

POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH HANDBOOK

Chapter 18 - Postgraduate Student Absence Policy

Contents

1.	Introduction	1
2.	Submission of absence record.....	2
3.	Student Visa Holders	2
4.	Absence from programme of study	3
5.	Return to the University following interruption on medical grounds.....	6
6.	Phased Return to study.....	6
7.	Ability to study significantly affected by a chronic medical condition or disability ..	7
8.	Sickness during pregnancy	9
9.	Parental Leave	10
10.	Absence from clinical practice, industrial placement or other placement	11
11.	Professional Doctorates: submission or assessment affected by absence	11
12.	Student absence before a viva voce examination.....	11
13.	Student absence during a viva voce examination	12
14.	Student absence before a deadline, not including thesis submission	13
15.	Student absence after submission of the thesis/dissertation	13
16.	Unauthorised absence	14

Annexes:

- [Annex A: Postgraduate Research Absence Stipend Payments Policy](#)
- [Annex B: Student Pregnancy and Family Leave PGR funding policy](#)

1. Introduction

- 1.1. It is recognised that students can suffer illness or other adverse personal circumstances which affect their ability to attend and engage with their programme of study and/or complete an examination/assignment.
- 1.2. All Postgraduate Research (PGR) students are expected to meet all formal requirements of their studies including assessment submissions, upgrade and examination vivas. If a student is ill or experiencing other adverse personal

circumstances during their studies, they should consult their [PGR Support team](#) as soon as possible in order to consider the possible effects of such circumstances on students' performance. Students experiencing continued absence due to a long-term health condition or disability should manage their absences with support through the [Health, Wellbeing and Support for Study \(HWSS\)](#) procedures. PGR students who are also members of staff should follow the appropriate [HR policy for staff](#).

- 1.3. PGR students **must** report all absences of less than one month (aside from pre-arranged annual leave or interruptions) using the [iTrent PGR Absence Record](#) and **must** also alert their supervisors. Students are reminded that many medical practices are unable to provide a medical certificate unless they are consulted during the illness. Students are therefore advised to contact their medical practitioner as soon as possible when a medical certificate is required (see [Section 4 below](#)).
- 1.4. Students on Professional Doctorate programmes whose illness affects examinations/assignments or taught elements **must** also consult the University's Mitigation system and report their illness via MyExeter or as directed by their [PGR Support Team](#).

2. Submission of absence record

- 2.1. All absences must be reported via the [iTrent PGR Absence Record](#) at the earliest opportunity in order to be considered. For absences longer than 7 days, medical certificates or other corroborating evidence should be uploaded to the [iTrent PGR Absence Record](#). Students with an Individual learning Plan (ILP) that stipulates short term absences should confirm that they have an ILP when they submit the [iTrent PGR Absence Record](#). Medical certificates and corroborating evidence will be archived until the end of the year following the student's graduation or leaving the University.

3. Student Visa Holders

- 3.1. Absences, interruptions of study and changes to mode of attendance can have implications for students' immigration status. Students considering taking an interruption of studies, short-term absence or changing their mode of attendance should seek advice early from the University's [International Student Community &](#)

[Support team](#). Students should refer to the [TQA PGR Handbook, Chapter 5: Periods of registration and changes to registration status for postgraduate research students](#) – (Section 4, Interruption of study) for further information and the [Doctoral College Student Handbook](#) for guidance about applying for interruption to study.

4. Absence from programme of study

- 4.1. Students funded through a Research Council or who receive funding administered by the University of Exeter may be eligible for continued stipend payments during absences, subject to strict criteria. Such students should refer to the [TQA PGR Handbook, Chapter 18, Annex A: Postgraduate Research Absence Stipend Payments Policy](#) and the [TQA LTS Handbook, Chapter 25, Annex C: Postgraduate Research Pregnancy and Family Leave Funding Policy](#).
- 4.2. Students in receipt of funding not administered by the University of Exeter (for example, International Sponsorship, Student Loans etc) should discuss the impact of absence on study with their funder directly.
- 4.3. The following arrangements normally apply in instances of absence from programme of study due to ill health, with exceptions relating to assessments and examinations detailed below.
- 4.4. The reasons for student absences which are eligible for consideration are:
 - a. Disability (in accordance with ILP and HWSS recommendations).
 - b. Illness.
 - c. Illness of a dependent or other immediate relative for whom they have caring responsibilities.
 - d. Maternity, adoption or other family leave following the birth of or adoption of a child.
 - e. Parental leave to care for your child (e.g., sickness, during school holidays etc).
 - f. Medical Appointments.
 - g. Bereavement or other compassionate grounds.
 - h. Victim of crime.
 - i. Public Duties, e.g., Jury service.

