

Senior Tutors' Committee Guidance on Undergraduate Suspension of Status

Revised version adopted by the Senior Tutors' Committee on 11 November 2019

Further information from the University, including on access to facilities and services for students whose status is suspended, can be found at:

<https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/guidance/undergraduate/status?wssl=1>

This also includes links on Fee liability, and Student Loan payments for suspending undergraduates.

It would be advisable for all students considering an application for suspension to be referred to this page for up-to-date University information.

Definition of terms

Suspension of status

Suspension of status is sometimes colloquially referred to as 'suspension', 'rustication', or 'intermission', and it is recommended, for clarity, that 'suspension of status' is the term to be used, as it is by the University. During this period an undergraduate will not be considered on-course, and will not hold enrolled status.

In the absence of College permission, an undergraduate ceasing their studies or going out of residence will be deemed to have withdrawn.

Withdrawal

An undergraduate may withdraw from their studies at any time and by such withdrawal leaves the University, their College, and their course. Students who have withdrawn are not enrolled at the University and cannot expect to return to their course at a subsequent point.

Principles of undergraduate suspension of status

1. A suspension of status may arise in one of two ways. Firstly, when an undergraduate wishes to suspend status on medical or other personal/welfare grounds (for example, bereavement, parenthood¹, need to care for others, etc.). Secondly, on rare occasions, a college may decide it is necessary to suspend an undergraduate's status (i) if there are severe concerns about an undergraduate's fitness to study² or (ii) for disciplinary reasons (academic or non-academic).

¹ For guidance from the University on resources for 'Student parents', see <https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/welfare/childcare?wssl=1>.

² Individual colleges may have their own fitness to study policy, and/or may also refer to the University's Fitness to Study policy: <https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/welfare/fitness-to-study?wssl=1>, and the associated University statute: <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/statutes/787-121.shtml>.

The University has established a common framework across departments, faculties and colleges for cases where questions arise as to whether a student is fit to study or to return to study after a period of leave for medical, psychological, or emotional problems. Extract from Statute XIII <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/statutes/787-121.shtml>:

“‘fitness to study’ shall mean:

(a) a student's fitness:

- (i) to commence a distinct course of academic study; or
- (ii) to continue with his/her current course of academic study; or
- (iii) to return to his/her current or another course of academic study; and

(b) his/her ability to meet:

- (i) the reasonable academic requirements of the course or programme; and
- (ii) the reasonable social and behavioural requirements of a student member (whether resident in college or not) without his/her physical, mental, emotional or psychological health or state having an unacceptably deleterious impact upon the health, safety and/or welfare of the student and/or other students and/or University or college staff (not withstanding adjustments required by law)”.

2. Undergraduates do not have an automatic right to suspend status, though colleges will consider sympathetically requests on medical, or other personal/welfare grounds, and will make reasonable adjustments in cases covered by the Equality Act 2010. Suspension of status on medical grounds requires medical certification, typically from the GP (doctor) with whom a student is registered in Oxford, in support of the request. A college will not grant suspension of status solely on the grounds that an undergraduate is, or feels, ill-prepared for examinations, or that they have underperformed on course.
3. Cases of suspension will be considered on an individual basis, taking into account all relevant information (including medical) and are always treated holistically, with the particular undergraduate in mind. A request to suspend status is usually preceded by a period of discussion and on-course support. Colleges will do all they reasonably can to assist an undergraduate to remain on course, rather than to suspend their status. In some cases suspension of status will be the best course of action, in others it may not.³
4. Any decision made by a college regarding suspension of status, and the conditions attached to that suspension and return, should be confirmed in writing by the college within a reasonable time (no later than 28 working days from the date of informal agreement, subject to receipt of necessary medical evidence⁴). If an undergraduate is dissatisfied with the college's decision, they should follow relevant appeal or complaints procedures as set out in college regulations. Such regulations can normally be found in College handbooks or provided on request by the Senior Tutor.

Discussion between a college and an undergraduate regarding suspension of status might helpfully also include discussion of domestic and other arrangements, such as any charges made for college rooms vacated, means of communication during the period of suspension (e.g. confirming which email address will be checked), and the possibility of college accommodation on return to studies.

