Fitness to Study Policy and Procedure

Policy

1. What is fitness to study?

Fitness to study relates to an individual's capacity to participate fully and satisfactorily as a student, in relation to academic studies and life generally at the University of Bristol.

The University is committed to supporting student wellbeing and recognises that a positive approach to the management of physical and mental health is crucial to student learning and academic achievement.

2. The purpose and scope of this policy

a) To provide a suitable and co-ordinated response by academic and support staff in circumstances where it is not considered appropriate to apply other internal procedures such as the Student Disciplinary Regulations.

b) To encourage early intervention and active collaboration between all staff in managing situations where there are concerns regarding fitness to study.

c) To provide a non-judgemental, consistent and sensitive approach to the management of situations which may require different levels of response according to the perceived level of concern.

This policy does not relate to fitness to practise – certain professional programmes have fitness to practise procedures which operate outside the scope of this policy.

This policy repeals and replaces the Policy on Student Mental Health and Regulation for the Suspension of Studies or Exclusion on the Grounds of Health, Safety or Welfare with effect from 1 August 2013.

3. When to use this Policy

A student’s fitness to study may be a cause for concern as a result of a wide range of circumstances, including (but not restricted to) the following:

- Concerns about the student’s fitness to study are raised from a third party i.e. a friend, housemate, colleague, school staff or medical professional either whilst the student is at university or whilst engaged in university-led outside activities such as placements or field trips.
- The student has told a member of staff that they have concerns about their fitness to study.
- The student’s disposition is such that it indicates that there may be need to address an underlying health issue
- Behaviour which would usually be dealt with as a disciplinary matter, which may be known to be or suspected to be the result of an underlying physical or mental health difficulty.
- A student’s health difficulties are adversely affecting the health, safety or wellbeing of others.
• The student’s academic performance or personal conduct is not acceptable and is thought to be the result of an underlying physical or mental health problem.

Procedure

4. Stages of action

The procedures can be entered at any stage depending on the level of concern and urgency although it is hoped that most situations can be remedied by action taken at stages 1 or 2.

4.1. Stage 1 – Informal Stage

Once concerns have been raised about the student, a member of staff from the student’s school should approach the student and explain to them, in a supportive and understanding way, that concerns about their fitness to study have emerged. This would ordinarily be a member of staff with knowledge of the student, such as their personal tutor, senior tutor or academic tutor. The member of staff should contact Student Services if they require advice or guidance on how to approach the student and discuss difficult issues.

The student will be made aware of the precise nature of the behaviour that has caused the concern. The member of staff will attempt to resolve the matter by informal discussions with the student. The student should be encouraged to explain their views on the matter and should be encouraged to use one or more of the support services offered by the University. The member of staff should consider with the student whether any specific academic arrangements or other types of support could be applied to help the student to study more effectively.

It is anticipated that in most cases the concerns can be resolved informally at this stage and that the student will engage with this process and access the student support services that are available to them at the University. Any plans agreed between the member of staff and the student should be set out in a letter to the student so it is clear what has been agreed.

A review period should be established, by agreement between the student and member of staff if possible. Sufficient time should be given to allow the student to consider their behaviour and seek support. At the review meeting the steps taken to address the concerns should be discussed.

Further meetings may be scheduled to monitor the situation and progress made by the student. The member of staff should help the student access the support available to them to enable them to continue with their studies and engage in university life. The general expectation is that the student will take personal responsibility and fully engage with the support recommended by staff.

If the concerns have not been addressed, support has not been sought, and the member of staff feels that the progress has not been made, the case can move on to the next stage of the policy.

4.2. Stage 2 – Case Review

If action taken under stage 1 has not been successful or if the concerns raised are too serious to be dealt with informally, stage 2 should be invoked.
A meeting of a Case Review Panel can be convened by the Faculty Education Manager (FEM) from the student’s faculty, who will act as clerk to the Panel, usually made up of the following:

- A representative from the student’s school
- the Faculty Undergraduate or Postgraduate Education Director
- a representative from the Student Services Division
- the Equality and Diversity Manager

Before the Case Review Panel meeting medical assessment may be sought, usually from the student’s GP or medical practitioner. The student will be encouraged to consent to the assessment. The student will be able to submit documents for the Panel to consider and will be given a copy of any documents seen by the Panel. The student may request to attend all or part of the Case Review Panel meeting. The Panel will make a reasoned decision regarding whether the student should attend. If the student does attend, they will have the right to bring a friend or representative to the meeting.

A letter will be sent to the student after the meeting setting out any decision made and the reasons for the decision.

The Panel will order its proceedings as it sees fit and may call witnesses if necessary.

