

## Fitness to Study Policy and Procedure

### 1. Introduction

The University of Sunderland is committed to an ethos of equality and inclusivity. We aim to facilitate and promote positive and inclusive health and wellbeing through the recognition and understanding of all relevant health conditions and disabilities. This is essential to our wider strategic agenda to provide a transformative experience for our students, working in collaboration with a shared vision of success.

Where necessary, the University encourages all students to seek help and support from the appropriate service(s) at the earliest possible opportunity.

This procedure has been developed in response to an increasing occurrence of ill health (including mental health difficulties, psychological, personality or emotional disorders) experienced by students in Higher Education Institutions. The aim is to sustain the academic progression and wellbeing of students in a supportive environment, whilst being mindful of the need for all staff and students to be / feel safe.

Whilst this policy is intended to compliment the [Fitness to Practise Policy](#) by supporting students to manage their health and wellbeing, the Fitness to Practise policy takes precedence for students on professionally recognised programmes.

This document is designed for members of staff, to offer an alternative pathway to the standard referral to Student Wellbeing.

This procedure can be used by any member of staff who has concerns about a student's health, safety and mental wellbeing. This can include personal tutors, programme leaders, module leaders and professional services staff.

Students who express concerns about another student should raise this with a member of staff or appropriate person such as an academic tutor, member of Students' Union, RA, Student Rep or Student Wellbeing. The student expressing concern would not be required to manage the situation themselves, the staff member (who the student has reported concerns to) will be expected to move the issue forward either individually or by appropriate referral.

A cause for concern does not necessarily indicate that all stages outlined in this document will be required.

### 2. DEFINITION, SCOPE AND PURPOSE

2.1 **The University defines Fitness for Study as the ability to participate appropriately as a student and as a member of the University community.**

2.2 The University is committed to supporting all students to fulfill their potential. Occasionally a student's circumstances or health may impact upon their own, or others' ability to fulfill that potential. **The University expects its students to be able to live and work with others and to conduct themselves in ways which do not**

**have an adverse impact on other members of the University and the local community.** This policy and the accompanying procedures are designed to outline the processes that the University will follow in instances where this ability is in doubt and/or associated levels of risk are unacceptable. This may be as a result of a student's extended absence, health condition, wellbeing concern or other circumstances that lead to an inability to progress in their programme, or that adversely affect others.

2.3 This policy relates specifically to student behaviours which may be related to a health condition. When they are not, the [Student Disciplinary procedure](#) will apply.

2.3 **In an emergency situation where it is believed that a student's health or wellbeing condition presents an immediate risk to themselves or others, the appropriate Emergency Services should be contacted** and the Deputy Director / Director of Student Journey or nominee, should be notified as soon as possible. For the University of Sunderland in London (UoSIL) this should be the Director of UoSIL or a member of the Senior Management Team.

See 'When to Refer' for further information about dealing with emergencies.

For UoS staff

<https://sunderland.ac.uk/gateway/whentorefer/staff/> For

London Campus staff

<https://services.sunderland.ac.uk/gateway/whentorefer/london/>

### 3. Criteria

Concerns about the student's Fitness to Study may occur for many reasons and due to a range of circumstances. These include (but are not restricted to) the following:

- Social isolation / significant withdrawal from others.
- A sudden deterioration in academic performance or motivation.
- Significant nonattendance or engagement.
- Repeated applications for Extenuating Circumstances.
- Psychological symptoms or repeated inappropriate emotional outbursts.
- Inappropriate behaviour, for example inappropriate touching, invading personal space.
- Obvious signs of substance or alcohol misuse.
- A suicide attempt
- Serious self harming behaviours.
- Aggressive, suspicious or paranoid behaviour.
- Extreme mood swings.
- A student's declaration to a member of staff that he or she has a problem and has provided details that indicate a need to consider his or her fitness to study.
- Repeated patterns of unacceptable behaviour.
- Significant lack of self awareness.
- The student's academic performance, attendance and/or behaviour considered not satisfactory/acceptable and thought to be a result of a physical condition or mental health difficulty.

