Queen Mary
University of London

FITNESS TO STUDY POLICY

1. Queen Mary University of London (QMUL) is an adult learning environment in which students are treated as mature individuals and expected to have the capability to study and live independently alongside people of all ages and from a variety of backgrounds. QMUL is also committed to supporting its students to ensure they can succeed and match their own and the university's high expectations for their academic and personal progress. In making this commitment, QMUL recognises the potentially negative effect of health and wellbeing issues on student learning, academic achievement and the wider student experience, as well as its duty under the Equality Act 2010 to make reasonable adjustments, where possible and where appropriate, in order to provide equal access to learning opportunities for its students.

2. Fitness to study refers to the impact of an individual student's health and wellbeing on his/her capability to participate fully and appropriately in the learning environment at QMUL, in spite of appropriate reasonable adjustments having been put in place. It refers to situations in which a student exhibits unacceptable conduct, or develops an unsatisfactory record of attendance, submission of work or academic performance, that is considered to be the result of an underlying health or wellbeing issue. This Policy describes the process that will be followed in such situations to consider the needs of the student, the support that is being provided and the implications for other students and members of staff before any disciplinary action is taken, unless to delay disciplinary action would represent a serious and immediate risk to the student, to others or to QMUL's reputation.

3. This Policy applies to all registered students of QMUL, regardless of their mode of study or attendance, except where the provisions of the Professional Capability and Fitness to Practise Regulations apply.

Use of standard support mechanisms

4. Before invoking this Policy, the student's academic school/institute should ensure that all relevant support mechanisms at QMUL have been considered and made available to the student. These mechanisms might include:

   - Using the Q-Engage tool (or other academic school based systems) to monitor attendance and engagement, and provide pro-active pastoral support where appropriate
   - Meetings with Academic Year Tutors, Personal Advisers, Student Support Officers
   - Referrals to student support departments within Professional Services, e.g. the Advice and Counselling Service, the Disability and Dyslexia Service, Learning Development, Residential Services and Support, Student Enquiry Centre

   For further advice about the support on offer from these services please see below.

   Advice and Counselling Service

   Disability and Dyslexia Service

   Learning Development

   Residential Services and Support

   Student Enquiry Centre

Staff are also advised to refer to the university Safeguarding Policy and the Students in Distress guidelines should they deal with a student who presents as being at risk or vulnerable.

Resources for staff in academic schools, to support in them in their pastoral role, are available on the Student Experience and Engagement module in QMPlus.

It is envisaged that the majority of situations where a student is experiencing difficulties that are impacting on their ability to successfully engage with academic life will be covered by the various standard support mechanisms outlined above.

Referral for a Case Conference

5. Where it has not been possible to address sufficiently the impact of the student's health and wellbeing using the standard support mechanisms, the Fitness to Study Policy allows staff to refer the matter to a case conference. The purpose of the case conference is to bring together individuals with relevant expertise to consider in more detail the needs of the student, the support that is being provided and the implications for other students and members of staff.

Who can request that a case conference is convened?

The case conference can be convened by concerned staff within the student's school or institute, e.g. the Student Support Manager or the Head of School, or by an appropriate person from a Professional Services department, e.g. the Head of Residential Support, Head of Public Services in the Library.

How would a case conference be organised?

For a full explanation of the processes involved with arranging a case conference, including the membership and the possible outcomes, please see Appendix A.

It is anticipated that most issues will be resolved using the various mechanisms associated with a case conference outlined in Appendix A. However, it may be that the outcome of a case conference is a recommendation to interrupt studies or a referral for disciplinary action.

Referral for disciplinary action

6. Cases considered under this policy may be referred for action under the Code of Student Discipline where:

[a] the student at any time represents a serious and immediate risk to him/herself, to others or to QMUL's reputation;

[b] the student's conduct continues to have an adverse effect on the learning or working environment, or on the health or wellbeing of other students or members of staff;

[c] the student fails to provide adequate documentary evidence about his/her health or wellbeing issues.

Appendix A: How to organise and manage a Fitness to Study Case Conference

If concerns regarding a student's behaviour and conduct cannot be resolved using the standard support mechanisms referred to in section 4 of the Fitness to Study Policy, staff may decide that it is necessary to arrange a case conference to discuss the issue(s) with the student, their representative (if requested) and other members of staff.

1. Case conference

The initial case conference meeting will include relevant members of staff who have a direct responsibility or role with the student, alongside someone who will be responsible for making decisions within the relevant area of the university, such as the student's school. These members of staff, or their representatives, could include, *inter alia*:

- Student Support Co-ordinator / Manager in the School
- Head of School
- Head of Advice and Counselling Service
- Head of Disability and Dyslexia Service
- Mental Health Co-ordinator
- Residential Support Manager

A potential outcome of the conference could be to invite the student to a further meeting to discuss possible next steps, such as making a commitment to engage with some or all of the various support services on offer, or else to write to the student and ask them to make an appointment with a named member of staff in either the school or a Professional Services department to discuss ways in which they can resolve their current difficulties.

The decisions, follow up actions and staff responsibilities for next steps should be recorded and retained by the area of the university that has the primary relationship with the student; usually the academic school/institute.

