

# Regulations Governing Special Considerations and Suspension of Candidature for Postgraduate Research Students

## Introduction

These regulations outline the policy and procedure that is to be followed when a research student makes a request for:

- special consideration for extenuating circumstances; or
- suspension of candidature unrelated to extenuating circumstances

These regulations are divided into two sections. Section A gives details of the policy, Section B outlines the procedure to be followed.

These regulations apply to all research degrees, but do not cover special consideration for taught components of research degrees: the applicable policy and procedure is set out in the [Regulations Governing Special Considerations \(including Deadline Extension Requests\) for all Taught Programmes and Taught Assessed Components of Research Degrees](#) (Calendar Section IV).

A research degree that leads to professional registration and has a practice component is governed by a requirement that students demonstrate their fitness to practise. A student's fitness to practise may be challenged when their behaviour, health and/or professional conduct gives cause for concern. In such circumstances, a request for special consideration will be reviewed under the [Regulations Governing Fitness to Practise](#) (Calendar Section IV).

Students can obtain free, independent and confidential advice about making an application for special consideration or suspension of candidature from the [Students' Union Advice Centre](#).

## Section A: The Policy

### 1. Who can request special consideration or suspension of candidature?

- 1.1 Individual research students in candidature for a research degree at the University of Southampton, as defined in the [Regulations for Research Degrees](#) (Calendar Section V).
- 1.2 A research student may request:
  - a suspension of candidature;
  - an extension to candidature;
  - an extension to the deadline for the submission of a Progression Review Report;
  - that a Progression Review or a *viva voce*, is rescheduled;
  - an extension to the deadline for the submission of minor or modest amendments to a thesis following a *viva voce*;
  - an extension to the deadline for the submission of a revised thesis following a *viva voce*;
  - special consideration to be given to the outcome of an assessment;<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Regulations do not allow for the assessment process or for the outcome of an assessment to be adjusted. An application for special consideration shall remain distinct from the assessment process and assessment outcome shall be determined solely on the basis of the work submitted by the research student. However, the Special Considerations Board may recommend that an assessment attempt is disregarded (see Section B paragraph 2.2.1.5).

- that extenuating circumstances are logged where the situation does not warrant an immediate request for special consideration (further information relating to the circumstances and the period affected may also be required at the time of the later request).

## 2. What circumstances are covered within these regulations?

### 2.1 Special consideration for extenuating circumstances

2.1.1 Situations that are outside of a research student's control that they could not reasonably have foreseen and that have (or may in the future have) a negative effect are defined as extenuating circumstances. A negative effect includes:

- performance in a Progression Review or final *viva voce*;
- the ability to meet a deadline for submission of a Progression Review Report, or final thesis for examination;
- the ability to meet a deadline for submission of minor and modest amendments to a thesis following the *viva voce*;
- the ability to meet a deadline for submission of a revised thesis for re-examination following the *viva voce*.

2.1.2 Whilst the University recognises that difficulties impact on individuals in different ways, a non-exhaustive list of the situations that generally meet the definition of extenuating circumstances is set out below:

- bereavement – death of a close relative/friend/significant other that, in an employment context, would lead to an absence in accordance with compassionate leave;
- serious short-term illness/accident/hospitalisation that, in an employment context, would have led to a period of (un)certified sickness absence;
- deterioration or fluctuation of a disability or long-term/recurrent health condition;<sup>2</sup>
- significant adverse personal/family circumstances;
- employment commitments that could not reasonably have been foreseen;
- financial issues that could not reasonably have been foreseen;
- other significant exceptional factors where there are other exceptional factors which have caused significant stress (e.g., victim of a crime).

2.1.3 Should the circumstances be so severe that they significantly disrupt a research student's ability to study and/or meet reasonable expectations, they should consider making an application for a period of suspension until their situation can be stabilised.

### 2.2 Suspension of candidature unrelated to extenuating circumstances

2.2.1 A non-exhaustive list of the situations that would generally require suspension of candidature is set out below:

- attendance at a fixed-term work placement that supports the research degree;
- parental leave;
- employment commitments (where an employer requires more time than usual to be dedicated to employment). This should be for a short and limited period of time only.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> If there is an unforeseeable and unavoidable increase in such circumstances, information on the condition/disability and its potential impact on the period in question will be required and not just information on the condition/disability itself.

<sup>3</sup> This category is also designed for programmes that allow periods of time in practice, e.g. in a health care setting.

