Higher Education Leave of Absence/ Interruption of Studies SOP

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The procedures for staff and students in submitting and reviewing a Leave of Absence/ Interruption of Studies request for Higher Education students.

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1.0 Change History

Changes to this SOP are documented in Appendix 1 of this document. When reading electronic copies of this document, you can click here to view the change history.

2.0 Purpose

This document sets out the framework for managing Leave of Absence (LoA)/ Interruption of Studies (IoS) for students enrolled on Higher Education (HE) programmes in South Eastern Regional College. The general principles of this document have been agreed at sectoral level by the Colleges in Northern Ireland. The processes set out ensure that requests for LoA/ IoS are handled consistently, fairly and transparently, while safeguarding academic standards, student wellbeing and compliance with national quality and regulatory expectations.

3.0 Scope

This procedure applies to:

- All students registered on Higher Education programmes delivered by the College, including franchised and validated provision.
- Full-time and part-time HE students (including Higher Level Apprentices).

This procedure **does not** apply to Further Education/ AppNI/ Traineeship (level 1-3) programmes, which are governed by separate arrangements.

Where the detailed regulations of an Awarding Body/ Organisation are more specific than this procedure, those external regulations take precedence. The College procedure should then be applied in a way that is consistent with those regulations.

4.0 Principles

The College recognises that students may experience circumstances that impact their ability to engage fully with their studies. LoA/ IoS may be granted where circumstances are exceptional, unavoidable or time-limited, and where temporary discontinuation is in the student's best interests.

This document is underpinned by the following:

- Protection of academic standards and award integrity, in alignment with the QAA UK Quality Code 2024 for Higher Education.
- The Northern Ireland Act 1998 (Section 75) and associated equality duties, including the requirement to consider the impact of policy decisions on individuals and groups
- Awarding Body/ Organisation requirements.
- A student-centred and compassionate approach.
- Consistency and equity in decision-making.
- Clear communication of implications for progression, assessment and funding.

5.0 Definition of Leave of Absence/ Interruption of Studies

A Leave of Absence (LoA) or Interruption of Studies (IoS) is a formally approved temporary suspension of a student's registration, during which they do not engage in teaching, learning or assessment activities for an agreed period, such as a semester or academic year. An

interruption is authorised on the expectation that the student will return to complete their programme within an agreed period of time.

An LoA/ IoS differs from:

- **Short-term absence**, which should be managed locally within programmes by applying the extenuating circumstances procedures. (See Higher Education Extenuating Circumstances SOP)
- **Withdrawal**, where there is no expectation of return and the student's registration is terminated with the relevant Awarding Body/ Organisation.

Students submitting requests under this procedure may be signposted to relevant wellbeing, disability, financial or academic support services where appropriate.

6.0 Relationship to Other Policies and Support Arrangements

This procedure applies to LoA/ IoS. Short-term, ongoing circumstances are normally managed through other College processes, including:

- Higher Education Extenuating Circumstances SOP
- Authorisation of Absences for Full-Time Students SOP
- Higher Education Programme SOP
- Safeguard, Care and Welfare SOP
- Learning Support SOP

7.0 Grounds for Leave of Absence/ Interruption of Studies

An LoA/ IoS may be approved where a student is temporarily unable to engage effectively with their programme. Grounds may include, but are not limited to:

- Physical or mental health difficulties.
- Significant personal or caring responsibilities.
- Bereavement or family crisis.
- Financial hardship that directly affects the ability to study.
- Participation in exceptional professional, sporting or civic opportunities that are judged to be educationally beneficial.
- Military service.

LoA/ IoS will not normally be approved to:

- Extend deadlines or assessment opportunities where extenuating circumstances procedures are more appropriate.
- Take extended holidays.
- Remedy poor academic performance in the absence of mitigating factors.

These grounds are not exhaustive and other circumstances will be considered on an individual basis, for example to repeat without attendance, or 'retake the year in part or full'.

If an LoA/ IoS request is not approved, then the student will be signposted to relevant College support services and other options such as extenuating circumstances, continuation of study or formal withdrawal as appropriate.

