

York Online Study Break / Leave of Absence policy



Purpose and scope:

The York Online programmes were developed as flexible programmes, aimed at working professionals, enabling students to balance their studies around work and other commitments. The University recognises that the nature of those other commitments may at times have a significant impact on a student's ability to study. This document sets out the University's policy for enabling students to take time out from their studies. This policy applies to all students studying on the York Online programmes, namely:

- MSc Computer Science, MSc Computer Science with Artificial Intelligence, MSc Computer Science with Cyber Security, MSc Computer Science with Data Analytics;
- MSc Finance, Leadership and Management, MSc Innovation, Leadership and Management, MSc International Business, Leadership and Management;
- Master of Business Administration, MBA Public Sector Management;
- Master of Public Administration, MPA International Development, MPA Public Policy and Management, MPA Social and Public Policy;
- and any other programmes that may be added to the portfolio from time to time.

Document control:

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Policies superseded by this policy:	The University's Leave of Absence policy for taught students Section 4.3 of the York Online programme characteristics 2017		
Amendments	Date:	Details of change:	
	22/03/2023	Updated broken link to Data Protection policy	
Related policies, procedures, guidelines and regulations			
The University's Leave of Absence policy no longer applies to these programmes. The York Online Fit to Sit / Submit policy The York Online Repeat Study policy The York Online Policy on managing disruptions in the ISM			
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1. Introduction

1.1 As part of its commitment to enabling a lifelong journey of growth and development, the University of York offers a series of 100% online programmes, known as York Online, aimed primarily at mid-career professionals seeking to enhance their careers or transition into new ones. Students on these programmes represent a distinct population within the University, with the majority being mature learners with full-time work and family commitments that may need to take precedence over their studies from time to time. The University recognises the diversity of experience and barriers to attainment that our York Online students may encounter. In response, the University aims to provide a support environment that enables students to respond flexibly to changes in their circumstances and manage their learning and progression on the programme.

1.2 Studying at Masters level alongside employment represents a significant commitment and can often be challenging. Students have a responsibility to manage their time and workload effectively, monitor their engagement with the programme and plan accordingly. The University expects that all students who have selected and paid for a module in the current teaching period will be actively studying that module and able to engage effectively.

1.3 Where work, family or other life commitments are likely to significantly impact a student's ability to engage with their studies, the University encourages students to take time out from the programme through either a short study break or a longer leave of absence. Students are expected wherever possible to plan this in advance and notify the University as soon as possible via the appropriate form.

2. Definitions

2.1 **Conditions of return** - any requirement that must be met before the student is permitted to resume their studies. These may be academic, e.g. submission of outstanding assignments, exam, etc, or non-academic, e.g. providing medical evidence of fitness to return.

2.2 **Refund period** - the period in which a student may withdraw from a module that they have paid for and get a refund; this is 14 days after the payment deadline.

2.3 Teaching period - equivalent to a term for the York Online programmes; each teaching period lasts eight weeks and students study a single module in that time. The teaching periods are numbered OL1 (the September start) to OL6 (the June start).

2.4 Working days - standard working days for the University are Monday to Friday, 9.00 - 17.00 UK time, excluding Bank Holidays and University closure days.

3. Study Breaks

3.1 A Study Break is an informal break taken between modules and each one lasts for an entire teaching period. The start and end dates for a Study Break align with the module start and end dates. These dates cannot be changed. It is suitable for students wanting to take a short break for a planned event, such as moving house, preparing for a reassessment or managing an increase in paid workload for a number of weeks.

3.2 Students may take up to two consecutive Study Breaks. Each missed period of study will be counted as one Study Break. If, following two consecutive Study Breaks, a student does not either select and pay for a module or apply for a Leave of Absence, they will automatically be withdrawn from the programme.

3.3 There is no overall maximum limit to the number of Study Breaks that can be taken during the programme. However, students who have a high number of absences from the programme may be monitored so that support can be offered to ensure they have the best chance to succeed.

3.4 There is no formal procedure for taking a Study Break; students should simply not select a module for the upcoming teaching period. Students are encouraged to inform their Student Success Coordinator of their intention so that they can be removed from payment reminders.