### 3. What circumstances are not covered by these regulations?

- 3.1 These regulations do not apply to circumstances whereby a research student can or could have taken reasonable steps to either avoid or to mitigate the impact on their studies and/or their performance.
- 3.2 The following is a non-exhaustive list of the situations that generally **do not** meet the definition of extenuating circumstances:
- if there is a clear and reasonable case that the circumstances presented could have reasonably been foreseen or prevented;
  - a minor illness or ailment that, in an employment context, would generally not have led to a period of (un)certified sickness absence;
  - a long-term condition where treatment or additional support/arrangements are in place to mitigate;<sup>4</sup>
  - holidays/family events;
  - personal computer and printer issues including loss of data, that can be attributed to poor practice (e.g. failure to back-up work);
  - submission of the wrong work for assessment or an error in submission (e.g. submission of a draft version of the work as a final version);
  - poor time management (e.g. claiming a lack of awareness of the dates or times of submission of work for assessment or attendance at a *viva voce*);
  - religious observance (e.g. fasting, leaving before sundown, etc). A research student is considered to be responsible for planning their work so that it is completed and submitted before the deadline (or appointment for attendance at a *viva voce*) if the student is observing a religious festival around the time of such a deadline or appointment. A student should seek advice from their Faculty Graduate School Office in advance of the deadline or appointment in question if they know that attendance and/or submission of work is prohibited on certain dates or that major festivals might fall on potentially relevant dates.

### 4. What information is required?

- 4.1 Supporting information should be submitted in English. If the information is not in English, it is the research student's responsibility to provide a certified translation. The University reserves the right to verify that any information submitted is genuine.

#### 4.1.1 Special consideration for extenuating circumstances

- 4.1.1.1 A request for special consideration must be submitted with appropriate information. The following is a non-exhaustive list of the information that may be used to support such an application:

- statement of support/explanation from Student Disability and Inclusion or Student Wellbeing - it should be noted that such a statement may only be requested by the research student if they have been receiving support from these services for the circumstances described;
- letter of support/explanation from a third party - although a letter of support from a member of staff (e.g. supervisor or senior tutor) is acceptable, a staff member has no obligation to provide such a letter

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<sup>4</sup> The special considerations process is not designed to mitigate a research student's ongoing circumstances such as a long-term or recurrent health condition/disability or an ongoing family commitment. It is expected that such circumstances will be managed by medication or other treatment and/or support and/or the implementation of reasonable adjustments recommended by Student Disability and Inclusion or Student Wellbeing. Such circumstances are therefore normally excluded from the scope of these Regulations. However, an acute flare-up of a condition/disability or short-term change in family circumstances should be disclosed to the Special Considerations Board so that it can consider how the student can best be supported.

and will only do so if they are fully aware of the research student's circumstances and feel able to support the application for special consideration;

- medical certificate/letter from a general practitioner (GP) or other recognised health professional;
- death certificate – although a death certificate is definitive proof of bereavement, the University must ensure sensitivity when dealing with such cases and should not insist on the provision of a death certificate. Other forms of information, such as an obituary or funeral/memorial order of service may also be submitted;
- correspondence from employer;
- police crime reference information; letter from a social worker, etc.
- COVID-19 Impact Log, together with any relevant supporting information

#### **4.1.2 Suspension of candidature unrelated to extenuating circumstances**

4.1.2.1 A request for suspension of candidature must be submitted with appropriate information. The following is a non-exhaustive list of the information that may be used to support such a request:

- correspondence from the research student's placement provider/employer;
- letter of support/explanation from a third party – although a letter of support from a member of staff (e.g. supervisor) is acceptable, a staff member has no obligation to provide such a letter and will only do so if they are fully aware of the research student's circumstances and feel able to support the application for suspension;
- maternity certificate (e.g. MATB1) or adoption matching certificate

## **5. How will a request be reviewed?**

### **5.1 Special consideration for extenuating circumstances**

5.1.1 The Faculty is required to constitute a Special Considerations Board to consider requests for special consideration.

5.1.2 The Board will review requests for special consideration and make recommendations as to any suitable mitigation. The review of the case and any recommendation for mitigation is separate from the decision as to whether a recommendation for mitigation should be implemented. The Board's recommendation for a form of mitigation is referred elsewhere for a decision as to whether to implement the recommended mitigation.

