

Policy on and procedures relating to PhD and MPhil student academic engagement and fitness to study

Introduction

1. The purpose of this document is to outline the appropriate procedures that staff should take when concerns are raised regarding a student's academic engagement and/or fitness to study at the University and/or within a placement, or whilst working away from the University. It should be read alongside the [Policy on and procedures for students returning to or repeating study](#) and the [Guidance on research students' suspensions and extensions](#).
2. The policy and procedures set out below apply specifically to PhD and MPhil students. They would also normally apply to Professional Doctorate students who are in the 'research phase' of their programmes. The parallel University policy and procedures for undergraduate and taught Master's students would normally apply to Professional Doctorate students whilst in the 'taught phase' of their programmes. If there is any uncertainty about which set of procedures to use, Schools should contact the Dean of Postgraduate Research Studies for advice.
3. In order to maintain the standards of scholarship, personal integrity and communal life essential to the existence and good name of the University, students are expected to take responsibility for organising their academic work, their personal lives and their participation in the University community in line with the University's Regulations for Conduct (Section G of the [University Calendar](#)).
4. There are times when it is not in the best interests of a student, or the University and its community, to allow the student to continue studying because they are not fit to do so, or is producing work of a standard that is judged to be unlikely to attain a research degree. It is appropriate for the University in these circumstances to recommend suspension or permanent withdrawal from studies.
5. Where the conduct, or one element of the conduct, which has caused concern falls in to a category of misconduct dealt with through other disciplinary processes within the University, it is important that those processes are concluded prior to the determination of academic engagement and fitness to study via the process outlined below. However, a student may be suspended from their programme and/or a placement pending an investigation where deemed necessary. Prior to the disciplinary processes being concluded, the allegations remain undetermined and therefore cannot be taken into account with regard to academic engagement and fitness to study. However, where academic engagement and fitness to study are a concern, every reasonable effort will be made to expedite the process(es).
6. In following the procedures outlined in this document, staff should at all times ensure that they use the appropriate level of confidentiality.
7. A student has the right to be accompanied to any meeting by a 'friend'. A 'friend' for this purpose, is defined as: an adviser from Reading University Students' Union Advice Service team, a current member of staff of the University of Reading, a currently registered student of the University of Reading, or a RUSU Student Officer. A person who does not fall within these categories will not be able to act as a 'friend' unless otherwise agreed by the Dean of Postgraduate Research Studies or his or her nominee.

Disabled Students may also be accompanied by a Support Worker in addition to a ‘friend’, as appropriate to his or her needs.

8. The procedures relating to academic engagement and fitness to study comprise three stages. Should a student be unwilling to play a part in these stages, or should the situation be sufficiently serious, then progress through the stages may still continue in the student’s absence.
9. Schools will be responsible for facilitating alternative arrangements for students who cannot reasonably be expected to attend relevant meetings in person, e.g. students on distance learning programmes.

What is meant by “academic engagement” and “fitness to study”?

10. A student is academically engaged if they comply with the academic requirements stated in the list of student responsibilities in the [Code of Practice on Research Students](#).
11. A student is fit to study if they can consistently and effectively undertake their studies in a way that does not endanger him/herself or other members of the University.
12. Students may present themselves as not fit to study through submission to the Doctoral Research Office (via their School / Department) of a completed *Request for Suspension* form. Alternatively, a cause for concern may be raised by any third party, such as other students, academic or administrative staff.
13. Cause for concern as to a student’s academic engagement or fitness to study can be raised relating to a wide range of behaviours, including, but not limited to:
 - Non-engagement with study;
 - Work being of a standard such that the student is judged as not likely to attain a research degree;
 - Not being fit to study,which may or may not be related to any of the following:
 - Substance misuse;
 - Health issues (mental or physical)
 - Aggressive, violent or threatening behaviour;
 - Inappropriate attitude or behaviour;
 - Health concerns and lack of insight or management of these concerns;
 - Circumstances putting staff or student safety or wellbeing at risk;
 - Failure to meet conditions placed on their fitness to return (where applicable), and
 - Multiple/serial Extenuating Circumstances claims or requests for suspension of studies.
14. Concerns should be acted upon as quickly as possible in order to provide appropriate support and avoid crisis situations. In crisis or emergency situations staff should consult the University’s [Staff Guide to supporting Students with Mental Health difficulties](#).