- j. Unforeseen emergencies.
- k. Attendance at religious days or festivals, or a requirement for religious observance which corresponds to a day of examination (e.g., upgrade or examination).
- l. Participation in a national or international sporting event.

4.5. Absence of seven consecutive days or fewer

4.5.1. For an absence of seven consecutive days or fewer, the student **must** complete a [iTrent PGR Absence Record](#) and notify their supervisor of their short-term absence. This form should be submitted as soon as reasonably possible at the start of the absence. If students take frequent short absences for the same reason, or if short absences regularly coincide with deadlines or milestones, students may be referred to the PGR Welfare team to discuss further and to consider appropriate support.

4.6. Absence of more than seven days

4.6.1. For any absence of more than seven consecutive days the student must provide supporting evidence where possible, for example, an order of service for a bereavement or confirmation of jury service. For absences relating to sickness, a medical certificate from a medical practitioner is required to accompany the [iTrent PGR Absence Record](#) unless the sickness is related to a disability or long-term health condition which has been disclosed to the University, and where an ILP is in place. Students should alert their supervisor to this period of absence.

4.7. Absence for one month or more in duration

4.7.1. Where students understand that the severity of their circumstances (including reasons of illness) will prevent them from engaging with their studies for a month or more, an interruption of studies **should** be considered and discussed with their supervisory team. Professional Doctorate Students **must** consult their [PGR Support team](#) in the first instance and notify their employer. Students should refer to the [TQA PGR Handbook, Chapter 5: Periods of registration and changes to registration status for postgraduate research students](#) – (Section 4, Interruption of study) for further information and the [PGR Student Handbook](#) for guidance about applying for interruption to study. The requirements for Interruption of Studies apply.

4.7.2. Students requesting interruptions which total more than one year in a consecutive period will be encouraged to consider their circumstances and the likelihood of when they will return to study. For continued long-term interruption, students may be encouraged to consider withdrawing and reinstating at a later date, when their circumstances allow for study (see [TQA PGR Handbook, Chapter 5: Periods of registration and changes to registration status for postgraduate research students](#)– (Section 13, Reinstatement of Registration)).

4.8. Cumulative short-term absences

International students who are student visa holders: taking cumulative short-term absences may count towards the absence limit allowed by your student visa, which may have serious consequences for your immigration status. If you take multiple short-term absences and wish to take an extension to recognise absences under this category, you are advised to seek advice from the [International Student Community & Support Office](#) before proceeding. It is the student's responsibility to ensure that any impacts on visas are considered before taking absence from your programme.

4.8.1. Where a student has had multiple short-term absences (not recorded as interruption), which are supported by medical or other evidence, and which in total are equivalent to one month or more (the minimum threshold for interruption), the cumulative absence time may be added up and the period of study extended by the equivalent duration.

4.8.2. Extensions based on cumulative absences will be considered at the end of each academic year, at the request of the student. Students **should** contact their PGR Support Team if they have taken one month or more in cumulative absences and would like their period of study extended accordingly. Extensions will only be considered if the absences have been recorded in the [iTrent PGR Absence Record](#), are supported by evidence and do not overlap with any periods of interruption.

4.8.3. Students in receipt of funding **should** discuss cumulative short-term absence from study with their funder directly. Students funded through a Research Council or who receive funding administered by the University of Exeter should refer to the [TQA PGR Handbook, Chapter 18, Annex A: Postgraduate Research Absence Stipend Payments Policy](#) for details about when cumulative absences may extend funding.

5. Return to the University following interruption on medical grounds

- 5.1. Prior to resumption of their studies, all students who interrupt due to medical circumstances are responsible for completing a [PGR Self-Assessment Return from Medical Interruption form](#) and for providing a medical practitioner evidence form where required. Students who have an ILP which supports absence as a reasonable adjustment **may** not need to provide medical evidence upon their return from interruption.
- 5.2. Students will be notified before they return from interruption whether they need to provide a letter from their medical practitioner (considered “enhanced” interruptions). Students considered to be on an ‘enhanced’ medical interruption will be supported in their return to study by the [PGR Welfare Support Advisor](#). Students on a standard medical interruption will be supported in their return to study by their supervisors.
- 5.3. The medical self-assessment form will ask the student to provide details of their current state of health and for details regarding further support that they may require.
- 5.4. For more information about interruptions, please see the [TQA PGR Handbook, Chapter 5: Periods of registration and changes to registration status for postgraduate research students](#) – (Section 4, Interruption of study). For phased return to study, see section 6 in this policy, below.

