

SGSAH Guidance towards Good Practice

Returning to Doctoral Research

All HEIs have policies for managing the approved interruption or suspension of doctoral research.

The guidance below is intended to help supervisors support the return of doctoral researchers who have taken an extensive break from their programme of study (that is, a break of over three months in duration).

The reasons that doctoral researchers will have taken an approved extensive break from research are diverse and include maternity, paternity and shared parental leave, illness, caring responsibilities, internships and job opportunities.

Just as there are many diverse reasons for doctoral researchers to interrupt or suspend their studies, so are there many possible changes to their circumstances upon their return to study. They may return to study a different person than when they suspended (for example, they may return on a part-time contract, as a parent, as a primary carer, as a cancer survivor, with a manageable long-term illness, etc.). It is important to recognise that the circumstances of interruption and return will be different for each doctoral researcher and that planning for their return must take these individual circumstances into account. HEIs and supervisors should also take into consideration other factors, for example, whether the doctoral researcher is registered as part-time or distance learning.

Returning to doctoral research after an extensive break can be challenging for many reasons, including lack of confidence and erosion of emerging researcher identity, sense of isolation (peer group has moved on), distance from and disengagement with research project, developments in research landscape, changes in supervisory team/HEI environments, lack of research plan.

To support doctoral researchers make a productive return to their programme of study, we would advise:

1. The supervisory team to set up a meeting with the doctoral researcher on the day that s/he is returning to their programme of study – or virtually in the case of distance-learning students.
2. The supervisory team to discuss openly with the doctoral researcher the context of his/her return to establish what might have changed in his/her circumstances and any implications attached to such changes in order to identify any additional needs the researcher might have. These should inform the Return to Research plan (see below).
3. The supervisory team to remind the doctoral researcher of the HEI's support services, as appropriate (e.g. Counselling Services, Welfare Office etc), as well as other formal structures of support (e.g. Advisors of Study).
4. The supervisory team to advise the doctoral researcher of any changes that have occurred in the HEI or the team during their absence which are likely to have an impact on him/her. The HEI's current Code of Practice for Research Degrees, or equivalent, should be given to the doctoral researcher. The doctoral researcher should also be advised of any new opportunities – for example, new funding routes to support conference attendance, specific PhD activities or societies etc.
5. A work routine should be discussed and agreed. This will offer the doctoral researcher a sense of stability and security.
6. The supervisors and the doctoral researcher agree a Return to Research Plan at the first meeting. Though the Plan will be responsive to the researcher's needs and circumstances, a useful guide is to agree a Semester-length plan (e.g. 10 weeks).
 - This should set out clearly immediate goals, so that the doctoral researcher is clear about what the first steps are and can be reassured that they have a plan to follow.
 - These first steps should be manageable, realistic, detailed and 'bite size'. It will be encouraging to start with tasks which can be easily completed.

- The Plan should be tailored to the student's project/circumstances.

Week 1	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Review work completed before interruption and take a note of the achievements. 2. Complete bibliographic search for materials published during period of interruption. 3. Attend Departmental Seminar.
Week 2	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Meet with supervisors. 2. Draft overall plan: what remains to be completed and when? 3. Begin annotated bibliography of newly published material in order of priority and submit three annotations to supervisors. 4. Attend 'Writing for a PhD' workshop.
Week 3	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Meet with supervisors to discuss annotated bibliography and overall plan. 2. Attend History of Art PGR Reading Group. 3. Submit another 3 annotations to supervisors. <p>etc.</p>

7. The supervisor(s) to see the doctoral researcher at least once a week in the early stages of the return to programme of study.
8. In order that the doctoral researcher rebuilds her/his emerging identity as a researcher, supervisors should advise her/him to attend as many seminars, workshops etc as is feasible, especially in the early stages of returning to the programme of study. Supervisors may need to recommend particular events/workshops etc. Doctoral researchers should be encouraged strongly to join any relevant email lists, forums, etc., especially where these are peer-led.
9. Where the doctoral researcher's return coincides with Induction events, invite the student to attend these. S/he may well no longer have a peer group and so will need to develop a new one.
10. Where possible, the supervisor(s) should arrange for a peer from the doctoral programme to meet with the returning doctoral researcher, to act as a mentor.
11. Supervisors to encourage doctoral researchers to be honest and open at their supervisory meetings about their progress, challenges, etc. Doctoral researchers should feel able to ask for help.

Approved by SGSAH Executive 22 September 2015