Stage 1 – School Review

Fitness to study and/or inappropriate behaviour

15. When a cause for concern regarding *fitness to study or inappropriate behaviour* has been raised by the student or others, the normal expectation is that the following will take place at School level.
 - The student should be encouraged to speak to their supervisor or Director of Postgraduate Research Studies in the School about their circumstances or conduct. The student may be unaware that there is an issue, and the details of the concerns should be made clear.
 - Options should be discussed in relation to the needs of the student and any support that the University can provide. Where appropriate, reasonable adjustments that can be put in place should be considered in accordance with the Equality Act 2010.

- Where appropriate, the student should be encouraged to consult any relevant support services, in particular Counselling and Wellbeing, the Disability Advisory Service, the University Study Advisers and the RUSU Student Advisers. The student may also be encouraged to consult a medical practitioner.
 - A written record of any discussions and any agreed actions should be drawn up and shared with the student and a review date set. This will formally affirm the student's responsibility to take positive action to resolve the concerns raised. A copy of the written record should be placed on the student's file.
 - The student and member of staff involved should meet on the agreed date to review the situation. The majority of issues would normally be resolved at this stage.
16. If, following these actions, at School level, there are continuing concerns, the student will be invited to attend a meeting with the School / Department Director of Postgraduate Research Studies and Head of School / Department to discuss the concerns and possible solutions. Schools are advised to arrange such meetings in a timely manner in order to avoid any delays in addressing the concerns raised. The invitation to the meeting must be sent by email and letter at least 5 working days before the meeting is due to take place and should outline what needs to be discussed. Disabled students may be accompanied by a support worker as appropriate to their needs.
 17. An action plan will be drawn up between the student and the School Director of Postgraduate Research Studies and Head of School / Department, where appropriate, to formally agree the University's expectations of the student, actions required of the student, and details of any support to be provided by the University. The action plan will have a review date.
 18. The meeting is to be minuted and agreed outcomes should be drawn up and a copy sent to the student normally within five working days of the meeting taking place. This correspondence should state that failure to take positive action to adhere to the action plan and/or to attend the arranged review will result in the academic engagement/fitness to study case moving to stage 2. A copy should be placed on the student's file.
 19. If appropriate, the possibility of suspension or withdrawal from the University should be discussed with the student. It should be made clear to the student that approval at Graduate School level is required for all suspensions, and they should be informed of the relevant policies and procedures. For further details of the procedure relating to suspensions, please refer to the *Policy and procedures on Research Students' Suspensions and Extensions*.

Academic engagement

20. Causes for concern may also arise as a result of work being of a standard that is judged to be unlikely to result in the attainment of a research degree. Evidence will have been gathered in accordance with the policy and procedures set out in the Code of Practice on Research Students and the more informal guidance set out in the Graduate School Good Practice Guide [Monitoring and Assessing the Progress of doctoral researchers](#). Where concerns are raised via formal monitoring such that the School wishes to recommend that a student's registration be discontinued, the Head of School should refer the case to the Dean of Postgraduate Research Studies, thus invoking Stage 2 of the procedures relating to PhD and MPhil student academic engagement and fitness to study. The referral should include a detailed justification for the proposed recommendation from the Head of School, together with the supporting documentation from the Confirmation of Registration or Annual Review process (i.e. a copy of the reports produced by the student, supervisor and assessor) and a timeline summarising the student's progress since registration.

Stage 2 – Graduate School Review

21. Where a case of academic engagement or fitness to study is referred by the Head of School to the Dean of Postgraduate Research Studies, a Case Review will be carried out by the Graduate School. The University reserves the right to move straight to Stage 2 where the students' health or behaviour poses a

risk of harm to either themselves or others and it is therefore thought inappropriate for stage 1 to take place.

