

**SMUO Study Break Policy**

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| **Date Effective** | 21 November 2023 |
| **Approved By** | Academic Strategy, Portfolio and Student Experience Committee |
| **Date Approved** | November 2023 |  |
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| **Related Policies** | Leave of Absence Policy | Withdrawal Policy  |

St Mary’s University is committed to improve student retention and maintain accurate student records for internal and external submissions. The purpose of this policy is to ensure that students receive appropriate advice, academic, pastoral and financial, before the Study Break process is initiated.

This policy works in conjunction with the Leave of Absence Policy and also provides guidance for academic and professional services staff, on how to process requests for a Study Break or an interruption in study, within a timely manner.

**Scope and Purpose**

The purpose of this policy is to make staff and students on Distance Learning programmes aware of the University’s policy on Study Breaks. The policy applies to all undergraduate and postgraduate students on the Distance Learning and Online programmes.

A student retains the right to request an interruption of study from their programme, however guidance should be made available to assist the student in exploring alternative options.

Students considering a Study Break should seek academic advice and student guidance as soon as possible, from both their Course Lead, Course Coordinator and Student Services and Wellbeing.

**Definitions and Terminology**

For the purpose of this and associated policies.

* **Student**: any person registered onto a programme, regardless of the number of modules registered onto at one time or mode of study
* **Study Break**: a short-term interruption of study from the programme, agreed with the University authorities and that is not defined as a Leave of Absence
* **Module**: an individual, credited unit of the programme with structured teaching and learning, with an explicit set of learning outcomes and assessment criteria
* **Leave of Absence**: a pause in studies when a student temporarily and formally, in agreement with the University authorities, disengages from their studies

St Mary’s University defines a Study Break to be a period of 3 months or 16 weeks, however long the period of the semester. Any interruption of study longer than this period, will be defined as a Leave of Absence.

**Study Break**

A Study Break is considered when a student wishes to or is advised to take a short-term or minimal break in their studies, for up to the period of a semester.

With any interruption of study, a student is required to firstly contact their Course Coordinator and may additionally submit a change of status quest through their online Student Portal on E-vision. The student will be able to submit any documentary evidence associated with their request.

The length of a Study Break may be dependent on a number of factors including when the module being missed will next be available. The confirmed length of Study Break will be communicated to the student either through the online Student Portal or email, once the request has been approved.

Students are permitted up to two Study Breaks throughout the course of their studies. These can be taken consecutively, however those wishing to take consecutive breaks should also refer to the Leave of Absence Policy. Those who fail to resume study after the agreed Study Break period will either be asked to request a Leave of Absence or risk a Forced Withdrawal from the programme.

Once a student has commenced and registered onto a module, unless the module has been dropped or a withdrawal request submitted before the cooling off period, the student will be liable for any fees. Details of the cooling off and liability period can be found in the Refund Policy.

**Implications of a Study Break**

The student must be made aware of the implications of a Study Break on their studies and finance. The Course Lead should signpost these issues in any conversation with a student considering a Study Break, before referring them to the appropriate departments.

The initial conversation should cover the following:

All of the options available to the student including a Leave of Absence, repeating a module, changing the course pathway, module swapping, deferral or withdrawal

The implications on their finance, with clear advice that the student contacts Student Finance, the Fees Office or any other funding agencies or sponsors, to discuss their particular circumstances

What support is available in the case of health-related or personal circumstances

What their programme of study will comprise upon their return, including any planned changes in the programme of modules that may occur whilst they are away, affecting their choice on their return

The proposed duration of the Study Break

**Imposed Study Break**

From time to time, the University may decide that it would in the student’s best interest and/or the University community, if they were to take a Study Break or a short-term interruption of study. The decision will be made with reference to the University’s Fitness to Study Policy and any Academic Regulations.

An imposed Study Break will not count towards a student’s maximum of two voluntary Study Breaks.

**Voluntary Study Break**

If a student has asked to take a Study Break, they should firstly contact their Course Coordinator. Once the request has been submitted, approved and a Study Break period agreed, the student will be notified through their Student Portal or email account. University staff can submit a Study Break request on behalf of a student.

Where the issue leading to an application for a Study Break is highly sensitive and if the student has been in contact with Student Services, Wellbeing Services may be asked to provide supporting evidence.

**Refusal of Study Break request**

In the event of a Study Break request being refused, the student should receive notification from the Course Lead and/or Registry Services, giving the reason for the refusal, within five working days of their discussion. The student appeal to the Academic Registrar within five working days of receipt of the notification, enclosing additional evidence if appropriate. A panel comprising of Registry Services staff and Faculty representatives will review the decision and respond to the student within ten working days, of receipt of the appeal.

Students who have failed the overall programme or have been placed on a forced withdrawal by the University will not be eligible for a Study Break, including those awaiting outcome of an academic appeal.

**Returning from a Study Break**

Two weeks before the student is scheduled to return, the University will contact the student and arrange for a doctor’s report or confirmation from Student Services and Wellbeing teams to be produced, if applicable, indicating whether the student is fit to return to study. Planned ongoing support will be established either at a pre-return meeting or by email correspondence.

A student returning from an approved or imposed Study Break may be allowed to defer any assessments due, for any modules they have completed before their period of leave.

Any changes to modules prior to the Study Break will need to be requested with Registry Services. Please refer to the Module Drop Policy for further details.

Upon returning from a Study Break, students will be required to fulfil any previous conditions agreed; academic and medical-related. Return to study from a medical Study Break would require submission of a medical certificate or equivalent evidence confirming the student’s fitness for study, which may also be extended for students returning from an absence on compassionate grounds.

Students who fail to provide sufficient evidence or meet the conditions for a return to study will be required to submit a new request for a Leave of Absence (longer than the Study Break permits) or a withdrawal from their studies. The University will have the right to process a forced withdrawal or imposed Leave of Absence, for students who do not meet the conditions in returning from a Study Break.

A student may return to a module from a Study Break, a maximum of two times. Any assessments taken and outcomes previously obtained will stand, unless extenuating circumstances had been submitted and approved, prior to the Study Break. It should be noted however that students re-joining the module may not be eligible for a refund if the module is later dropped; the 14-day liability period will no longer apply.

**Extension to a Study Break**

In the case of an imposed Study Break, if the appointed Practitioner does not deem the student fit to return to study as per the Fitness to Study Policy, it may be necessary to extend the period further. In such cases, a Leave of Absence request may be submitted on the student’s behalf and ongoing support made available to facilitate the student’s return, at a later agreed date.

Any request to extend a Study Break, into a Leave of Absence, must be approved by the Head of Registry and Course Lead.

**Fees and Funding**

Students taking a Study Break will be liable for the fees for the term in which their leave commences. For students with financial support such as Student Finance England. The University is obliged to inform the funding body of the student’s Study Break, which may however be subject to the length of the interrupted study.

Further details of fee charges for students with an interruption of study can be found in the Refund Policy.