The outcomes available to the Panel are:

- No further action required
- To monitor the student formally for a specific period of time. An action plan will be agreed with the student detailing any steps the student will need to take and the support to be provided to the student. Regular review meetings will be arranged with the student and a nominated member of staff. The student should be made aware of what will happen if the action plan is breached, which will normally involve their case moving to stage 3.
- To recommend a specific academic arrangement be put in place which may include a suspension of studies. Such recommendations should be agreed by the student’s school and faculty where appropriate and the student. If the student does not agree, the case will move on to stage 3.
- To refer the case to a Fitness to Study Panel, under stage 3 of this procedure. This will be appropriate in serious cases, for example where there is evidence of a serious risk to the health and safety of the student or others in the university community. This course of action would be used when it is considered that suspension, temporary exclusion, permanent exclusion or withdrawal may be the appropriate course of action or if the student has not agreed to a recommendation or action plan made under stage 2.

4.3. Stage 3 – Fitness to Study Panel

This stage will only be invoked following a referral from a Case Review Panel or if in the opinion of the Deputy University Secretary the case is sufficiently serious and urgent to warrant an immediate referral without consideration of stage 1 and 2.
The Deputy University Secretary can convene a Fitness to Study Panel to consider the case and will act as clerk to the Panel.

The Members of the Panel will usually be:
- A representative of the student’s school
- A representative of the student’s faculty (usually the FEM and/or the FED)
- A representative of another faculty or school
- A representative from the Student Services Division
- The Equality and Diversity Manager

As with the Case Review Panel the student will have the opportunity to submit documents for the Panel to consider and will be sent a copy of any documents seen by the Panel.

The student may ask for a Student Adviser from the Just Ask unit of the Students’ Union to attend the meeting on their behalf but will not normally be permitted to attend in person.

The Panel may order the proceedings at its discretion and may call witnesses if required. The Panel may request further medical evidence.

The Panel will make a recommendation to the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education and Students). Possible recommendations may include:

- A short term exclusion to allow the student to be assessed by a medical professional, access support services both within and outside of the University or for the University to obtain further information. The exclusion will be reviewed within four weeks as set out below in relation to emergency temporary exclusion.
- Suspension with conditions for a period up to twelve months. A student who is suspended from the University may be prohibited from participating in University activities and may either be prohibited from entering the University premises or have restricted rights to enter the premises. The terms of the suspension will be notified to the student in writing, depending on the circumstances of the case. The decision to suspend a student shall be reviewed as necessary by the Panel.
- Exclusion or requirement to withdraw - if the Panel concludes, taking into account the individual circumstances of the case and any supporting medical evidence, that there is no reasonable prospect of the student re-engaging with their programme in the short to medium term a recommendation will be made to the Pro Vice-Chancellor that the student is permanently excluded or required to withdraw. This recommendation should only be made in the most serious cases.
- Any other action considered to be appropriate and proportionate.

5. Temporary Exclusion

The Deputy University Secretary may refer the case straight to the Pro Vice-Chancellor if it is considered that the risk to the student or the University is very high and an immediate temporary exclusion is the most appropriate course of action.

The Pro Vice-Chancellor may impose a temporary exclusion for a set period of time with immediate effect. A student who is subject to a temporary exclusion order is prohibited from entering university premises and from participating in university activities. The exclusion
may, exceptionally, be subject to qualification, such as the permission to take an
examination or to enter university premises to attend a meeting with a support service, such
as the Student Counselling Service or the Students’ Health Service. The terms of exclusion
will be individual to each case and will be notified to the student in writing. An exclusion
order does not affect the student’s status as a member of the University.

The decision to exclude will normally be reviewed within four weeks. The review may include
a recommendation that a Fitness to Study Panel be convened to consider the case.

6. Return to study

The Case Review Panel or Fitness to Study Panel that made the recommendation regarding
a suspension or temporary exclusion, or as many members of the original Panel as possible,
will be reconvened to consider whether the student is fit to return to study.

Further medical evidence will be requested from the student which considers their ability to
fully engage with their studies and meet the requirements of the programme. A student will
only be permitted to return if, after receiving the medical evidence, the Panel is satisfied that
the individual is fit to study.

If a student agreed to suspend studies under stage 2, the Case Review Panel that originally
considered the matter can make the decision regarding a return to studies without referral to
the Pro Vice-Chancellor if it is satisfied that the student is fit to return.

If the Pro Vice-Chancellor made the decision to suspend or temporarily exclude under stage
3 on the recommendation of the Fitness to Study Panel, the Panel should reconvene to
consider whether the student is fit to return to study and make a recommendation to the Pro
Vice-Chancellor. The Pro Vice-Chancellor will make the final decision based on the Panel’s
recommendation.

Where a student returns to study after a temporary exclusion/suspension under this policy
the relevant panel will consider any support that the student may require to support a return
to studies, such as regular review meetings or a return to study action plan. The general
expectation is that the student will take personal responsibility for fully engaging with this
support.

7. Right of appeal

The student may appeal to Council against a suspension or requirement to withdraw. A letter
setting out the grounds of appeal should be addressed to the University Secretary, to be
received within 21 days of the date on which the order for suspension or the requirement to
withdraw was made.

The membership and procedure of an appeal committee will be the same as that set out
under the Student Complaints Procedure.

8. Nominees

References in these Regulations to the holders of any office shall be construed to refer
either to the office holder or to their respective nominee.