22. A review of the case, led by the Dean of Postgraduate Research Studies, will involve relevant concerned parties, examples of which might include one or more of the following:
 - The School / Department Director of Postgraduate Research Studies
 - The Head of School / Department
 - The Mental Health Advisor
 - The Head of Counselling and Wellbeing
 - The Head of the University Medical Practice
 - The Hall Warden
 - The Disability Advisory Team Leader
23. The Dean of Postgraduate Research Studies, in consultation with the relevant parties, will discuss the steps taken so far and whether an enhanced action plan is likely to be of benefit to the student or if they need to refer the case to the Standing Committee on Academic Engagement and Fitness to Study (Stage 3). The Head of the University Medical Practice and/or the Head of Counselling and Wellbeing may be consulted as appropriate in order to evaluate any evidence presented by the student regarding his/ her physical or mental health. They will not be asked to provide a second opinion relating to the specific circumstances of the case.
24. Following the Dean of Postgraduate Research Studies' consultation with relevant parties, the student will be given the opportunity to provide a short written statement and, if necessary, will be invited to meet with the Dean of Postgraduate Research Studies and the School / Department Director of Postgraduate Research Studies or another member of School staff as appropriate. Where such meetings take place, the student will have the right to be accompanied by a 'friend' who should normally be a currently registered student of the University, a member of staff of the University, a sabbatical officer or student adviser of the Students' Union. Disabled Students may also be accompanied by a support worker as appropriate to their needs.
25. If the recommended action is that of an enhanced action plan, this will be drawn up by the School in consultation with the student to formally agree the University's expectations of the student and the support that will be provided by the University. The action plan will have a review date and it will be made clear to the student that the consequences of not adhering to the plan will be referral to the Standing Committee on Academic Engagement and Fitness to Study. A copy should be placed on the student's file. The School will be responsible for monitoring compliance with the action plan and for reporting any failure to adhere to the plan to the Dean of Postgraduate Research Studies & Researcher Development.
26. If the recommendation of the Case Review is a referral to the Standing Committee on Academic Engagement and Fitness to Study, a Case Review report will be written and submitted to the Chair of the Committee.

Stage 3 – Standing Committee on Academic Engagement and Fitness to Study

27. If the student has not achieved the agreed actions, or the recommendation following the Case Review is referral to the Standing Committee, then the procedure will move to stage 3. Stage 2 will always be necessary in order to provide the Committee with adequate information on the case.
28. The membership of the Committee will comprise:
 - a Pro-Vice-Chancellor or the Deputy-Vice-Chancellor;
 - a Teaching and Learning Dean from another School;
 - a School Director of Postgraduate Research Studies from another School;

- a Sabbatical Officer from the Student's Union;
 - a Secretary nominated by the Director of Student and Academic Services.
29. On receipt of the Case Review report, the Secretary will write to the student enclosing the Case Review report and any other supporting documents that will be considered by the Committee.
 30. The date for the meeting of the Committee will be set in a timely fashion. The student will be informed of the procedure to be followed and the date and time of the meeting. The student shall have the right to attend the hearing of the case on the specified date.
 31. The Committee will be provided with a copy of the Case Review report. The Secretary will keep a record of the proceedings and of evidence given to the Committee. The Committee's meetings shall be held in private.
 32. The Committee may choose to consult others as appropriate.
 33. The detailed procedures of the Standing Committee will be available on request from the Secretary.
 34. The Committee may determine that:
 - a) the student's fitness to study is not substantially impaired, that they have demonstrated a sufficient level of academic engagement, and that they may continue their studies;
 - b) the student's fitness to study is impaired and/or they have not demonstrated a sufficient level of academic engagement, and/or that the student is not judged to be capable of attaining a research degree.
 35. In the case of (a) the School will be responsible for ensuring that all reasonable efforts are made to enable the student to continue on their programme. The ongoing fitness to study and academic engagement of the student should be monitored as normal.
 36. In the case of (b) the Committee will determine an appropriate and proportionate action: the extent to which fitness to study is impaired or academic engagement has not been demonstrated; the extent to and means by which that impairment or lack might be addressed and, if applicable, any mitigating circumstances accepted. Actions may include any of following alone or in combination:
 - formal notification to the student that their conduct has caused concern and that they must comply with any imposed conditions, which may include, but are not limited to:
 - close supervision by the School or a cognate School; and,
 - engagement with an appropriate medical or mental health professional; and/or,
 - engagement with a University Study Adviser to improve the student's academic practice;
 - suspension for a specific period of time with or without further conditions;
 - requirement to re-sit or retake part of the programme, with or without further conditions;
 - termination of current course of study but transfer of University registration to an alternative programme if available;
 - termination of current course and removal from membership of the University, but retaining eligibility to receive any lesser award if applicable; and/or,
 - termination of current course and removal from membership of the University.
 37. If conditions have been applied alongside the specified action(s), the School is responsible for monitoring compliance with academic conditions. Failure to comply with conditions will result in automatic referral back to the Standing Committee on Academic Engagement and Fitness to Study.
 38. The outcome letter and a copy of the minutes of the hearing will normally be sent to the student within five working days. This will also include information on how to make an appeal. The decision will also be communicated to the School / Department Director of Postgraduate Research Studies and the Dean of Postgraduate Research Studies.
 39. The Secretary will record the decision of the Committee on the student's record where it will remain as long as the record is kept in accordance with the University's data retention schedule.