2. Case conference: meeting with student

If a student is invited to a case conference in accordance with the Fitness to Study Policy, the student will be provided an explanation of the purpose of this meeting, together with a copy of the Fitness to Study Policy and the following information:

- Who will attend the meeting and the capacity in which they are attending;
- An explanation that the student can be accompanied by someone in a supportive capacity (for example a parent, friend or students' union officer). Disabled students may also be accompanied by an appropriate person e.g. sign language interpreter, as appropriate to their needs
- Whether the student will need to provide any specific documents (e.g. medical evidence)
- An explanation that the meeting will be confidential and that personal information relating to the health and well-being of the student will only be shared with those who have a direct involvement in the Supporting Fitness to Study Policy meeting
- The date, time and venue of the meeting

This meeting should be arranged as soon as possible; ideally within one working week of the initial case conference.

2.1 The meeting itself

The meeting should cover the following:

- An identification and explanation of the issue or concern, (citing clear and specific examples) and any other relevant information

- An opportunity for the student to give their perspective on the issues and, if appropriate, a history of events, past experiences and helpful strategies or support for managing these issues
- Clarification of relevant university regulations and/or policy
- Clarification of the student's responsibility at the university (e.g. to be 'well enough' to study and to be respectful of others)
- Consideration of what would be helpful or make the difference to the student in relation to their support and in order to minimise the concerns being raised
- Signposting the student to relevant support services, both those within the student's school or academic department, as well as Professional Services
- A clarification of agreed actions and support options to change and improve the current situation, e.g. providing deadline extensions, deferring coursework / exams, formal interruption, part time study, a commitment to accessing university support services
- An explicit clarification of the consequences of failing to complete the agreed actions, and/or a continuation of the cause for concern
- Agreement of any interim monitoring or measures

The meeting should conclude with an agreed date to meet and review the situation from both the student's perspective as well as that of the university.

Following this meeting, a written summary detailing the points raised and – importantly - a list of agreed actions should be sent to all attendees of the meeting, including the student, within five working days of the meeting taking place. A copy of this should be kept confidentially by whichever department organises the meeting, e.g. the School.

2.2 Fitness to Study Policy: Review Meeting

A review meeting will duly take place at the date agreed in the Fitness to Study Policy meeting with the student, i.e. 2.1. This meeting should proceed along the following lines:

- A review of how the student has been since the initial meeting
- A review of whether the agreed actions have been undertaken
- An explanation / exploration of any further concerns which may have arisen
- A consideration on new or ongoing events which may be adjudged 'extenuating'
- An exploration of further and ongoing support which may be necessary, including any adjustments
- An agreement of whether a further action plan is necessary

Following the review meeting a summary of recommendations will be sent to the student, the student's Head of School and relevant Professional Services staff as appropriate.

2.3 Student does not engage with the Fitness to Study Policy

If the student fails to engage with the process, and / or fails to attend any arranged meetings as outlined in section two of this Appendix, then the case will be discussed in the student's absence and recommendations will be made with regard to next steps.

The student should be made aware that if they fail to take the opportunity to meet to discuss concerns about their health and wellbeing and/or fail to provide any supporting evidence of any underlying issues then this could result in a referral under the Code of Discipline.

As with 2.1, a written summary detailing the points raised and – importantly - a list of agreed actions should be sent to all relevant parties, including the student. A copy of this should be kept confidentially by whichever department organises the meeting.

Appendix B: Advice and Guidance on assisting a student's Return to Study

If a period of interruption – voluntary or recommended - is agreed using the Fitness to Study Policy, then it is important that the student is provided with clear guidance about what will happen when the interruption period is over and they are due to return to study, either in attendance, out of attendance, full-time or part-time.

This guidance will include a minimum and maximum period before the case can be reconsidered.

The academic school/institute should nominate a named staff member for the student to contact during their period of interruption, and that staff member should initiate contact with the student during that period. This contact might include strategies to help the student remain engaged with their studies and with QMUL during their period of interruption.

At the point that the student is proposing to return to study they should be asked to present evidence which confirms that they are well enough to return to the satisfaction of the quorum of the case conference, which should mirror as closely as possible the membership of the original meeting that decided on the period of interruption.

The precise nature of the evidence required from the student will be dependent on the individual circumstances, but in all cases it is expected that this will involve a report from a recognised independent health professional with sufficient knowledge about the health and well-being of the student during the period of interruption and the potential impact that returning to study might have.

The report should include specific detail about the appropriateness of the student's health in the context of the proposed return to study; examples of relevant questions will depend on the academic discipline, but may include:

- Consideration to risks associated with chemicals and other hazardous materials
- How equipped the student is to study challenging and potentially disturbing content, (e.g. material relating to sexual violence or child abuse)
- Consideration of the demands of field work on the student
- Consideration of the demands of small group work on the student
- How equipped the student is to deliver presentations, either to large or small groups

The decision on whether or not to allow the student to return to study will be made by the student's Head of School/Institute in consultation with senior members of staff with responsibility for the student's welfare.

This decision will be communicated in writing to the student prior to their planned return date, along with detail of any special arrangements that will be implemented to support their return. The student's School/Institute will determine the ongoing arrangements with respect to the student's support and will arrange to review the student's progress at regular intervals in order to minimise the risk of a recurrence of the original difficulties.