6. Phased Return to study

- 6.1. All students returning from interruption **may** request a phased return to study if they anticipate that they will return to their previous FTE but are not immediately able to do so.
- 6.2. Phased return on medical grounds (up to one month)
 - 6.2.1. Students requesting a phased return from a medical interruption of up to 4 weeks should provide a fit note from a medical practitioner, confirming the individual's fitness to work. Phased return to study requests **must** be approved by the Faculty Pro-Vice-Chancellor or nominee. Phased returns to study **must** be part of a written plan to return to working to the FTE under which the student is returning to study. If this arrangement

is used, then the student's submission due date would only be extended for the period of sick leave taken during the phased return. This **should not** be used where there is a clear need for the student to move to part-time on a longer-term basis.

6.3. Phased return on non-medical grounds, including family leave (up to one month)

6.3.1. Students requesting a phased return from interruptions on non-medical grounds, including maternity/other family leave, compassionate leave or due to other personal circumstances, for up to 4 weeks will need to inform their PGR Support Team of their plans. They will be required to record their non-study days during the phased return in the [iTrent PGR Absence Record](#). The time off will be considered as cumulative short-term absences, and the cumulative short-term absence procedures described in section 4.8 of this policy will apply.

6.4. All phased returns over one month

6.4.1. If a student would benefit from a phased return to study for a period of more than 4 weeks, they should apply for part time registration via the Changes to Modes of Attendance process (see [TQA PGR Handbook, Chapter 5: Periods of registration and changes to registration status for postgraduate research students](#) – (Section 7: Changes to Mode of Attendance)).

6.5. Students funded through a Research Council, or funding administered by the University of Exeter who require a phased return to study should refer to the [TQA PGR Handbook, Chapter 18, Annex A: Postgraduate Research Absence Stipend Payments Policy](#) for further guidance on how their funding will be affected.

6.6. Students receipt of a student loan or funding from another provider **should** discuss their requirement for a phased return to study with their funder.

7. **Ability to study significantly affected by a severe, chronic, or fluctuating medical condition or disability**

7.1. Where a student is persistently absent from their programme of study due to a disability, chronic illness or fluctuating health condition the student **should** book an appointment with the [Disability Advice and Support team](#) to discuss any necessary

adjustments for support for study, which **should** be recorded in an ILP (individual learning plan). There **should** be an updated & reviewed ILP for each programme of study due different programme requirements which may need different adjustments. Medical evidence **should** be provided by the student at the time of the assessment and may cover the duration of a student's study, unless there are changes to the disability or health condition during the period of study which would mean that a new medical practitioner's letter **must** be provided to update the ILP. ILPs **should** be reviewed annually and at the start of each new programme. See section 4 in this policy, above, regarding procedures to follow for different length of absences.

- 7.2. Students **should** contact the [PGR Support Team](#) and [PGR Welfare Support Adviser](#), who will invite the student to a Welfare meeting to discuss their situation and any appropriate on-going support such as [HWSS](#), an [ILP](#) (if not already in place), Disability Support Allowances (DSA) in [Devon](#) or [Cornwall](#) etc.
- 7.3. Absences of one month or longer **must** be managed through interruption and requested through MyPGR (see the [TQA PGR Handbook, Chapter 5: Periods of registration and changes to registration status for postgraduate research students](#) – (Section 4, Interruption of study)). Short-term absences should be managed through cumulative short-term absences, as described in Section 4.8 of this policy. If formal submission deadlines are affected (e.g., upgrade, thesis submission, assessments for taught modules), students must request either a deferral, extension or mitigation as appropriate, and will be advised which action to take by their [PGR Support Team](#). Deadlines for work for supervision meetings should be discussed with the supervisory team.
- 7.4. Professional Doctorate students, students on placements and those who have industrial placements as part of their programme **should** liaise with their [PGR Support Team](#) and external partners to discuss individual support outside of the University. Any absence related to a disclosed disability or health condition should be managed in discussion with both the employer and the [PGR Support Team](#) and will be managed on a case-by-case basis. Students with disabilities or chronic health conditions **should** disclose their

disability/health condition to their employer and discuss reasonable adjustments with them. Students are encouraged to share their ILP with their employer.

