

BREAK IN STUDY POLICY AND PROCEDURE FOR POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH STUDENTS

Introduction

1. In this document 'we', 'our' and 'us' refer to Sheffield Hallam University. 'You' and 'your' refer to all postgraduate research degree students (PGRs) of Sheffield Hallam University who are studying for a Sheffield Hallam academic award either at the University or a partner organisation.
2. Once you enrol onto a course at the University, you are normally expected to complete the course in one continuous period of uninterrupted study. However, we recognise there are some situations where you may wish to take time out, or need to take a break in your studies, for personal, health, employment reasons etc., or need to halt your studies due to extenuating circumstances. This policy explains the process and implications of taking a break in study.
3. A break in study means that you are temporarily halting your research. **The university will not allow retrospective applications for a break in study under any circumstances.** The university Code of Practice stipulates that you must raise issues at the time the circumstances are happening, so that support can be discussed, and a break in study planned where necessary.
4. The university will only allow a break of between 2 and 12 months in duration, in any one application. If you apply for a 12-month break but your circumstances then continue beyond the 12-month duration, then you will need to engage in a face-to-face review meeting with your Director of Studies (DoS), Postgraduate Research Tutor (PGRT) and Research Institute Officer (RIO) before any further break in your studies is considered (see sections 26 to 28 for further details). Continuous breaks in study of over 24 months will only be supported if an intended return date is agreed, and you recommence your studies at that point. Depending on the circumstances reported, you may be advised to withdraw from your research degree and re-apply, by using the normal Admissions process, when you feel able to re-engage with your studies. However, a place on a research degree programme, particularly where a research project is funded, cannot always be guaranteed.
5. The length of your break in study is not included in the calculation of the number of months/years you study on the course. The maximum regulatory timescales will therefore be adjusted, and the length of break taken will be added to the end date of the course. The university will also consider applications for additional time on top of the adjusted timescale, to complete your thesis to a satisfactory standard.

6. We will try to support your request to take a break wherever possible, but when you are in financial debt to the university, you must clear your debt within your current academic year. If you are a debtor, progression to the next academic year is not allowed under the PGR Students in Tuition Fee Debt Policy.
7. There are some situations where your Director of Studies and HoRD/PgRT will invoke the Break in Study process without your consent, and automatically record you as taking a break in study. Examples are as follows:
 - Where you are an international student studying on a Student visa, you must return home to renew your visa, and return to study at a later date.
 - Where you have been detained under the Mental Health Act (1983).
 - Where you have been remanded in custody pending a criminal trial or sentenced to a period in prison.
8. If you are pregnant and are planning to take maternity leave, you must contact your Director of Studies to notify your need to take a break in study for maternity related reasons. Please see Student Pregnancy and Maternity Policy and Procedure for details.
9. If you are an international student on a Tier 4 or student visa, you must ensure that you understand what a break in study means for your visa. For example, the University must report the details of your break in study to UK Visas and Immigration and cease sponsorship of your current visa. You will need to apply for a new student visa to return to study. You must also be aware of the visa time Limits on study in the UK. Further advice for international students taking a break in study is available from the International Experience Team.

Process

10. You must contact your Director of Studies to request a break in study and to complete the Break in Study (RFBIS) form. Your request will be considered by your Research Institute HoRD or PgRT. The university Research Degrees Committee (RDC) will endorse this decision and write to you confirming the decision.
11. If your request is declined, RDC will explain the reasons why. Your Director of Studies will discuss with you other options for support, and/or the implications of withdrawing from the University and reapplying in the future.
12. If your request is approved, your research degree studies will be put on hold until the end of the duration of the break. The specific implications will vary, depending on where you are in your studies. These will be explained to you when you apply for a break in study.

Assessment for Students on Professional Doctoral Programmes

13. If you are taking a break in study part way through an academic year, any assessment already submitted for the level 8 Professional Doctorate programme modules will be marked and considered at a relevant College/Departmental Board. If modules are passed, the marks stand. If modules are not passed, the assessment attempt will be voided. You will be able to take the attempt again, with the benefit of feedback from the academic marker, when you have resumed your studies.

14. You will not normally be permitted to engage in any outstanding assessments from your previous year. Exceptions for those taking a break in study due to non-medical reasons will be considered on an individual basis. This will be confirmed to you if your request to take a break in study is approved.

During the break in study

15. You are not permitted to attend any teaching or supervision meetings during your break in study and cannot access laboratories or other research facilities. Teaching/research staff are not obliged to provide you with any academic support during your break in study and so there will be limited communication from university staff. This is to enable you to concentrate on the circumstances which have led to your break in study.
16. You do however retain all access to University IT services, including Blackboard, and the Library resources, unless you are a debtor to the university.
17. You can access wellbeing support available to all students for online, self-help and group sessions. If you have previously registered with the Wellbeing Service or are requesting individual support, this will be assessed on a case-by-case basis depending on your circumstances during your break and your ability to actively engage with the wellbeing support.
18. You will be contacted about any arrangements that must be put in place for your return to study, for example, dates to take complementary studies modules or extended deadlines for Confirmation of Doctorate.