3.5 Where a student does not select and pay for a module by the deadline, their student record will be updated to show that they have chosen to take a Study Break and they will receive a confirmation email. They will continue to be registered as a student at the University.

3.6 Students may not take a Study Break once the module has started. The exception to this is if a student selects and pays for a module and then changes their mind during the refund period. In such cases, and assuming the student does not want to take a formal Leave of Absence, the student record will be reset to a Study Break and a refund issued.

3.7 Where a student opts to take a Study Break, but later chooses to submit a Leave of Absence request to extend their time away from studies, their Leave of Absence start date will align with the start date of the upcoming module occurrence; Study Break dates will not be overwritten.

3.8 When a student in receipt of a student loan takes a Study Break, the University will inform the Students Loans Company of their absence. The student will need to have adequate funds to pay for their next module themselves. Their loan payments will be resumed once they have returned to active study.

4. Leave of Absence

4.1 Definition and permitted periods of absence

4.1.1 A Leave of Absence is a formal period of absence from studies that is usually taken for a period of more than 16 weeks. It is suitable for students experiencing significant life events that they know will prevent them engaging with their studies for a long period of time. As students can take a Leave of Absence midway through a module, it is also suitable for situations where something unexpected happens and a student needs to suspend their studies immediately. Students may also take Leave of Absence on motivational grounds, and can request a Leave of Absence to focus on outstanding assessments from previous modules where multiple assessments have accumulated which the student wishes to sit before returning back into active study.

4.1.2 A single period of Leave of Absence can be up to one calendar year in the first instance. It is not usually possible to process a Leave of Absence for a period of less than 16 weeks, although it may be considered in some circumstances, e.g. where a student needs to pause their studies on health grounds, where a student needs to take a Leave of Absence because they are transferring programmes, or where there would be a significant negative impact on the student's completion of the programme. Where a student experiences circumstances which are wholly unexpected, which significantly impact their ability to engage with teaching within one module, and which exceed the scope of the Fit to Sit / Submit policy, a Leave of Absence will be considered for a period of less than 16 weeks, providing that there is a module is available for the student to return to and that the process can be completed in the available timeframe.

4.1.3 There is no maximum limit on the number of periods of Leave of Absence, or the total duration of those absences. However, students who have a high number of absences from the programme may be monitored so that support can be offered to ensure they have the best chance to succeed. Where the total accrued periods of absence exceed 24 months, absences

will require additional approval from the Department's Chair or Board of Studies. Where the student's likelihood of successfully completing their programme is called into question, the student may be referred to the University's Support to Study Process or the application may be rejected.

4.1.4 Students may apply for a Leave of Absence at any point, however they are strongly encouraged to do so in advance of the period of absence starting. Where that is not possible, students are usually expected to apply within one month of the absence starting. Leave of Absence that is entirely retrospective will not be considered or approved.

4.1.5 Where a student has commenced a module and applies for a Leave of Absence within the refund period, their period of absence will cover the whole of that module and they will receive a refund. Applications for Leave of Absence received outside of the refund period will not result in a refund. Instead the fee for that module will be retained and re-applied when the student studies the same module at a later date.

4.2 Returning from a Leave of Absence

4.2.1 Students who take a Leave of Absence will only be permitted to return to studies once they have fulfilled any conditions of return. Such conditions are usually either academic (for example, passing particular assessments), or medical. If a student is unable to return from their current leave of absence they can request a further leave of absence by submitting another application. Students on medical Leave of Absence are expected to take the necessary steps to ensure they can provide medical evidence in time to return to studies. Students must meet their conditions of return or submit a new Leave of Absence request; failure to take either action will result in withdrawal from studies.

4.2.2 When a student returns to a module that they left part way through, they will be allowed to rejoin at the start. It is up to the student whether they choose to engage from the start or the point that they departed. However, failure to engage from the beginning of the module will not be considered adequate grounds to request in-module mitigation under the Fit to Sit / Submit policy, or to request repeat study of the module unless there are other, extenuating circumstances which impact the student's ability to engage.

4.2.3 A student may only return to a module twice without additional approval (i.e. a total of three attempts at the module, see section 4.5.2). Where a student has completed a mid-module assessment, that mark should stand unless the student can evidence that they were not Fit to Sit at the time of the assessment.

