

**Definitions and Terminology**

For the purpose of this and associated policies.

* **Student**: any person registered onto the programme, regardless of the number of modules registered onto at one time or mode of study.
* **LOA (Leave of Absence)**: a pause in studies when a student temporarily and formally, in agreement with the University authorities, disengages from their studies.

St Mary’s University defines a Leave of Absence to be a period between one semester and no longer than twelve months.

**Background**

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. 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.

With any approved Leave of Absence, a student is expected to return to study within the time period agreed with the University. Any Leave of Absences longer than 12 months may lead to permanent withdrawal from the programme.

Once a student has commenced and registered onto a module, unless the module has been dropped or a withdrawal request submitted before the cooling off period, the student will be liable for any fees. Details of the cooling off and liability period can be found in the Refund Policy.

**Reasons for Leave of Absence**

The University recognises that students may wish to take a break from their studies for a number of reasons. Leave of absence requests from students will be looked at and investigated on an individual basis. The following will be considered as appropriate reasons for requesting a Leave of Absence:

* Medical reasons, as recommended by the student’s GP or consultant
* Maternity/paternity/adoption leave
* Bereavement
* Other valid personal reasons
* Students requesting a Leave of Absence may be asked to provide documentary evidence for their request, for example:
* Medical certificates
* Birth/adoption certificates
* Death certificates
* Divorce decrees
* Contract of employment

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

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 measure to be taken before the student can return to the University. Typically, the student will be required to produce a not 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 will meet with the student to ensure that they are aware of the implications of taking a leave of absence.

**Implications of Leave of Absence**

The student must be made aware of the implications of taking a Leave of Absence on their studies and finance. The Course Lead should signpost these issues in any conversation with a student considering a Leave of Absence, before referring them to the appropriate departments.

The initial conversation should cover the following:

* All of the options available to the student including a Study Break, repeating a year, changing course, changing modules, deferral or withdrawal
* The implications on their finance, with clear advice that the student contacts Student Finance, the Fees Office or any other funding agencies or sponsors, to discuss their particular circumstances
* What support is available in the case of health-related or personal circumstances
* What their programme of study will comprise upon their return including any planned changes in the programme or modules that may occur whilst they are away, affect their choice on their return
* The proposed duration of the Leave of Absence

**Imposed Leave of Absence**

From time to time, the University may decide that it would be in the student’s best interest and/or the University community, if they were to take a Leave of Absence. The decision will be made with reference to the University’s [Fitness to Study Policy](https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/policies/fitness-to-study.aspx).

The most likely reason for requiring a student to take a Leave of Absence is mental ill health. 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 a link staff member allocated by the University and student in their period of absence.

**Voluntary Leave of Absence**

If the student has asked to take a Leave of Absence, they should firstly contact their Student Support Officer and may additionally submit a change of status request through their online Student Portal on E-vision. The student will be able to submit any documentary evidence associated with their request.

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

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

**Duration of a Leave of Absence**

Normally, it is expected that a Leave of Absence will last for a full semester (3 months/16 weeks) or alternatively and ideally, a full academic year, to enable the student to engage fully with their studies on their return and so as not to 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 a year off.

Any absence requests for less than 3 months/16 weeks will not be considered for a Leave of Absence. Short absence requests should be referred to as outlined in the Study Break policy.

Requests for a Leave of Absence made more than two weeks after the start of each semester would not normally be granted. Where exceptional circumstances are not deemed to exist and the student still wishes to take a leave of absence at that time, any assessments taken on their return will be treated as repeat assessments and capped at 50%.

Generally, 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 Academic Registrar.

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.

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 consultant, which confirms both their fitness to return to study and 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 approval from the Vice Chancellor, formally terminate their studies.

**Refusal of Leave of Absence request**

In the event of Leave of Absence requested refused, the student should receive notification from the Course Lead and/or Registry Services, giving the reason for the refusal, within five working days of their discussion. The student appeal to the Academic Registrar within five working days of receipt of the notification, enclosing additional evidence if appropriate. A panel comprising of Registry Services staff and Faculty representatives will review the decision and respond to the student within ten working days of receipt of the appeal.

Students who have failed their overall programme or have been placed on a forced withdrawal by the University will not be eligible for a Leave of Absence, including those awaiting outcome of an academic appeal.

**Returning from a Leave of Absence**

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

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.

Any changes to modules prior to the Leave of Absence, will need to be requested with Registry Services. Please refer to the Module Drop Policy for details.

Upon return from a Leave of Absence, students will be required to fulfil any previous conditions agreed; academic and/medical-related. Return to study from a medical Leave of Absence would require submission of a medical certificate or equivalent evidence confirming the student is fit for study, which may also be extended for students returning from an absence on compassionate grounds.

Students who fail to provide sufficient evidence or meet the conditions for return to study will be required to submit a new request for a Leave of Absence or a withdrawal from their studies. The University will have the right to process a forced withdrawal for students who do not meet the conditions in returning from a Leave of Absence or are unable to provide evidence to support their fitness to return to study.

Students will be permitted to re-commence their studies at the start of a module, regardless of when their Leave of Absence was initiated. Students will also be permitted to re-commence their studies at the point from where their Leave of Absence was initiated.

A student may return to a module from a break of study, a maximum of two times. Any assessments taken and outcomes previously obtained will stand, unless extenuating circumstances had been submitted and approved, prior to the Leave of Absence. It should be noted however that students re-joining the module at the beginning will not be eligible for a refund if the module is dropped; the 14-day liability period would no longer apply.

**Extension to Leave of Absence**

In the case of an imposed Leave of Absence, if the appointed Practitioner 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 further. In such cases, ongoing support will be vital to facilitate the student’s return, once they are able to do so.

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

In the case of a voluntary Leave of Absence, an extension request beyond an academic year or twelve months should be submitted in writing to the Registry Services office and addressed to the Academic Registrar with reasons and evidence to support the request.

**Accepted Evidence**

* Certificate or letter from a medical professional on headed paper, dated and signed. The document must include the name(s) of the medical professional(s), title and signature
* Hospital discharge letter or an equivalent medical documentation on headed paper, dated and signed
* Supporting letter from the University or known associates of the University, approved by the Student Services and Wellbeing teams
* Adoption or birth certificates
* Death certificates
* Divorce decrees
* Contract of employment

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

**Complaints/Redress**

The following [Complaints Procedure](https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/policies/complaints-procedure.aspx) applies to complaints against the implementation of this policy. Further advice and guidance on procedural matters should be referred to the Appeals and Complaints office by emailing [complaints@stmarys.ac.uk](mailto:complaints@stmarys.ac.uk)

**Fees and Funding**

Students taking a Leave of Absence will be liable for the fees for the term 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.

When returning from a Leave of Absence, the University will inform the relevant funding bodies, to allow funding to resume once the student re-commences study. This will however not be applicable to those who have initially paid for the programme in full.

Further details of fee charges for students with an interruption of study can be found in the Refund Policy.