## **Stages in the process**

### **Stage 1- Initial concern is raised.**

#### **Informal Procedure**

- a. Initial concerns about a student's health, safety or mental wellbeing are raised. The member of staff will arrange to speak to the student. Concerns will be discussed in an understanding manner with the student and where possible resolved.
- b. If following discussion with the student, concerns are resolved; no further action will be taken.
- c. Should concerns be continued and/or issues can't be resolved then the staff member should explain that, due to concerns about the student's Fitness to Study, it will be necessary for the matter to be passed to the Wellbeing Team in Sunderland or London who will contact the student to arrange a further meeting. It should be made clear to the student that the purpose of involving the Wellbeing Team is to ensure that the student is offered appropriate support and is not intended to be a punishment or sanction.
- d. Staff member will complete Fitness to Study – Follow up form (Appendix 1)

### **Stage 2 - Continuing or significant concerns.**

**Continuing or significant concerns occur when an individual student's health, safety or mental wellbeing is raised and cannot or is considered inappropriate to be addressed via stage 1.**

Stage 2 will be carried out by Wellbeing service in Sunderland or London. The Wellbeing Team will work collaboratively with the student, the Faculty and other relevant services.

If the action undertaken in stage 1 has not resolved the concern, or it is felt the case is too serious to be handled informally, stage 2 (or exceptionally stage 3) of the procedure may be initiated.

The student will be asked to meet with a member of the Wellbeing Team to discuss the concerns raised. This should ideally be within 5 working days of the decision to move to stage 2 of the procedure. (Appendix 2 – Standardised Fitness to Study email)

The student will be informed that engaging with stage 2 of the procedure is mandatory and refusal to engage may result in further escalation to stage 3.

The purpose of the meeting will be to ascertain the student's perception of the issues that have been identified including the impact which his or her ill health or behaviour are having upon him or herself and on the University community.

The student should be informed of the purpose of the meeting and be advised of any documents s/he may be required to bring. The student may be accompanied by someone to this meeting for example a member of the Students Union or a close friend / family member.

Disabled students may also be accompanied by a support worker (e.g. sign language interpreter or MH worker).

Wellbeing staff will consider the concern raised in the Fitness to Study follow up form (Appendix 1) and any other information provided by the student and confirm whether

concern resolved or ongoing.

During the meeting, if concern not resolved, a mutually agreed action plan will be devised to put in place support for the student and formally agree expectations for the student to observe. In cases where academic adjustments are required, the Wellbeing Adviser or appropriate Disability Adviser will be consulted. (Appendix 3. Fitness to Study – Agreed Action plan)

This action will have a specific review date and the consequences of not keeping to the agreed action plan must be clearly outlined to the student. This may involve moving to stage 3 of the procedure where a suspension may be considered.

If the action plan cannot be agreed, or the concern is so significant that an action plan is inappropriate then this will move to stage 3.

A report of the meeting and its outcomes will be recorded by the Wellbeing Team and a copy of the agreed action plan will be submitted to the student's Programme Leader. For London this will be the Programme Manager. The student will also receive a copy.

The Programme Leader or Programme Manager for London will disseminate this to the relevant staff in the school on a strict need to know basis.

The student should be informed that if the concern continues or any additional cause of concern arises or student fails to engage with action plan, this could result in their fitness to study being further considered by moving to stage 3.

### **Stage 3 – Serious or persistent concerns.**

Serious or persistent concerns are raised about the individual student's actions or behaviour that are putting the health, safety, wellbeing or academic process of him / herself or other members of the University community, or the effective operation of the University at significant risk.

The Deputy Director of Student Journey or Head of Services for Students and Marketing (UoSiL) will be informed that stage 3 needs to be invoked and a case conference group will be set in motion.

Case conference attendees may include academic or professional services staff as necessary and appropriate. Membership of the group would involve members of the University Incident Group on a need to know basis. University professional services staff in attendance will act in an advisory capacity and not as advocates for the student.

Further to the case conference the student, the student will normally be invited to attend a follow up meeting and may be accompanied by a member of the Students Union or a close friend / family member.

The case conference will be an evidence based process drawing upon expert professional judgment, where appropriate.

Appropriate medical evidence may include a letter from the students GP or a report from a Clinical Psychologist or Psychiatrist. The University reserves the right to make decisions based on the full information available in each case and is not obliged to act upon the specific opinions or recommendations of any professional.