4.3 Requests for repeat study

4.3.1 Repeat study is the opportunity to take a previous module again where the student's ability to engage with that module was affected by a significant disruption. Students must demonstrate, and evidence, that their circumstances had an impact on their studies during the module for which repeat study is being requested (see section 4.4 on evidence requirements). Students may also be required to demonstrate, and evidence, good reason for failing to notify the University of their circumstances earlier and for continuing to sign up for modules.

4.3.2 Students wishing to request Repeat Study as part of their Leave of Absence application should also refer to the York Online Repeat Study policy.

4.4 Evidence requirements

4.4.1 Evidence will only be required in the following circumstances:

- students applying for a Leave of Absence on medical grounds;
- students returning from medical Leave of Absence;
- students applying for repeat study;
- evidence may be required where the total accrued periods of absence exceed 24 months;
- evidence may be required for students returning from any Leave of Absence where the total accrued periods of absence has exceeded 24 months.

4.4.2 When an application is submitted where the total accrued periods of absence exceed 24 months the student may be required to provide evidence/further information in support of their application in order to demonstrate that they are likely to complete their programme of study. Failure to do so may result in their application being rejected.

4.4.3 Evidence will not normally be required where students request to extend a medical Leave of Absence except in cases where the York Online Support Team is concerned about the student's welfare or their ability to complete the programme. For example, where a student has made little progress on the programme and has repeatedly extended their Leave of Absence, evidence that the student has the potential to return and complete within a reasonable period will be requested, to ensure the best outcome for the student and the currency of learning.

4.4.4 Evidence will not be required for Leave of Absence for other reasons, e.g. financial, personal etc.

4.4.5 All evidence must be in English or be accompanied by an English translation. It is the student's responsibility to source the translation.

4.4.6 Where a student applies for a Leave of Absence on mental health grounds following a bereavement, they will not be expected to provide independent evidence confirming the death of another person. Students will also not be expected to provide independent evidence confirming sexual violence or domestic or intimate partner abuse, or of a miscarriage or of an abortion, or of complications arising from a miscarriage or abortion. Students may still be required to provide a statement in support of their application which explains the circumstances, when they occurred, and how their studies were impacted.

4.4.7 Where students are required to provide medical evidence, the following types of evidence will carry greater weight:

- a recent letter or certificate from a medical professional, dated and on headed paper; this includes GPs, consultants, midwives and nurses as well as psychiatrists and other mental health practitioners;
- an appointment letter, hospital discharge letter or other medical documentation, dated and on headed paper;
- a supporting letter from another University of York service such as the Open Door Team, Disability Services or Student Hub.

4.4.8 The following types of evidence carry less weight:

- a letter or certificate from a medical professional that simply repeats the student's own description of events and does not provide an independent assessment;
- a letter or certificate from a complementary therapist.

4.4.9 Other forms of evidence are unlikely to be accepted.

4.4.10 Students should not wait for evidence to be available before submitting a Leave of Absence application. Where evidence is not available at the time of application, students will be given four weeks to submit it. Where evidence is not received, the Leave of Absence will still be processed but students may be required to take additional steps in order to return to study.

4.4.11 In certain circumstances, students may be permitted to self-certify their return from medical Leave of Absence. This will typically be in cases where the student has a routine health issue where it is easy for the student to recognise and confirm that they are fit to study again

e.g. when a student has recovered from a bout of Covid-19 and can confirm they have no lingering symptoms, or where a student has regained mobility after breaking a limb.

4.4.12 Where a student has genuine reasons for being unable to provide medical evidence to support their return, and their medical condition is such that self-certification is not possible, the student may be required to attend a virtual meeting with a relevant member of University staff, such as a member of the Open Door Team or of Disability Services, or a University Health Advisor from the campus-based surgery Unity Health to ascertain if they are fit to return to study. Where concerns are identified about the student's welfare, and the student is considered to be at risk if they return to studies, they will not be permitted to return and instead will have their Leave of Absence extended.