5. An undergraduate whose status is suspended on medical grounds will normally be expected to follow medical advice and appropriate treatment as agreed with a doctor (typically the GP with whom a student is registered in Oxford) in order to address their health problems. Students reading Medicine may also need to satisfy departmental requirements appropriate to the course. After suspension on medical grounds, and before an undergraduate is permitted to resume study, the college must receive a medical assessment from the doctor, stating whether or not the undergraduate is medically fit to resume study. The doctor's assessment will, as appropriate, take into account reports provided by other clinicians involved in the care of the undergraduate during the period of suspension. The college will be responsible for determining, in the light of the doctor's assessment, whether the undergraduate is fit to study and whether any other conditions of return have also been met (see footnote 2).

Undergraduates whose status is suspended are often required to arrange an appointment with the doctor (again, typically the GP with whom a student is registered in Oxford) prior to a final decision's being made on their medical fitness to return, so that necessary paperwork can be submitted in good time, outstanding conditions addressed, and appropriate support or necessary reasonable adjustments put in place.

Undergraduates are encouraged to provide full disclosure to the doctor, who will then only communicate to the college what has been agreed with the undergraduate, and what is relevant for return.

³ University procedures allow for the possibility of re-structuring courses as a 'reasonable adjustment' where this is the best response to an ongoing disability condition. Applications for such re-structuring, or for other major adjustments to assessment on the grounds of disability should be made to Education Committee.

⁴ All parties should make every attempt to expedite an agreement as soon as possible. This is particularly important in relation to student visas and financial support (e.g. students with home or overseas government loan schemes) where delay can cause acute difficulties.

Confirmation of an undergraduate's medical fitness to return does not need to entail a full recovery: an undergraduate might continue to be in receipt of health-care or welfare support on returning to studies, as agreed with the doctor, but be managing their medical condition sufficiently well for the doctor to be able to recommend to the College that they can return to full-time study.

6. All undergraduates who are on course, including those who have returned from suspension of status, are expected to be in good academic standing, as defined by the college (for example, attending classes, tutorials, submitting work on time, sitting collections, performing at a level commensurate with their ability).

Colleges will wish to assure themselves that returning undergraduates are ready to re-integrate into their course at an appropriate level, and are fit to return to study (see footnote 2). In relation to students with disabilities, colleges will follow the collegiate University's common framework, noting the requirement to make reasonable adjustments insofar as they do not compromise academic competence standards.⁵ Returning without being able to fulfil the academic requirements of the course and to maintain good academic standing within the college may be seriously detrimental to an undergraduate's health, and can limit an undergraduate's opportunities to complete their studies successfully.

Colleges may deem it appropriate to set academic as well as medical conditions of return. Where academic conditions are set for undergraduates returning from medical suspension (and where the undergraduate is not concurrently under an academic disciplinary process) these are on pedagogical grounds and/or to support undergraduates in their return, and to ensure that they are prepared for the proposed point of re-entry, rather than as a punitive measure (that is, if collections are set under these circumstances they are not 'penal' collections). In such cases it will be important to show how a specific requirement relates to a college's overall academic framework and procedures.

If an undergraduate was on a disciplinary or academic monitoring process at the point of suspension they would normally return at the same point in that disciplinary or monitoring process, unless it was decided prior to, or at the point of, suspension that their medical condition provided sufficient mitigation for them to be removed from that process, or for that process to be adjusted.

Where suspension of status has been decided on academic disciplinary grounds a college will normally set academic conditions of return (which may include one or more penal collections to be sat shortly before or at the point of return).

7. Any term of study that has been completed by the time of suspension is not normally allowed to be repeated. Circumstances that have affected study in a given term should normally already have been raised with tutors and/or relevant college officers as and when they arise, and addressed during the term. There might be exceptions, such as when a condition is raised early on in term and, in consultation with tutors and the appropriate college officer, an undergraduate attempts to continue study without suspension, but this attempt is ultimately unsuccessful, or where a serious situation has not been recognized at an earlier stage. In such cases any period of 'repeat study' cannot be assumed, but might be considered.⁶

The University's rules state that the term's fees must normally be paid if an undergraduate is on course beyond Monday of 4th week of that term. In practice, this normally means that a suspension should have been discussed and agreed by Friday of 3rd week of the term of

⁵ <https://academic.admin.ox.ac.uk/common-framework-for-supporting-disabled-students>

⁶ University regulations and processes allow for flexibility where there is good cause. However, assessment structures start from the basis that all undergraduates will have the same number of terms, and time, to study and prepare for examinations and colleges need to ensure that suspension does not lead to unfair advantage in relation to other undergraduates.

suspension if fees are not to be incurred and the term is to be re-taken. In the context of fees, it may be appropriate to emphasize to students that suspension of status is not a mode of part-time study: undergraduates who are taking part-time courses pay fees at specific rates for those courses, while undergraduates taking full-time courses whose status is suspended and are not on course do not pay fees for the terms of suspension (subject to the above point about the timing of suspension).