#### **5.1.3 Terms of Reference of the Special Considerations Board**

5.1.3.1 The role of the Board is to determine whether the information presented supports the research student's case and, if so, to (i) recommend any suitable mitigation or (ii) recommend that the circumstances are logged for review at the point of any subsequent request for special consideration.

5.1.3.2 Recommendations of the Board will be made by a simple majority vote, with the Chair having a casting vote.

5.1.3.3 Recommendations of the Board will be referred to the Faculty Director of the Graduate School who, in their capacity as Chair of the Faculty Graduate School Committee, is responsible for deciding whether to implement the recommended mitigation.

5.1.3.4 To retain impartiality and independence, the Faculty Director of the Graduate School is not permitted to sit as a member of the Special Considerations

Board. The Faculty Director of the Graduate School may nominate a single, named deputy to consider the recommendations of the Board and to make a final decision. This deputy must be an academic member of the Faculty Graduate School directorate and must not be part of the membership of the Special Considerations Board.

- 5.1.3.5 The membership of the Special Considerations Board will be appropriately representative, and will be constituted as follows:
- Chair: a nominee of the Dean who is an academic staff member of the Faculty (excluding the Faculty Director of the Graduate School);
  - at least two additional academic staff members of the Faculty. Such individuals should normally have had some experience in the evaluation of special considerations or pastoral issues (e.g. Doctoral Programme Director, PGR Senior Tutor, but excluding the Faculty Director of the Graduate School);
  - co-opted members as deemed necessary by the Chair
- 5.1.3.6 A representative from the Faculty Graduate School Office (usually the Team Leader or Senior Administrative Officer) will be in attendance to the Board to offer expert regulatory and procedural advice and to formally record the proceedings.
- 5.1.3.7 The Board may consult with and/or take advice from relevant Professional Services/Faculties; other relevant Faculty staff including those who offer pastoral support; and members of the research student's supervisory team (unless the research student has specifically indicated otherwise in their request, see Section B paragraph 1.5).
- 5.1.3.8 The Chair is tasked with ensuring that the Board conducts its responsibilities in a fair, transparent and impartial manner and in accordance with relevant University and programme regulations and procedures.
- 5.1.3.9 **All requests for special consideration must be reviewed by no fewer than two academic members of the Board.** Additional academic members may be called upon to give further opinion in the event of disagreement regarding the proposed recommendation. A representative from the Faculty Graduate School Office must always be in attendance as per Section A paragraph 5.1.3.6.
- 5.1.3.10 Should the Chair of the Special Considerations Board not participate in the review of a particular request for special consideration due to a conflict of interest, another member of the Board must take the role of Chair and an additional member of staff co-opted to the Board in accordance with paragraph 5.1.3.9). In such situations, the formal record of the proceedings must reflect the revised membership.
- 5.1.3.11 The Board is responsible for scheduling its meetings as necessary and may choose to meet face-to-face or virtually (e.g. online). Online discussion must take place in a safe and secure manner, respecting the confidentiality of the process.
- 5.1.3.12 The Board is required to retain a formal record of all of its proceedings. All discussions must be recorded and records of virtual (e.g. online) communication between members in reaching a recommendation must be retained.
- 5.1.3.13 The purpose of the record is to:
- note the details of each case;

- note the names of those members participating in the discussion (the individual appointed as Chair must be identified as per Section A paragraph 5.1.3.10);
  - briefly summarise the discussion relevant to the recommendation reached and to clearly note the rationale that supports the recommendation;
  - note any areas of discussion or recommendations for future action.
- 5.1.3.14 Requests for special consideration, meetings of the Board, and its records are confidential and the Board should be run with due regard for privacy of the student, maintaining anonymity where possible. Where it may be appropriate to inform non-Board members of the outcome of a request (as per Section B paragraph 3.1), all other details, including the circumstances leading to the request, must be kept confidential to the Board.
- 5.1.3.15 A statistical report of the Board's activity (the number and type of requests, approval and rejection numbers, average period of suspension approved), together with a brief summary of trends and recommendations for future action will be reported to the Faculty Graduate School Committee for consideration not less than three times per year.

#### 5.1.4 Suspension of candidature unrelated to extenuating circumstances

- 5.1.4.1 The process for reviewing a request for suspension of candidature is detailed in Section B paragraph 2.2.2.

