

SMUO Study Break Policy

Document Title	Study Break Policy (St Mary's Online)		
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Related Policies	Leave of Absence Policy	Withdrawal Policy	Academic Regulations

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

This policy works in conjunction with the Leave of Absence Policy and also provides guidance for academic and professional services staff, to be able to make informed decisions before taking a Study Break or an interruption in study, within a timely manner.

1. SCOPE AND PURPOSE

1.1 The purpose of this policy is to make staff and students on Digital Learning programmes aware of the University's policy on Study Breaks. The policy applies to all undergraduate and postgraduate students on the Distance Learning and Online programmes.

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

1.3 Students considering a Study Break should seek relevant advice and guidance as soon as possible, from available resources such as Associate Lecturer, Subject Lead, Student Success Coordinator or Student Liaison Officer.

2. DEFINITIONS AND TERMINOLOGY

For the purpose of this and associated policies.

Student: any person registered onto a programme, regardless of mode of study or the number of modules registered onto at one time

Study Break: a short-term interruption of study from the programme, agreed with the University authorities and that is not defined as a Leave of Absence. Usually taken as the duration of a module by not registering for that module

Module: an individual, credited unit of the programme with structured teaching and learning, with an explicit set of learning outcomes and assessment criteria

Trailing Module: an individual module or maximum number of modules/credits not passed from a previous registration period, permitted to retake or complete in a new registration period

Leave of Absence: a pause in studies when a student temporarily and formally, in agreement with the University authorities, disengages from their studies for longer than a Study Break

3. STUDY BREAK

3.1 St Mary's University defines a Study Break to be a period of 8 weeks, or however long the period of the module taken as a study break is determined to be. Any interruption of study longer than two consecutive study breaks, will be defined as a Leave of Absence.

3.2 A Study Break can only be taken or applied for after the completion of at least one module. A dormant status cannot be applied at the start of a new registration.

3.3 A Study Break is considered when a student wishes to, or is advised to, take a short-term or minimal break in their studies.

3.4 With any interruption of study, a student is required to firstly ensure that they have sought out relevant advice and information from the following:

- Documents such as Student Handbooks provided in all of their modules
- Academic staff such as Associate Lecturers and Subject Leads, their Student Success Coordinator and/or Student Liaison Officer and Registry Services

3.5 Students may additionally submit a change of status request through their online Student Portal on E- vision or contact St Mary's Registry Services. The student will be able to submit any documentary evidence associated with their request.

3.6 Students are responsible for retrieving and completing any outstanding assessments during a Study Break.

3.7 The length of a Study Break may be dependent on several factors, including when the module being missed will next be available or if a student has any outstanding assessments from the current or previous module. The confirmed length of Study Break will be communicated to the student either through the online Student Portal or email, once the request has been approved.

3.8 Study Breaks can be taken consecutively, however those wishing to take consecutive breaks in excess of two full modules should also refer to the Leave of Absence Policy. Those who fail to resume study after the agreed Study Break period will either be asked to request a Leave of Absence or risk a Forced Withdrawal from the programme.

3.9 Students are permitted a maximum of six Study Breaks throughout the duration of their programme (excluding any approved Leave of Absence periods) when studying part-time.

3.10 Once a student has commenced and registered onto a module, unless a withdrawal request is submitted before the cooling off period, the student will be liable for any fees and will not be able to enter a study break for that module. Details of the cooling off and liability period can be found in the Refund Policy. If a student wishes to pause a module for any reason after the first two weeks of the module start date, they should liaise directly with their Subject Lead for relevant information and guidance on the best approach for their individual situation.

3.11 If a student takes three consecutive Study Breaks, they will automatically be placed on a Leave of Absence. Failure to return from multiple consecutive study breaks and the resulting Leave of Absence will result in the

student being withdrawn from their programme. If the student wants to avoid automatic withdrawal, they need to contact Registry Services (statuschange@stmarys.ac.uk) to advise of their intention to return to study.

4. IMPLICATIONS OF A STUDY BREAK

4.1 The student must be made aware of the implications of a Study Break on their studies and finance. The Subject Lead, Student Liaison Officer or their Student Success Coordinator should signpost these issues in any conversation with a student considering a Study Break, before referring them to the appropriate departments.

4.2 Where a student seeks advice on the study break via their Subject Lead, Associate Lecturer, Student Liaison Officer, or Student Success Coordinator, the initial conversation should cover the following:

- a) **Students are not permitted to trail more than two 15 credit modules (30 credits in total) during a Study Break.** This includes modules with no submissions or extenuated summative submissions open, when returning from a Study Break.

Examples:

A student may complete Module A (15 credits) but defer Module B (15 credits) during the Study Break. They cannot defer two or more modules simultaneously, such as Module B and Module C, as this would exceed the permitted limit of trailing modules.

A student has passed two modules and has an outstanding university level extenuating circumstance for a summative assessment on Module 3. They have now failed the summative assessment on module 4. This student would not be able to register for any further modules until one of the non-passed modules is retrieved.

A student has failed the mid-module assignment on Module 6 and now fails the end of module assignment on module 6 – whilst they can retrieve this module at the next opportunity and can take their next module, if a further fail occurs on module 7, an enforced study break would be required during module 8 to retrieve either module 6 or 7.