8. A single period of suspension of status will not normally exceed one year. In some cases colleges will consider an extension, or further period of suspension, following a fresh consideration of the case. It would be unusual for any undergraduate's status to be suspended for a total of more than two years across their course. Periods of suspension in aggregate extending beyond two years will require consultation with further parties (e.g. Education Committee and the relevant Department or Faculty), not least as a returning student would be 'Overstanding for Honours' without dispensation.
9. In all cases of suspension consideration will need to be given to the assessment of any University work already submitted, changes in exam regulations, and whether that undergraduate will be 'Overstanding for Honours'. This should be discussed with the undergraduate prior to suspension.

10. Access to University facilities

An undergraduate whose status is suspended will no longer be on course. Undergraduates whose status is suspended will normally have access to certain University facilities as set out by the University. This will include the provision of an active University card, which will in turn allow access to online facilities and resources, use of the University libraries, borrowing rights from faculty and sub-faculty libraries (unless a block has been put on the University card e.g. for non-payment of library fines), and an active University email account. It should be noted that students who are suspended due to non-payment of fees will have all services withdrawn.

During a period of suspension, undergraduates may not normally be included on routine mailing lists, and may need to remain in proactive contact with tutors and administrators regarding matters such as option choices on return. College offices can try to safeguard against students' falling off faculty lists/being listed on the wrong year-group list, by ensuring that the student's status is recorded correctly on eVision, and if feasible by contacting relevant faculty administrators. Many college offices will provide a letter of introduction on request if undergraduates wish to use a local University library.

11. Access to College site and facilities

Many colleges require that an undergraduate not come into college during suspension of status except with written permission. Colleges are small academic communities concentrated on academic work, and many of their members are residents. Colleges may regard the presence in college of undergraduates who are not on course as a distraction to those who are, and may also have health and safety reasons for requiring written permission for access. Undergraduates whose status is suspended are sometimes concerned that their access to facilities is restricted, and many undergraduates find the company of their on-course friends a support. However, colleges must balance the needs of all their undergraduates. Because of their pre-existing membership of the college community, the relationship to the college of a student whose status is suspended is not akin to that of a member of the public, and their presence on college premises has a different impact. In some cases blurred boundaries of support can lead to a very difficult environment for on-course undergraduates, significantly affecting both their work and, potentially, their own welfare. Colleges will have a named officer from whom, or procedure by which, an undergraduate whose status is suspended can seek permission to enter college premises. If and when academic conditions of return have been set, a student whose status is suspended will need to liaise with the college about appropriate access in the run-up to any assessment, for example if access is required to specific texts.

Advice

12. Welfare support

It is important to recognise that Colleges and the University are places of academic study and cannot play a significant role in the welfare support or treatment of an undergraduate while their status is suspended.

An undergraduate whose status is suspended will inevitably face a certain amount of disruption to their support networks. As part of preparing to suspend, undergraduates should consider how to ensure that they will have sufficient support during the suspension of their status.

Undergraduates who are staying in the city of Oxford need to be made aware that this can be a challenging option, and asked to consider carefully how they will spend their time as an Oxford resident who is not currently on course.

Undergraduates whose status is suspended will normally have access to certain University welfare services as set out by the University⁷; however, this support is generally not a substitute for specialist support for the relevant medical condition. The University's Counselling Service may also provide students whose status is suspended with help on the same basis as students on-course; that is, on a short-term basis. The Counselling Service will not be able to substitute for NHS (or overseas) support at home, but can assist in helping students to think about the services they will need, and can offer appointments on Skype to students who have already left residence. Students may also find it helpful to access the Service before returning to study to help re-engage with academic work and college life.