## 6. Conflicts of interest

- 6.1 All individuals involved in reviewing requests for special consideration and suspension of candidature are required to declare any conflict of interest associated with such requests.
- 6.2 Any individual with a conflict of interest should not review the request, nor should they be party to any conversation nor make any form of recommendation or decision in connection with the request.
- 6.3 The following is a non-exhaustive list of examples of conflicts of interest that should be declared:
- a member (or former member) of the research student's supervisory team;
  - the assessor for the research student's Progression Review;
  - the internal examiner for the research student;
  - the Independent Chair for the research student's progression review or final *viva voce*.

## Section B: The Procedure

### 1. Submitting a request

- 1.1 A research student must submit a request for special consideration or suspension of candidature as soon as the circumstances are known to them but normally not more than five working days after any assessment or deadline that may be affected.
- A request for special consideration should be made using the [SC1 Request for Special Consideration Form](#) (or PGR Manager equivalent).
  - A request for suspension of candidature should be made using the [SC2 Request for Suspension of Candidature Form](#) (or PGR Manager equivalent).
- 1.2 Only in exceptional circumstances, and only where there are compelling reasons why the request was not made in accordance with the requirements set out in Section B paragraph 1.1, will a request be reviewed.

- 1.3 A request that is incomplete in any material aspect and does not include sufficient information in support of that request, or a valid explanation of why such information cannot be provided, will not be reviewed until rectified.
- 1.4 A request for a retrospective (i.e. backdated) period of suspension of candidature will not normally be permitted and will never be granted if in conflict with regulatory or legal requirements (e.g. that of a funding body, visa requirement or statutory body).
- 1.5 It is usual practice for a research student to notify their supervisory team of any request being made within these Regulations and to ask that they provide a written statement to accompany a request for special consideration or suspension of candidature. Should such a statement not accompany the request, the research student should include an explanation for its omission with their request. The Chair of the Special Considerations Board may then consider it beneficial to meet with the student before the request is further progressed.
- 1.6 In exceptional circumstances, a research student may ask that their request is considered outside of their home Faculty and, in such cases, should provide an explanation. This explanation will be referred to the Chair of the Special Considerations Board or (for requests for suspension of candidature unrelated to extenuating circumstances) to the Faculty Director of the Graduate School who may consider it beneficial to meet with the student before the request is further progressed.

## 2. Reviewing the request, the recommendation and the decision

- 2.1 In reviewing a request for special consideration or suspension of candidature, due account will be taken of the research student's needs and the structure of the research degree.
- 2.2 Requests will be reviewed on the written information that has been provided, within a standard timeframe. Should a research student request an extension to the date of an assessment or deadline that is within 25 working days of the date by which the request is received, it will be deemed to be time critical and the Special Considerations Board will review it without delay.

### 2.2.1 Special consideration for extenuating circumstances

2.2.1.1 In reviewing the research student's circumstances as presented and where:

- multiple or repeat requests for suspension have been submitted by the same research student during their candidature (irrespective of whether the requests cover periods of less than 24 months continuously); and/or
- there are concerns that issues around the research student's health, well-being or behaviour may be impacting on their academic progress; and/or
- there are concerns about the research student's ability to successfully complete their research degree

the Special Considerations Board may consider that a referral to other mechanisms such as the [Student Support Review Regulations](#) would be helpful. Such Regulations seek both to be supportive and to actively engage with the research student prior to decisions being made about fitness to study. A research student's failure to engage with such processes is likely to be taken into account should they make any future application for special consideration on the same or similar basis.

2.2.1.2 The Special Considerations Board should use its discretion to determine whether a request that makes direct relation to the COVID-19 pandemic as the extenuating circumstance is reasonable, e.g.:

- symptoms of COVID-19;
- additional, unexpected, caring responsibilities for children and/or other dependants;

- students who fall under the 'key worker' category outlined by the UK government and who are required to work additional hours;
- computer/IT issues where students have been unable to access University IT facilities whilst working away from campus due to circumstances directly related to COVID-19 for which no mitigation has been possible.
- an inability to access the resources needed to progress their research (e.g. fieldwork, laboratory access, conducting interviews, supervisory availability) **and** where it has been impossible to implement mitigation. Reasons why the implementation of mitigation has been impossible must be submitted with the application.

2.2.1.3 Having reviewed the request, the Special Considerations Board should determine one of the following outcomes:

- A The circumstances presented are currently not accepted as justification for affecting candidature or affecting performance at an assessment;
- B The circumstances presented are currently of such a minor nature that they are unlikely to have affected candidature or performance at an assessment;
- C There are sufficient grounds for believing that the student's candidature or performance at an assessment has been or would be adversely affected.