- 7.5. Students who need extended periods of absence due to a health condition may consider transferring to a part time mode of attendance. The University of Exeter offers a variety of part time modes of attendance: 0.5, 0.6, 0.7, 0.8 and 0.9 FTE, and may reflect weekly, monthly, or annual working patterns according to the student's circumstances and requirements of the research project. Working patterns are flexible and should be agreed between students and supervisory teams and documented in the [Supervisory Agreement](#) at the start of each academic year. For further details about changing mode of attendance, please refer to the [TQA PGR Handbook, Chapter 5: Periods of registration and changes to registration status for postgraduate research students](#) – (Section 7: Changes to Mode of Attendance).

- 7.6. Where an absence specifically relates to a disability that is formally disclosed to the University, and where a student has an updated ILP for the current programme of study, additional medical certification will not be required. Requests for paid sick leave that relate to a disclosed disability will be considered in conjunction with any Reasonable Adjustments already in place through the ILP. Absences that are unrelated to a disclosed disability will require medical certification as described.

8. [Sickness during pregnancy](#)

- 8.1. If during pregnancy, a student is unable to attend studies due to illness, the normal procedures for sickness absence reporting should be followed.
- 8.2. However, any period of pregnancy related sick leave or interruption beyond the 36th week of pregnancy may trigger the start of maternity leave, in line with the University of Exeter HR maternity policy¹. The [PGR Support Team](#) may require confirmation from the student's doctor that they are fit to return to study at the end of the interruption period for maternity leave.

¹ Refer to the [Maternity Leave Pages](#) for the HR maternity Policy

- 8.3. The Faculty in which a pregnant student is based is responsible for risk assessments in relation to their research or study environment. Students and supervisors **should** complete the pregnancy and maternity support plan (see [TQA LTS Handbook, Chapter 25, Annex A: Pregnancy, Maternity and New Parent Support Plan](#)). Any health and safety concerns should be raised immediately within the appropriate Faculty.
- 8.4. Students should refer to the [TQA LTS Handbook, Chapter 25: Student Pregnancy and Family Leave Policy](#) for further information about what to do when they are pregnant or are expecting parents.
- 8.5. Funded students **should** refer to the [TQA LTS Handbook, Chapter 25, Annex C: Postgraduate Research Pregnancy and Family Leave Funding Policy](#).

9. Parental Leave

- 9.1. The University of Exeter defines parental leave for PGRs as leave to care for your child/children (including child sickness, appointments, school holiday child-care etc). This kind of leave is not the same as pregnancy or other family leave following the birth of or adoption of a child (see the [TQA LTS Handbook, Chapter 25, Student Pregnancy and Family Leave Policy](#)).
- 9.2. Students in receipt of funding through URKI, from the University of Exeter or in receipt of funding administered by the University of Exeter are not eligible for stipend payments during parental leave as defined in 9.1 of this policy.
- 9.3. Students may take up to one month of parental leave per year either through interruption or through cumulative short-term absences. The processes for requesting and recording these absences should be followed as described in this policy.

10. **Absence from clinical practice, industrial placement or other placement linked to their degree**

10.1. Students on clinical, industrial or research placements **must** inform their placement provider of **any** absence as soon as possible.

10.2. Any absence related to a disclosed disability or health condition **should** be managed in discussion with both the employer and the [PGR Support Team](#) and will be managed on a case-by-case basis. Students with disabilities or chronic health conditions are encouraged to disclose their disability/chronic health condition to their employer and discuss reasonable adjustments with them. Students are encouraged to share their ILP with their employer.

11. **Professional Doctorate Taught elements only: submission deadline or assessment affected by absence**

11.1. The University has established a mitigation system (see [TQA APA Handbook, Chapter 10, Mitigation](#)) for considering the possible effects of an illness or absence for good reason on a submission deadline or assessment relating to a taught module (for thesis or upgrade submission deadlines, please see the relevant sections of this policy, below). Professional Doctorate students **must** inform their placements/employer of any absences or changes to their clinical placements.

11.2. If students fail to attend a module examination or other unauthorised absence related to their Professional Doctorate, action will be taken in accordance with the [TQA LTS Handbook, Chapter 29: Taught Student Attendance and Engagement Policy](#) and the [TQA LTS Handbook, Chapter 15: Unsatisfactory Student Progress, Engagement and Attendance Procedures](#).

12. **Student absence before a viva voce examination**

12.1. If a student is unwell or absent due to severe and unexpected circumstances within five working days ahead of the viva or upgrade viva and knows that they are unlikely to be able to attend the viva, they **must** notify the Chair of the examination (the internal examiner or NEIC where appointed) **and** the [PGR Administration Team](#) that they are unable to attend, and request that the examination is rescheduled.