Oxford SU's Student Advice Service can provide both advice and support to undergraduates considering and returning from suspension.⁸ The University's Careers Service is also available to students whose status is suspended.⁹

13. The Disability Advisory Service

For some undergraduates, medical factors that led to suspension of status may suggest a condition that can be supported by the University's Disability Advisory Service.¹⁰ If an undergraduate suspects that support from the service might be helpful, they should be strongly encouraged to make contact prior to their return so that appropriate assessment can be scheduled and support put in place. The process of agreeing and funding support can take a surprisingly long time, and an undergraduate may put themselves at a disadvantage if appropriate support cannot be put in place by the time of their return.

14. Financial arrangements

While their status is suspended, an undergraduate will not be required to pay fees, unless the suspension commences after Monday of 4th week of the first term of suspension, in which case fees will be payable for that term. Nor will they normally be eligible for university student financial support; colleges will have their own policies with regard to college financial support. If suspension of status is agreed, the college will inform University administration, which will in turn inform any UK or other student funding body.

Living expenses incurred during suspension may be difficult to manage, as students are not normally entitled to maintenance support while their status is suspended. Students should be advised to update their funding body as soon as possible and seek its advice on what, if any, funding may be available. The University will notify Student Finance England (SFE), or other funding body, as soon as possible following the college's formal confirmation of suspension, but it can take between 4 and 6 weeks for the change to be processed by SFE. The college is only allowed to discuss an undergraduate's case directly with SFE or other agency where a student has set up permission for this to take place, but can be asked to provide any official letters required if

⁷ <https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/guidance/undergraduate/status?wssl=1>

⁸ <https://www.oxfordsu.org/wellbeing/student-advice/>

⁹ <http://www.careers.ox.ac.uk/>

¹⁰ www.ox.ac.uk/students/welfare/disability/eligibility

an undergraduate is negotiating provision. At the time of writing (2019), in some circumstances of medical suspension an undergraduate is able to receive an additional 60 days' worth of funding from SFE and, if an undergraduate has interrupted for Compelling Personal Reasons (CPR) and can demonstrate financial hardship, they may be eligible for a limited amount of maintenance funding during suspension. Requests are considered by SFE on a case-by-case basis, and in some circumstances the University's fees and funding team may be able to advise.¹¹ Each of the other UK funding agencies has different arrangements in place to respond to these circumstances, which students will need to check directly.

Undergraduates returning from suspension will need to re-contact SFE, or other funding body, prior to their return to confirm their funding arrangements directly. Where an undergraduate is returning from suspension in a subsequent academic year, they are advised to reapply for their Student Finance as early as possible after the new application cycle opens (usually from January onwards) to allow sufficient time for their application to be assessed and their entitlement to be finalized, even if not returning until Hilary or Trinity term of the next academic year. Following a re-assessment, undergraduates will receive an updated Student Finance letter from their funding agency which confirms their revised entitlement.

Undergraduates are advised to contact their Local Council as soon as possible after suspension of status to inform them of their situation and clarify whether or not they will be liable for Council Tax.¹²

Undergraduates who are withdrawing from exams only do not normally repeat the term on return from suspension, but return to sit exams only. These undergraduates will not be liable for tuition fees for that period, nor will they be entitled to access to tutorials, revision classes etc. SFE will not provide maintenance funding for a return to sit exams only.

15. Overseas students

Students who have been studying at Oxford on a student visa may be unable to remain in the UK and need to return to their country of residence promptly if their status is suspended. The University has a duty to inform the UK Border Agency when a student's status is suspended, and students are advised to check on the University's webpages for overseas students for further information on their rights and responsibilities:

<http://www.ox.ac.uk/students/visa/during/changes>. Students can also access individual advice via tier4compliance@admin.co.uk.

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¹¹ <http://www.ox.ac.uk/students/fees-funding/fees/liability/payments/suspension>

¹² If a student whose status is suspended finds themselves in hardship, they can apply for a discretionary discount under section 13A of the Local Government Finance Act. The Council policy for discretionary discounts should be found on local government websites. For students staying in Oxford, Oxford City Council has agreed a template letter which should be sent (with the student's consent) from the College Office to the council office, which will allow the council to consider the student for remission from council tax if the student's status is suspended on, for example, medical grounds. Template circulated as SCSTC 18/53.

Student Registry provide details to the Council of enrolled students and their term-time address in Oxford to facilitate the Council's processing of student exemptions. A student who becomes ineligible for a student council tax exemption, as they no longer have enrolled status, will immediately become liable for payment and the Council will seek recovery of discounts, which may include interest. This liability will commence at the start of the period of suspension.