At this time the student may or may not be considered fit to study at University of Sunderland or University of Sunderland in London.

Various options will be considered in relation to the student including:

- Additional support strategies.
- A change in the mode of study
- Interruption from study (Leave of Absence)
- Or a recommendation to the VC that the student be suspended or withdrawn from the University. (See Stage 4)

The students will be informed of the decision within 10 working days.

#### **Stage 4: Suspension or Withdrawal**

There may come a point when it is apparent that in the interests of the student's own health and welfare, or those of other students and staff, it is not appropriate for the student to continue with his or her studies. This Stage is intended to manage such situations where it is necessary to exclude a student from study on health grounds.

Such exclusions will operate until either the University can be satisfied that the risk or issue which prompted the exclusion is not likely to recur throughout the rest of the student's study following his or her return, or a decision is made that this is not achievable within a reasonable timeframe, and that therefore withdrawal from the programme is necessary.

Such a decision may be made where the case has been escalated via Stage 3 above, or where a senior member of University staff deems there to be urgent enough concern of Significant Risk. Where possible a case conference should be held to consider recommending suspension or withdrawal as detailed in Stage 3 (if one has not already taken place). In urgent circumstances such a recommendation could be made by a member of the senior team in Academic Registry or Senior Management Team in London; where this takes place, a case conference should be held to review that decision as soon as is practicable.

A recommendation is made to a member of the University Executive, who will make the decision on whether to suspend or withdraw the student. If suspension is recommended the Deputy Vice-Chancellor will consider this advice, and convey his/her decision to the student in writing. The letter of suspension will make reference to these Regulations, to the conditions of the suspension, to support available during the suspension, to arrangements for any return and to the student's right of appeal.

The maximum period of suspension will be for one academic year, with the suspension reviewed after the first four weeks, and after that as appropriate but no less than once every six months. The suspension may be renewed for a maximum of one further academic year. If this renewal is not deemed appropriate, or the end of the second year is reached, the student should be withdrawn from the University on health grounds. Any withdrawal issue will be communicated in writing.

Where new information is received that is judged by the University to be material to the suspension, a case conference can be called at any time.

## **Appeals**

A student has the right to appeal a suspension or withdrawal decision on one or more of the following grounds:

- that there has been material procedural irregularity in arriving at the decision;
- that the decision is materially factually incorrect;
- that there are further material circumstances not known at the time the decision was reached and which have a significant bearing on that decision;

An appeal will be heard by an Appeals Panel consisting of a member of the University Executive who did not make the original decision (who will Chair the Panel), a member of senior staff of the University with no prior involvement in the case, and the President of the Students' Union. The Student Casework Manager in Academic Registry will act as officer to this Panel.

The student must have ten working days notice of the date of the Appeals Panel hearing, and may attend and be accompanied or represented by another member of the University community (current member of staff, student, or member of the Student Union either elected or staff), or choose not to attend but be represented by another member of the University community. The student will be given copies of the evidence which the Appeals Panel will use to make its determination a minimum of five working days before the date of the Appeals Panel, unless otherwise mutually agreed, and may submit his or her own evidence, in writing to the Officer of the Panel, for the Panel to consider.

The Chair will inform the student of his or her decision in writing within three working days. At this point the University processes are concluded, and the student will be issued with a Completion of Procedures letter which will entitle him or her to take a case with the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for HE if not satisfied with the outcome of the review.

## **Return to Study**

Following any period of interruption from the University under these procedures it may be appropriate for the student to return to resume their studies.

Where an interruption of studies was voluntary, the Wellbeing Team in Sunderland and London will be informed of a student's return to study via Programme Support Officers in Sunderland and Student Administration Team Leaders in London who will contact the student 6 weeks before they return to 'check in' with a formal appointment on return to study. (See Appendix 4 - Fitness to Study – Returning to Study)

Each student's case depends on the specific circumstances but in all cases, return to study will be conditional upon satisfactory evidence of Fitness to Study.

Evidence provided for this purpose could be from a registered Health Practitioner or designated member of the Wellbeing Team with enough knowledge of the student's circumstances to be able to make an informed statement about the student's Fitness to Study.

The University reserves the right not to permit a return to study if the evidence provided is deemed insufficient to mitigate any perceived remaining risk.