Students **must** complete the [iTrent PGR Absence Record](#) and provide supporting evidence (such as a letter from a medical practitioner, police crime number, death certificate etc). This is required in all circumstances where an examination is postponed within 5 working days, even if the absence is related to a disclosed disability, chronic illness or fluctuating health condition where a student has an ILP, due to the importance of the examination.

12.2. The [PGR Administration Team](#) will notify the Board of Examiners and will liaise with the student and Board of Examiners to make arrangements for rescheduling the examination. The examination **should** be rescheduled for as soon as possible and no later than one month after the student's to return to study.

12.3. Students who have disclosed disabilities or fluctuating health conditions who are concerned about arrangements for a viva voce examination should contact [Disability Advice and Support](#) to discuss an ILP and reasonable adjustments for the examination.

13. Student absence during a viva voce examination

13.1. If a student is unwell during a viva, they must alert the Chair of the examination (the internal examiner or NEIC where appointed) that they are unwell and unable to continue with the examination. The Chair will postpone the examination, making note of the time that the viva is halted and at what stage the examination is at.

13.2. The student **must** provide a letter from a medical practitioner to confirm their inability to proceed with the examination. This is required for all circumstances where an examination has been halted due to student illness, even if the illness is related to a previously disclosed disability, chronic illness or fluctuating health condition where a student has an ILP, due to the importance of the examination. The Chair (internal examiner or NEIC where appointed) will liaise with the [PGR Administration Team](#) to reschedule the viva for as soon as possible and should be no later than one month after the student's return to study.

13.3. Students who have disclosed disabilities or fluctuating health conditions who are concerned about potential disruption to a viva voce examination **should**

contact [Disability Advice and Support](#) to discuss an ILP and reasonable adjustments for the examination.

14. Student absence before a deadline or milestone not including thesis submission (including upgrade submission or viva, USPE deadlines or deadlines agreed for supervisory meetings)

- 14.1. If a student is unwell or absent due to severe and unexpected circumstances within five working days ahead of a milestone or deadline (e.g. upgrade submission, USPE deadline etc) and knows that they are unlikely to meet the deadline, they **must** contact the [PGR Support Team](#) and their supervisors to notify them of their absence and to request that the deadline is rescheduled. Students must complete the [iTrent PGR Absence Record](#) and provide supporting evidence (such as a letter from a medical practitioner, police crime number, death certificate etc). This is required all circumstances where a deadline is postponed within 5 working days, with the exception of when the absence is related to a disclosed disability, chronic illness or fluctuating health condition and where an ILP is in place. The supervisors will notify the upgrade panel or [PGR Support Team](#) as appropriate and will liaise to make alternative arrangements for the deadline. The deadline **should** be rescheduled for as soon as reasonable after the student's return to study.

15. Student absence after submission of the thesis/dissertation

- 15.1. Students who are absent following thesis/dissertation submission are required to complete the [iTrent PGR Absence Record](#) and **must** notify the [PGR Administration Team](#) of their absence. The examiners will be notified, and deadlines will be considered on a case-by-case basis. Students are reminded that absences leading up to the viva or prior to submission of minor or major amendments may lead to delays in the viva taking place or in the award of their degree due to the possible impact on examiners' workload and time planning. See [Section 15 of this policy](#), below about students failing to engage with the University following submission.
- 15.2. Students may be referred or continue to receive support through HWSS after submission of their thesis.

16. Unauthorised absence

- 16.1. Students who are absent from their programme (including, but not limited to, viva examinations, USPEA deadlines, HWSS meetings, supervisory meetings etc) without notifying the University of their absence will be considered to be on an unauthorised absence from their programme.
- 16.2. Students within their period of study (prior to thesis/dissertation submission) who do not respond to communications from the University will be started on the Unsatisfactory Student Progress, Engagement and Attendance procedures (see [TQA LTS Handbook, Chapter 15: Unsatisfactory Student Progress and Engagement Procedures](#)).
- 16.3. If a student has not engaged for 3 months or more following submission, resubmission, or the deadline for submitting amendments; and where there is no evidence of why they have failed to engage; and where the University has made reasonable attempts to contact and engage the student, action will be taken to de-register the student (See [TQA PGR Handbook, Chapter 5: Periods of registration and changes to registration status for graduate research students](#) (Section 11, Students deemed withdrawn)).
- 16.4. Professional Doctorate Students who fail to attend a module examination or other unauthorised absence related to their Professional Doctorate, will be subject to action in accordance with the [TQA LTS Handbook, Chapter 29: Taught Student Attendance and Engagement Policy](#) and the [TQA LTS Handbook, Chapter 15: Unsatisfactory Student Progress, Engagement and Attendance Procedures](#).