2.2.1.4 Before the Board makes its recommendation, it may consider it appropriate to offer the research student the opportunity to meet with a member of the Board to discuss the request and the information they have submitted (also see Section B paragraph 1.6). The research student is strongly advised to attend this meeting but if they do not attend, the request will be considered on the written information only.

2.2.1.5 The Special Considerations Board can make the following recommendations:

- approve (or approve with adjustment) a request for suspension of candidature;
- approve (or approve with adjustment) a request for extension of candidature;
- approve (or approve with adjustment) a request to extend a deadline for the submission of a Progression Review Report;
- approve (or approve with adjustment) a request to reschedule a Progression Review or a *viva voce*;
- disregard a Progression Review Report and/or Progression Review assessment and allow an additional attempt beyond that permitted in the regulations;
- disregard a *viva voce* and allow an additional attempt beyond that permitted in the regulations;
- approve (or approve with adjustment) a request to extend the deadline for submission of minor or modest amendments to a thesis (after the *viva voce*);
- approve (or approve with adjustment) a request to extend the deadline for submission of a revised thesis for re-examination (after the *viva voce*);
- log the circumstances;
- reject a request;
- take no further action.



- 2.2.1.6 In reviewing the request, the Board may deem it appropriate to make a recommendation for mitigation that is different to that requested by the research student.
- 2.2.1.7 The Board's recommendation will be submitted to the Faculty Director of the Graduate School who, on the basis of ensuring quality and standards, will decide whether to implement or reject the recommended mitigation, advising the Faculty Graduate School Office accordingly. Alternatively, the Faculty Director of the Graduate School may decide to implement mitigation that is different to that requested by the research student and/or recommended by the Special Considerations Board.

#### 2.2.2 Suspension of candidature unrelated to extenuating circumstances

- 2.2.2.1 Subject to the inclusion of a statement from the research student's main supervisor that is deemed satisfactory, candidature checks having raised no concern, and ratification by the Faculty Director of the Graduate School, the Faculty Graduate School Office will process and implement a student's first request for suspension of candidature. Where concerns are identified by the Faculty Graduate School Office, the request will be scrutinised by the Faculty Director of the Graduate School who will make a decision in their capacity as Chair of the Faculty Graduate School Committee.
- 2.2.2.2 Any subsequent request for suspension of candidature from the same research student will be referred to the Faculty Director of the Graduate School, who will make a decision in their capacity as Chair of the Faculty Graduate School Committee.
- 2.2.2.3 Before a decision is made, the Faculty Director of the Graduate School may consider it appropriate to meet with the student to discuss the request and the information they have submitted. The research student is strongly advised to attend this meeting but if they do not attend, the request will be considered on the written information only.
- 2.2.2.4 The Faculty Director of the Graduate School may choose to refer any request to the Special Considerations Board if they deem that additional review is required.

### 3. Communication of the decision

- 3.1 The Faculty Graduate School Office will communicate the decision of the Special Considerations Board to the research student and their supervisory team (unless exclusions, as specified in Section B paragraph 1.6 apply), normally within 20 working days of receipt of the request (or within 15 working days should the application be considered time critical (see Section B paragraph 2.2)). In accordance with Section A paragraph 5.1.3.14, all other details, including the circumstances leading to the request, will be kept confidential to the Board.
- 3.2 If the Faculty Director of the Graduate School has given approval for suspension of candidature, the communication of the decision will specify a date by when the research student is expected to resume their studies. The Faculty Graduate School Office will then communicate again with the student prior to their expected date of return. Should the student fail to re-enrol on the approved date of return and does not respond to a written reminder from the Faculty Graduate School Office, the University will assume that they do not wish to continue their research degree and termination of candidature will be recommended in line with the [Procedures for circumstances that may lead to withdrawal or termination of postgraduate research candidature](#).
- 3.3 Should a request for special consideration or suspension of candidature be rejected by the Faculty Director of the Graduate School, the research student will be provided with details of the rationale for the decision and signposted to the [Regulations Governing Academic Appeals by Students](#).

### 4. Appeals

- 4.1 A research student wishing to appeal against the outcome of a request made within these Regulations should refer to the [Regulations Governing Academic Appeals by Students](#).

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