40. Failure to accept the conditions or submit an appeal within five working days will result in the case being referred back to the Standing Committee on Academic Engagement and Fitness to Study for further consideration and a decision made, usually by Chair's Action.

Appeal process

41. Appeals against decisions of the Standing Committee on Academic Engagement and Fitness to Study are to the Student Appeals Committee. Full details can be found in the Student Appeal Committee (SAC) Policy. The Student Appeals Committee shall have the authority either to quash or uphold the decision of the Standing Committee on Academic Engagement and Fitness to Study.
42. The student should notify the University Secretary by email of their request for a review and the basis for that request in writing within five working days of the date of issue of the notification of the decision of the Standing Committee on Academic Engagement and Fitness to Study.
43. Admissible grounds for review shall be one or more of the following:
 - new evidence that was not available at the time of the meeting of the Standing Committee on Academic Engagement and Fitness to Study has become available that could materially affect the Committee's decision;
 - the decision was based on a demonstrable error of fact;
 - the decision was not reached in accordance with these procedures or that there was prejudice or bias in the conduct of the Standing Committee on Academic Engagement and Fitness to Study; and/or,
 - the decision of the Standing Committee on Academic Engagement and Fitness to Study is not one which any reasonable panel would have reached based on the evidence presented.
44. The Student Appeals Committee is in no position to make a professional determination on fitness to study and, subsequently, in its review it shall determine only whether the grounds presented are valid and sufficient for the decision of the Standing Committee on Academic Engagement and Fitness to Study to be quashed.
45. Where this is the case the Student Appeals Committee shall refer the case back to the Standing Committee on Academic Engagement and Fitness to Study, notifying it of the grounds on which it believes the case should be re-considered. The Secretary of the Student Appeals Committee will notify the student, School Director of Postgraduate Research Studies or their delegate, the Dean of Postgraduate Research Studies or, in the case of a student at a branch campus, the Provost (or their delegate), of the decision.
46. The Standing Committee on Academic Engagement and Fitness to Study will reconvene to hear the case for a second time in the light of the decision of the Student Appeals Committee. The normal appeals process will apply with the exclusion that the basis for the appeal must not be the same substantive matter as in the first appeal.
47. If the Student Appeals Committee decides to uphold the decision of the Standing Committee on Academic Engagement and Fitness to Study its decision shall be final. The Secretary of the Student Appeals Committee will notify the student, School Director of Postgraduate Research Studies or their delegate, the Dean of Postgraduate Research Studies or, in the case of a student at a branch campus, the Provost (or their delegate), of the decision.. The student will be notified in writing that this decision constitutes the completion of procedures

Support services available to students

48. The student should be encouraged by their School to consult relevant support services while their case is being dealt with under the academic engagement and fitness to study procedures. These support services may include, as appropriate, Counselling and Wellbeing, the Disability Advisory Service, the University Study Advisers and the RUSU Student Advisers. The student may also be encouraged to consult a medical practitioner.

49. Following the conclusion of the procedures, should the Standing Committee determine that the student’s membership of the University should be terminated, the student will retain the right to consult Counselling and Wellbeing for a period of six months from the date of termination. Students holding a Tier 4 visa retain the right to consult the above services via email and telephone, but are not permitted to be on campus once registration is terminated and Tier 4 sponsorship withdrawn.
50. For details of the entitlement of suspended students to access support services, please refer to the *Policy and procedures on Research Students’ Suspensions and Extensions*.

Version	Keeper	Reviewed	Approved by	Approval date	Effective date
1	CQSD	Annually	UBTL	30 April 2012	
2					September 2016
3			UBTL	11 July 2017	2017/18