- b) All options available to the student including a Leave of Absence, re-sitting assessments, changing the course pathway (where possible) or withdrawal
- c) 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 circumstances
- d) What support is available in the case of health-related or personal circumstances
- e) A trajectory of their programme of study should always be sought from their student success coordinator and made available to the student so that they are informed about planned changes in the order of their programme modules, or a compulsory deferral that would be needed to wait for a module to subsequently run after their deferral and/or study break.
- f) Students should be advised that any study break taken lengthens the duration of their degree and can, in some instances, postpone their graduation by up to two years.
- g) The proposed duration of the Study Break

4.3 An approved Study Break will result in a change of expected end date of the course duration, which is reported to the relevant regulatory agencies.

4.4 The University have the right to refuse consecutive Study Break requests, in addition to any Leave of Absence, if the expected end date exceeds the maximum course registration period.

5. IMPOSED STUDY BREAK

5.1 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 Study Break or a short-term interruption of study. The decision will be made with reference to the University's Fitness to Study Policy and any Academic Regulations.

5.2 Students who do not purchase their next module or complete enrolment before a given deadline, will be subject to an imposed Study Break. Failure to register onto or purchase two or more consecutive modules, may result in withdrawal from the course.

6. VOLUNTARY/REQUESTED STUDY BREAK

6.1 If a student has asked to take a Study Break, they should ensure that they have reviewed relevant information provided in handbooks, by their academic team and support staff. Application for a study break requires a student to confirm that they have taken this information on board in their decision making, and where unsure, they have consulted with one of the members of staff noted.

6.2 Once the 'Intent to take a Study Break' form has been submitted and received by the Academic or support team, if necessary, they will advise of any impact to the student's individual study trajectory, either via email or in a meeting. Students may request a meeting to discuss this prior to completing their Study Break request, where possible or confirmed in writing.

6.3 Where the issue leading to an application for a Study Break is highly sensitive and if the student has been in contact with Student Success and/or Wellbeing Services, they may be asked to provide supporting evidence or where appropriate, request a Leave of Absence.

6.4 Where a Study Break has been approved and a Study Break period agreed, the student will be notified via email from Registry Services. When exceptional circumstances prevail, University staff can submit a Study Break request on behalf of a student.

7. REFUSAL OF STUDY BREAK

7.1 In the event of a Study Break request being refused, the student should receive notification from the Subject Lead and/or Registry Services, giving the reason for the refusal, within five working days of their fact finding to review the request.

7.2 Any student appeal should be submitted to the Academic team 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.

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

8. RETURNING FROM A STUDY BREAK

8.1 A student returning from an approved or imposed Study Break may be allowed to defer any assessments due, for a module taught before their period of leave. This is subject to approval by the Subject Lead.

8.2 Upon returning from a Study Break, students will be required to fulfil any previous conditions agreed; academic and medical-related.

8.3 Return to study from a medical Study Break would require submission of a medical certificate or equivalent evidence confirming the student's fitness for study, which may also be extended for students returning from

an absence on compassionate grounds. Please refer to 7.2 of the University's [Leave of Absence](#) policy for details on acceptable evidence.

8.4 Before the student is scheduled to return, they must complete registration onto their next module, confirming resumption to study.

8.5 In any case where a Study Break has been imposed due to medical reasons, a student must provide sufficient evidence or confirmation indicating they are fit to return, following the University's [Fitness to Study Policy](#). Planned ongoing support will be established either at a pre-return meeting or by email correspondence.

8.6 Students who fail to provide sufficient evidence or meet the conditions for a return to study will be required to submit a new request for a Leave of Absence (longer than the Study Break permits) or a withdrawal from their studies. The University will have the right to process a forced withdrawal or imposed Leave of Absence, for students who do not meet the conditions in returning from a Study Break.

8.7 A student may return to a module from a Study Break by purchasing their next module. Any assessments taken and outcomes previously obtained will stand, unless extenuating circumstances had been submitted and approved, prior to the Study Break. It should be noted however that students re-joining the module may not be eligible for a refund if the module is later dropped; the 14-day liability period will no longer apply.

8.8 Students on a Study Break must monitor University communications to ensure that they do not miss important information shared or the deadline to register for their returning module.

8.9 Failure to recommence study following a Study Break may result in a forced Leave of Absence or withdrawal from the course, depending on the remaining period of registration.

9. EXTENTION OF A STUDY BREAK

9.1 In the case of an imposed Study Break, if the appointed Practitioner does not deem the student fit to return to study as per the Fitness to Study Policy, it may be necessary to extend the period further. In such cases, a Leave of Absence request may be submitted on the student's behalf and ongoing support made available to facilitate the student's return, at a later agreed date.

9.2 Any request to extend a Study Break, into a Leave of Absence, must be approved by the Head of Online Learning and Deputy Academic Registrar.

10. FEES AND FINANCE

10.1 Students taking a Study Break will be liable for the fees for the module in which their leave commences.

10.2 Eligibility for refund of a module may be granted if a Study Break is approved only and including up to the first two weeks of the current module. Refunds will not be automated and must be requested by the student directly with the University's Fees Office, fees@stmarys.ac.uk

10.3 For students with financial support such as Student Finance England, the University is obliged to inform the funding body of the student's Study Break, which may however be subject to the length of the interrupted study. This may result in Student Finance England requesting a return of funds received for payment of the interrupted module, and any modules not taken.

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