

Suspension of studies: factors to consider in making a decision and support for returning students

Introduction

Suspension of status within the University 'stops the clock' for all elements of the degree, including residency requirements, fees and the number of terms for which a particular status may be held.

Students do not have an automatic right to suspend, and must discuss this with their college (in the case of undergraduates) or department/faculty (in the case of postgraduates), before making an application.

Considering suspension

Suspension can sometimes be a suitable course of action for disabled students, as with non-disabled students, if they are experiencing a deterioration in their health, need to undergo substantial medical treatment, or require time away to support their mental health and well-being. Students may feel they need an extended period of time to recover from a deterioration in health, or to put in place strategies to manage the impact of their disability with the support of medical and other professionals, with the extra time that a break from the requirements of study gives.

A request to suspend status is usually preceded by a period of discussion and on-course support from tutors and the relevant disability coordinators in the college and department, with advice from the student's disability advisor at DAS, and, if appropriate, support from the relevant college welfare team. All reasonable steps should be taken to support the student on course, including reviewing the reasonable adjustments that are in place, considering and putting in place study support options and monitoring the student's progress. Major adjustments to the student's course, for example taking the FHS examinations over three years rather than two, or removing residency requirements for PGR students, could also be considered depending on the student's needs.

In some cases suspension of status will be the best course of action after these options have been explored, in others it may not. The University's Counselling Service has produced an excellent [podcast for students who are thinking about suspending](#). Students should be made aware prior to

suspension of the difficulties that can be experienced on return, so they can make an informed decision:

- They will no longer be on course so will not be able to seek help from tutors, other than in planning their return to studies;
- While much access to central University facilities can be retained, most colleges do not allow suspended students access to college facilities without explicit permission being sought each time access is wanted.
- The student's academic studies have been disrupted, and it can be difficult to re-engage with material that was first studied prior to suspension;
- On return to study, students can feel that their support networks are disrupted: they may well be in a different year-group, friends may have graduated and it may take time to re-establish social networks.

The [Student Union information booklet on suspension](#) sets out some of the difficulties, with suggestions on how to manage these.

Suspension application process

Details about the process of suspension for undergraduates are specific to each college.

Normally suspension on medical grounds is for not less than one term and for no more than three terms. Where suspension is needed for more than three terms, application will need to be made for dispensation from the normal time limits for completion. See [Further details on suspension for undergraduates](#), including details of the University services and facilities which the student will still have access to during suspension. Also available are [details of the suspension process for full-time graduates](#). Part-time students should contact the relevant [Graduate Studies contact](#).

Those students who suspend on medical grounds will always require a medical certificate, and a condition of return will be undertaking a medical assessment to determine whether they are medically fit to resume their course (See 'Medical assessments on return' section below). Academic conditions may be set also for reinstatement on the course, but these should be supportive in nature, insofar as they are intended to ensure that the student is ready to return to study. All conditions for return should be clearly communicated to the student at the time of suspension.

Support for disabled students returning to study

Suspending students should be directed to the following sources of support to plan for their return.

- **Discussion with academic tutor and preparation for any academic conditions for return**

Tutors will be aware that students on suspension will need time to focus on their recovery. But it is important that an academic support plan is put in place for the returning student, whether undergraduate or graduate, so that they understand any conditions they need to meet on their return and can prepare for these. The College (and in the case of graduates, the department in addition to the college) will wish to be assured that the student is ready to reintegrate into their course at an appropriate academic level, as well as being fit to return to study. Often there is an academic assessment prior to return, which might be invigilated collections, with a specified level of achievement expected, and/or essays may be set. This assessment is intended to be supportive, in that it is a way of identifying whether the student is ready to return. Preparation for any collections may also enable the student to build up to the level of full-time study which will be required when they are re-enrolled. These arrangements will vary according to the length of suspension, the college, and the circumstances of each student.

- **Medical assessments on return**

Returning students, who suspended on medical grounds, will also need to submit medical evidence, and/or have an assessment with their College doctor, to ensure they are medically fit to resume study. A college doctor's assessment should take into account reports provided by other clinicians involved in the care of the student.

- **Discussion with the college welfare team/personal tutor/Counselling Service/Student Union's Advisory Service**

Discussion with the relevant college welfare team and possibly the University's counselling service may help the student prepare for some of the challenges of their return, such as getting used to the pressures of full-time study, re-integrating into the social life of University, and considering the new ways of working that might have been agreed during the period of suspension.

- **Arranging for Reasonable Adjustments and dispensations whilst on suspension**

It is important that during a period of suspension, a new assessment of the student's need for reasonable adjustments is undertaken, so that action is taken to mitigate any problems experienced before suspension. Disability Coordinators within the college (in the case of undergraduates) or in the department (in the case of graduates), should notify the Disability Advisory Service of the need to review the Student Support Plan and also encourage the student to engage promptly with DAS as a priority. With the student's engagement, a disability advisor at the Disability Advisory Service will help the student put in place a plan to reinstate by discussing their needs, reflecting on barriers to study prior to suspension, collecting the relevant medical evidence and recommending reasonable adjustments and the support required for their return. Returning students will need to re-apply for Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA), and 14 weeks should be allowed for this process. The Study Needs Assessment, required for DSA support, will also be useful in establishing whether there is additional support that may be helpful for the student (e.g. a study skills tutor funded by DSA).

For research students, it is important that a discussion is had with the supervisor to re-assess the dynamics of the supervisory relationship, and also working methods, to identify whether there are steps that can be taken to ensure that there is a successful return. This might include more frequent supervision meetings for a period of time, agreeing a different method for feedback, or a different way of setting objectives/project plans. There is more information about supporting disabled students studying for the DPhil on the [Research students page](#).

Students who declare a disability during a period of suspension

For some students, medical factors that led to suspension of status may lead to the diagnosis of a condition that can be supported by the University's Disability Advisory Service. If a student or a member of staff working with them considers that support from the Service might be helpful, the student should be strongly encouraged to make contact well ahead of their return so that appropriate assessment can be scheduled and support/adjustments put in place. The process for agreeing and funding support can take up to 14 weeks.