Tuition fees

19. No tuition fee is payable from the date of your break in study being approved, to the date you resume your studies. If you take a break in study part way through an academic year, we will recalculate the tuition fee for that year based on the time between enrolment and the break in study. The university's [Terms and Conditions](#) section 6.4 on 'Withdrawals, transfers and time out from study' will be applied when a break in study is granted.
20. When you resume your studies in the next academic year, we will calculate the tuition fee for that year based on the time between your return to study and the end of the academic year (or your next enrolment point).

Funding

21. Taking a break in study can affect your future entitlement to funding and/or bursaries and scholarships. It is important to understand the implications of a break in study on your financial situation. You must speak to your funding body/sponsor about your personal circumstances before proceeding with a break in study.
 - If you are a student in receipt of a doctoral loan, you are advised to contact [Student Finance England](#) to discuss your future entitlement to tuition fee and maintenance loans when returning from a break in study.
 - If you are an international student, you must contact your sponsor directly to discuss your circumstances.

22. In normal circumstances when you resume studies after a break you can expect to maintain your eligibility for bursaries funded by the University, providing your research and other circumstances have not changed. You will not normally be asked to repay any University funded bursaries already paid in the academic year that you took a break in study. If you receive a bursary from an external body such as the Research Councils, Department for Education or NHS England, you may be asked to pay back some or all your funding. It is your responsibility to discuss bursary repayment and future eligibility with your funding body.

Returning from a break in study

23. Your Director of Studies will contact you one month before your intended date of return. At this point you must confirm that you are fully able to return to your studies and re-engage with supervision and the research process.
24. If you are not able to return to study, or if you do not engage with our communications, you may be presented with the option to write-up for an exit award if your project allows, or you will be withdrawn from the programme. You can re-apply via the Admissions process when you are able to engage in your studies.
25. You will be invited to attend a return to study meeting with your Director of Studies, the Research Institute HoRD or PgRT, and a Research Institute Officer to discuss your return. This will normally occur within two weeks of your return to ensure that you can fully engage with your studies and that all available support is in place.
26. If you attend the return to study meeting but are unable to re-engage with your studies at that time, and if you wish to make a further application for a break totalling 13 to 24 months of time out, this will be considered by the PgRT in conjunction with your supervisors. They may invoke the Capacity to Study process to discuss an action plan with you for your future return, and/or refer you to Disabled Student Support for a learning contract, if you have long term issues or medical conditions. These options will be discussed with you if you are citing long- term issues over and beyond a 12- month period. Signposting to Wellbeing services will be advised.
27. If after receiving the advice and support as noted in section 26 above, you are still wishing to take further time out, totalling 25 to 36 months, your request will need to be considered by the PgRT and HoRD. They will consider the help and support you have already received, and will assess whether the university can offer any further assistance to you. It is at the discretion of the Research Institute as to whether the break will be accepted or rejected, and this will be endorsed by RDC.
28. Applications totalling over 36 months will be considered by RDC, who will make the decision to accept or reject your application. RDC will consider the length of time you have spent away from your research, the support resources you have had, your current fitness to study, and your project feasibility, to establish whether the time you are taking away from your research, is affecting the currency and impact of that research. This decision is final from a university perspective and there is no right of appeal.

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Original Version Approved by and date:	Research Degrees Committee		
Owner:	Doctoral School		
Date for Review:	September 2026		
Amendments since Approval:	Detail of Revision:	Date of Revision:	Revision Approved by:
	Section 3 – retrospective applications will only be granted in exceptional circumstances.	26 June 2021	RDC
	Sections 26 to 28 – these are process enhancements to ensure standardisation and equity in decision-making, and to allow RDC the final decision on breaks totalling more than 36 months.	26 June 2021	RDC
	<p>Section 3 – this has been updated to state that no retrospective breaks in study will be supported/allowed.</p> <p>Section 4 – this wording has been varied for HESA compliance - continuous breaks in study beyond 24 months can be supported unless a return to study date is agreed and re-engagement with studies occurs on the agreed date. Any students who contravene this, will be withdrawn and will need to re-apply.</p> <p>Section 6 – the wording has been varied to state that whilst PGR students can take a break in study on financial grounds, then the debt must be cleared within the academic year if they are already in tuition fee debt; student debtors cannot be progressed to the next academic year.</p> <p>Section 15 – this has been broadened to clarify that students are not permitted access to laboratories or other research facilities while on a break in study, as students are not enrolled during this period and are not insured to be on university premises.</p>	21 June 2023	RDC