The decision to permit a student to return to study will be made by the Dean of Faculty or nominee in consultation with the Deputy Director of Student Journey. Specific conditions

may be imposed as deemed appropriate to the relevant case such as a return to study plan. In London the decision to permit a student to return will be made by Head of Academic Operations in consultation with the Head of Services for Students and Marketing. This return will also be monitored by the Wellbeing Team.

Any decision about a return by students who were suspended from the University will be made by a member of the University Executive, with advice from the Student Casework Manager or nominee and/or Deputy Director of Student Journey who will in turn be advised by the Wellbeing Team. For London this will be the Head of Services for Student and Marketing.

Tracey Mckenzie  
Head of  
Wellbeing

March 2018



## Wellbeing Service

### Standardised email relating to stage 2 – Fitness to Study

Sent within 5 working days of decision to move to stage 2.

Dear student,

We are writing to you today as we are aware / have been made aware (*delete as appropriate*) of continuing and / or concerns relating to your health / safety / wellbeing (*delete as appropriate*).

An appointment has been made for you to meet with ..... our Wellbeing Adviser on .....at ..... (*include date /time*)

The purpose of our meeting is to ascertain your perspective relating to particular concerns raised, which may include the impact of your wellbeing upon yourself / or the University community (*delete as appropriate*)

You may wish to be accompanied to this meeting by someone in a supportive capacity for example a close friend / family member, another member of staff or a member of your Student Union. *Advise of any documentation if relevant.*

The student may be accompanied by someone to this meeting for example a member of the Students Union, a member of University staff acting in a supportive capacity or a close friend / family member.

Engaging with the Wellbeing team is mandatory in this instance in relation to Fitness to Study Policy 2017 - stage 2. Please can I inform you that refusal to engage with us may result in further escalation in relation to your Fitness to Study (stage 3) (*attach link to policy*)

If for any reason you are unable to attend this given time, please can you contact us [wellbeing@sunderland.ac.uk](mailto:wellbeing@sunderland.ac.uk) as soon as possible so we can rearrange for a more suitable time.

With kind regards,

.....

Wellbeing Team



**Wellbeing Service**

**Fitness to Study – Agreed Action Plan.**

Support Action Plan	
<b>Name of student:</b>	<b>Student number:</b>
<b>Course:</b>	<b>Year of Study:</b>
<b>Name of Wellbeing worker:</b>	<b>Staff title:</b>

<b>Issues raised:</b>	
<b>Agreed expectations:</b>	
Any academic adjustments required: (in liaison with DST)	
Does this action plan need to be shared with any other service? (if so, authorisation to release form required)	Explain:
<b>Date of Meeting:</b>	.....
<b>Date of Review:</b>	.....



## Wellbeing Service

### Fitness to Study – Agreed Action Plan.

Please tick if you agree:

I am aware of the consequences of not keeping to this agreed Wellbeing action plan.

I am aware that failure to adhere to my plan may result in a movement to stage 3 as outlined (*add policy link*)

I am aware that a report of this meeting will be recorded and securely stored on the Wellbeing database.

I am aware that a copy of the agreed action plan will be submitted to my Programme Leader.

I am aware that if the concern continues or any additional cause of concern arises, this could result in my Fitness to Study being further considered by moving to stage 3.

Signature of student:

Signature of Wellbeing worker:



<h2 style="margin: 0;">STUDENT WELLBEING</h2> <h3 style="margin: 0;">Return to Study</h3>
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<b>Name:</b>	<b>Student number:</b>
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**Academic Details**

<b>Faculty</b>	Health, Sciences & Wellbeing / Education & Society / Business, Law, Tourism / Arts & Creative Industries / Technology. London Campus
<b>Year of study</b>	0, 1 <sup>st</sup> , 2 <sup>nd</sup> , 3 <sup>rd</sup> , 4 <sup>th</sup> , research
<b>Course</b>	

**Fitness to Study**

<b>What was planned:</b>	
<b>What action took place:</b>	
<b>External support accessed.</b>  Attached documentation if deemed appropriate	
<b>Current support requirements:</b>	
<b>Known current risk factors:</b>	
<b>In the opinion of Wellbeing, is the student deemed Fit to Study?</b>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Name of Wellbeing Worker:</b>	

