Student Engagement Policy 2021/22

Postgraduate research students

1. Introduction

1.1 This Student Engagement Policy and associated processes are part of SOAS's commitment to providing a supportive and engaging learning environment which enables students who have committed to a programme of research to achieve their full potential.

1.2 This policy presents the principles and rationale behind the School's approach to monitoring and addressing research student engagement patterns. It further outlines the methods and processes whereby the School may seek to understand and enquire where a student's engagement pattern has fallen to a level of concern.

2. Scope

2.1 This policy applies to all students on a SOAS postgraduate research programme of study, covering full time and part time delivery.

3. Principles

3.1 SOAS has a commitment to improve student engagement, retention and attainment through enhancing the relationships and touch points between students and staff.

3.2 SOAS recognises the investment that students make when they enrol on a programme of research and recognises that as a responsible institution it has a duty to monitor engagement patterns with a view to improvement.

3.4 SOAS recognises that on occasion, unforeseen and unpreventable circumstances may impact a student's ability to engage fully with their programme of research, and that it has a responsibility to respond in an understanding manner to such circumstances and to work to support students to fully re-engage with the programme.

3.5 SOAS will continually review engagement patterns and create interventions where necessary to support a student in times of deteriorating engagement. These interventions, whilst seeking to understand the underlying trends and look for improvement, will be supportive in nature and seek to bring students back to expected thresholds of engagement.

4. SOAS Approach

4.1 SOAS wishes to encourage and improve student engagement and progression, and the process is developed in the spirit of collaborative working with students to identify early, and address, factors that may be impacting an individual's ability to fully engage with the programme of research.

4.2 SOAS recognises that a fall in engagement levels may be the result of factors both internal and/or external to the School, and wishes to provide students with appropriate support options during these times.

4.3 The process defined below is designed to ensure meaningful communication is maintained with students, and that services that may assist with re-engagement are made available at the earliest opportunity.

5. Engagement Monitoring

5.1 Postgraduate research engagement monitoring is based on records of supervisory meetings, and researchers and supervisors are expected to maintain a full record of supervisory contact through the PhD Manager system during all years of study, including periods of fieldwork, writing up and corrections of the thesis, up to the point of submission of a final version of the thesis.

5.2 The PGR Code of Practice sets out expectations for the frequency of supervisory meetings, which vary according to the mode and stage of study.

5.3 Where appropriate, alternative arrangements can be put in place for the recording and monitoring of student engagement for students with disabilities or in cases where student/supervisor circumstances make it impossible for face-to-face or online supervision to take place or for PhD Manager to be used to record it. Requests for such arrangements should be made to the Director of Doctoral Studies and the relevant supervisor(s) and will be reviewed by the Doctoral School.

5.4 Records of supervisory contact are checked on a regular basis to ascertain when contacts have taken place or have been missed. Where the gaps between contacts are longer than expected without a reason being recorded, this will be followed up by the Doctoral School team. Students who have missed a contact due to the unavailability of their supervisor will not be considered to have missed the contact and alternative arrangements for recording supervisory contact will be considered.

5.5 If a student is absent for a short period due to illness or other short-term factors, they should contact their supervisor to rearrange any scheduled meeting. If the absence is longer (more than 7 days), or if it is impossible to rearrange the meeting, the reason for absence should be recorded in PhD Manager.

6. Fieldwork and other travel

6.1 Students on approved periods of fieldwork are expected to maintain contact with their supervisor as agreed in advance of their fieldwork and in line with the PGR Code of Practice. Where meetings are virtual, it is especially important that a clear, up-to-date record is kept on PhD Manager, including details of the work submitted or presented as part of (or in advance of) that meeting. Students are expected to return to their studies at SOAS on completion of their fieldwork.

6.2 Any delay in a student's travel plans at the end of a period of fieldwork must be communicated to the student's supervisor and the Doctoral School as soon as the delay is known, so that the student's record remains accurate.

7. Process

Stage 1

7.1 Each time a student misses a supervisory meeting (as set out in the PGR Code of Practice), an email will be sent to them noting the absence, expressing concern, and pointing the student to sources of help and support. This might involve rearranging supervisions, helping the student to re-engage with their studies or addressing issues of supervisor availability.

Stage 2

7.2 Where a student has missed two successive? supervisory meetings, they will be asked to attend a meeting with the Director of Doctoral Studies in their Department, to discuss their engagement.

7.3 Where a student engages to the satisfaction of the Director of Doctoral Studies, the concern will be recorded as resolved.

Stage 3

7.4 Where the student fails to meet with the Director of Doctoral Studies; or where they are not satisfied that the student will adequately re-engage with their studies; or in all cases where a student has not attended a meeting for more than 60 days, a Fitness to Study Panel will be held. This Panel will include the Director of Doctoral Studies, the Head of the Doctoral School, the Head of Student Advice and Wellbeing and the Academic Registrar, or their nominees. The Student Visa Compliance Manager will attend if the student is sponsored under Tier 4/Student Route.

7.5 The Fitness to Study Panel may decide to allow the student to continue their studies with support and conditions in place; to require the student to take a leave of absence and return to study at an agreed date with support and conditions in place; or to require the student to withdraw from study.

7.6 If a student has a concern recorded as resolved, and is identified as not engaged in a subsequent period of the same academic year, they may be referred directly to a Fitness to Study Panel.

7.7 If a Fitness to Study Panel allows a student to continue with support and conditions in place, and the student fails to meet those conditions, or is identified as not engaged in subsequent period of the same academic year, they will be referred directly to a further Fitness to Study Panel.

7.8 A student is entitled to appeal against the outcome of a Fitness to Study Panel under the Student Academic Appeals Procedure.