4.4.13 The University reserves the right to check the authenticity of all supporting evidence submitted. Where it is suspected that a student has submitted evidence that is not genuine, or has fraudulently made a claim on grounds which require no evidence, they may be referred for consideration under the University's [Regulation 7: student discipline procedure](#).

4.5 Approval

4.5.1 Leave of Absence applications will be checked and approved by the York Online Support Team. Academic staff from the student's department may be consulted on any academic conditions attached to the Leave of Absence. Academic staff may also be consulted where a student has had multiple absences that are likely to affect their ability to complete the programme; where the total accrued periods of absence exceed 24 months; or where a student is requesting to return to a module for the 3rd time (i.e. it will be their fourth attempt at that module). No student will be refused a Leave of Absence unless there are serious concerns about their ability to complete the programme. As stated under 4.1.3, students who are at risk of being unable to complete their programme may be referred through the University's Support to Study Process.

4.5.2 In the following cases, approval will also be required from the Special Cases Committee:

- The start date of the leave of absence is more than 20 weeks before the form is received by Student Records / Special Cases;
- The student is requesting to return to a module for the 3rd time (i.e. it will be their fourth attempt at that module).

5. “Default” Leave of Absence

5.1 Where a student has missed a module, either through a Study Break or a Leave of Absence, they will have to wait for the module to be offered again to complete it. While waiting to complete the programme there are likely to be teaching periods where there is no module available to study. Students will automatically be put on a Leave of Absence by “default”, their student record will be updated and they will receive a confirmation email. They will continue to be registered as a student at the University.

6. Impact on programme end dates

6.1 When a student takes a Study Break, the programme end date on their student record will automatically be extended by 8 weeks. However, students are likely to need to take additional breaks from study in order to wait for modules to be offered again and complete their programme. When a student takes a Leave of Absence, their programme end date will be updated to include their period of absence and any anticipated “default” Study Breaks.

7. Student rights and responsibilities

7.1 The purpose of a Leave of Absence is to take time away from studies and a student may not normally do work which contributes to their study during the Leave of Absence. The exceptions to this are:

- A. when they have chosen to take a Leave of Absence specifically to concentrate on outstanding assessments from previous modules; or
- B. when they are placed on a default Leave of Absence because there are no modules available for them to study, and they have outstanding assessments from previous modules scheduled, and they have not disclosed any reasons why they are not Fit to Sit / Submit.

7.2 If the period of absence starts part way through a module, the student’s access to that module on the Learning Management System will be suspended. For all students, access to completed modules, including modules with outstanding reassessments or sits-as-if-for-the-first-time, will remain.

7.3 The York Online Support Team will inform students whether they are expected to take an already scheduled assessment during their Leave of Absence.

7.4 Where a student is on a Leave of Absence of a type defined under section 7.1 A or B and they sit a scheduled assessment, it will be assumed that they are fit to do so. Their mark will stand and they will not be permitted to take the assessment again unless they invoke the York Online Fit to Sit / Submit policy. Students on other types of Leave of Absence are assumed to be not fit to take their assessments; any assessments taken will be considered null and void and the student will need to take it again after they have returned to study.

7.5 Where students are on a Study Break and have reassessments or sits-as-if-for-the-first-time to take during that break, they are considered fit to sit and will be expected to take those assessments at the scheduled time.

7.6 Where students on a Study Break or Leave of Absence have assessments to take, it is their responsibility to monitor their University email address and ensure that they know the assessment requirements. Where students are unable to complete those assessments during a period of absence, they should follow the York Online Fit to Sit / Submit policy. Students who do not take the assessment, and do not inform the University that they were not fit to do so, will fail the assessment and the standard rules will apply, as set out in the [Guide to Assessment, Standards, Marking and Feedback](#). Missing an email which notifies a student of the scheduling of their assessment is not considered grounds to mitigate failure.

7.7 Students on a Study Break are expected to be aware of module payment deadlines and their eligibility to take a further Study Break and take action accordingly.

7.8 All students on a Leave of Absence are expected to monitor their University email address within four weeks of their expected return date and respond to communications from the University about their return. Students are required to confirm their intention to return, or request a further leave of absence. Failure to respond will lead to the University assuming the student no longer wishes to continue their studies and being withdrawn from the programme.

7.9 Students on a Study Break or Leave of Absence will retain full borrowing rights from the [University Library](#) and are permitted to access [IT facilities](#).

8. Student finance

8.1 Where a student has financial support from a UK regional government funding body, such as Student Finance England, the University will inform the funding body of the Study Break or Leave of Absence. Payments will be suspended during the period of absence.

8.2 When a student returns from a Study Break or Leave of Absence, the University will inform the funding body and payments will resume. Funding body rules require that students be actively studying before payments can resume. This means that students in England, Scotland and Wales are likely to have to pay for their next module before they receive their next loan payment.¹ The exceptions to this are students who have paid in full for their programme and students returning to a module they have already paid for.

8.3 Where students are in receipt of other types of funding, it is their responsibility to ensure that the proposed period of absence is compatible with the regulations of any granting agency from which funding would normally be received, and that such agencies are informed of the proposed leave.

9. Data protection and safeguarding

9.1 Information and documents provided by students under this policy will be treated confidentially in line with the University of York [Data Protection Policy](#) and the [University's privacy notice for students](#).

9.2 The York Online Support Team typically obtains personal information directly from students e.g. when they contact us by email, telephone or video call, or when they submit an online Exceptional Circumstances claim form, a Leave of Absence application form or a Repeat Study request form. We may also receive information or data from the student's academic department, their Student Success Coordinator or Disability Services.

9.3 Students' personal information is used to prepare and process Leave of Absence applications; to inform application outcomes (e.g. to establish conditions of return); to process application outcomes (e.g. to ensure students are able to return at the appropriate time); and to establish whether they may benefit from additional support or signposting to other University services.

9.4 Personal information will be available to the York Online Support Team, and may be discussed within the team when one student case falls under multiple different processes (e.g. the Fit to Sit / Submit process; the Leave of Absence process; the Repeat Study process; or the appeals process). Evidence provided under one process may be used in support of a claim submitted through a different process, where applicable, with the student's permission (e.g.

¹ Student Finance Northern Ireland pays the funding directly to the University so a different process is in place for these students.

evidence submitted in support of an Fit to Sit /Submit claim may be used if a student submits a Leave of Absence request on the same grounds, but provides no evidence).

9.5 Where a team member believes a student may benefit from, or requires, additional information or support, personal information will be shared within the York Online Support Team in order to facilitate the provision of appropriate support (e.g. advising a student about other policies that help them in their circumstances or checking in on a student's welfare).

9.6 Outcomes from claims made under this policy may be shared with a student's academic supervisor and / or their Student Success Coordinator to enable them to provide advice about progress and trajectory through the programme. Details of the claim itself (i.e. the reason for it and evidence submitted) will not be shared.

9.7 Personal information will be shared with relevant academic staff in the Department, if an application or its outcome requires consultation. Personal information will also be shared with the Chair of the Department's Board of Studies, or their deputy, where approval is required from them. In cases requiring approval from the Special Cases Committee (section 4.5.2), personal information will be shared with the Special Cases Team.

9.8 In the event that an appeal is submitted regarding a Leave of Absence outcome, personal information will be shared with members of the Special Cases Team processing the appeal; the Chair of the Board of Studies who will approve recommendations about the appeal; members of the Special Cases Committee considering the appeal; and occasionally members of the Standing Committee on Assessment, in order to respond to an appeal. To investigate an appeal, the York Online Support Team may need to request relevant information from module tutors and/or academic supervisors; in such cases, the tutors or supervisors will be aware that an appeal has been submitted but will not be provided with personal information.

9.9 In the event that a student submits a complaint about their experience of this policy, the application form, any evidence and the outcome will be reviewed as needed by the Head of Online Partnerships, or their deputy, in order to investigate the complaint and provide a response.

9.10 Where the York Online Support Team has a concern regarding the welfare of a student they may seek advice from the Open Door Team or Disability Services, and may share personal information where it is deemed necessary.

9.11 Where the York Online Support Team has a concern regarding the welfare of a child or vulnerable adult they will seek advice from a Safeguarding Designated Contact, and may submit a safeguarding report containing a student's personal information. Please see the [University's Safeguarding Framework](#) on the University website.