8.0 Evidence Requirements

Evidence provided must be:

- relevant to the stated grounds for leave.
- proportionate to the circumstances.
- sufficient to allow an informed decision by the reviewer.

Suggested evidence is identified below. This list is not exhaustive and guidance for consideration will be given on a case-by-case basis.

Physical or mental health difficulties: Medical note, letter or report from a GP or healthcare professional (This does **not** need to disclose detailed diagnoses, only confirmation of impact on study).

Significant personal or caring responsibilities: Official confirmation of caring responsibilities, such as legal, social services, or support agency correspondence, or a brief supporting statement from a relevant professional.

Bereavement or family crisis: Reference to a death notice. Medical note, letter or report from a GP/ healthcare professional/ counselling service/ legal representative/ professional representative. (This does **not** need to disclose details of the situation, only confirmation of impact on the student's studies).

Financial hardship that directly affects the ability to study: Evidence of redundancy, change in employment circumstances, or financial hardship where relevant to the request.

Participation in exceptional professional, sporting or civic opportunities that are judged to be educationally beneficial: Letter from an employer, official club, confirmation of civic duties from an official source.

Military service: Letter confirming period of service from an official source.

Individual circumstances: Any supporting evidence that could assist your application.

9.0 Duration of Leave

The following outlines the usual considerations relating to the duration of leave, but each student application will be considered on an individual basis:

- LoA/ IoS will normally be approved for a maximum of one academic year.
- the total period of LoA/ IoS permitted for an individual student is the same for full-time and part-time continuous students.
- extensions to the year will only be granted in extreme circumstances and where the Awarding Body/ Organisation permits.
- shorter periods may be agreed where appropriate (where no prerequisites are impacted).
- once the approved period has been reached, the student must return to the programme, apply for an extension (where an Awarding Body/ Organisation permits) or be withdrawn.

10.0 Student Application Process

Students seeking LoA/ IoS:

1. Should discuss their circumstances with their Programme Co-ordinator/ Director, and/or designated Student Support service which will liaise with the Programme Co-ordinator/Director, in support of the student's application.
2. Must submit a formal written request for Leave of Absence, supported by relevant evidence. (See Appendix 2)
3. Must be informed in writing of the outcome and any conditions attached to the approval.

Applications should be made as early as possible. Retrospective requests for LoA/ IoS will be considered only where there is a clear and evidenced reason for delayed disclosure.

The College will ensure that students are signposted to relevant support services as part of this process.

11.0 Approval and Decision-Making

Consideration of LoA/ IoS requests should take a facilitative approach. Applications should be approved where the student has provided an explanation as to why they will be unable to engage with their studies and supported by appropriate evidence, for the relevant period, provided that the LoA/ IoS will be compatible with the student subsequently completing their studies and would not exceed the maximum allowable total period for LoA/ IoS.

Applications will be considered by Curriculum Management or a nominated representative and be subject to the following:

- consideration of the student's academic progress and engagement.
- requirements of the Awarding Body/ Organisation.
- confirmation that re-engagement and reintegration can be supported effectively.

Decisions will be communicated formally to the student normally within 10 working days, including confirmation of:

- the approved period of LoA/ IoS.
- the conditions of return, including any requirements relating to curriculum changes.
- the implications for fees, funding, visas (where applicable) and access to college services.
- if not approved, the rationale for non-approval.

All LoA/ IoS requests and outcomes should be formally recorded by the Programme Co-ordinator/ Director at the next Progress or Examination Board for the programme. The Programme Co-ordinator/ Director should also notify Student Finance, the Awarding Organisation/ Body and Training Organisation/department (HLA only) where appropriate.

Communication templates can be found in Appendix 3- LoA/IoS Review Outcome Templates

12.0 Student Status During Leave

While on LoA/ IoS the following arrangements will apply:

- students will not be permitted to attend classes or submit assessments.
- access to college facilities and services will be restricted.

- students remain subject to the College's and Awarding Organisation/ Body regulations and conditions of enrolment.

13.0 Funding and Financial Implications

Students are advised that LoA/ IoS may have implications for:

- student loans or funding arrangements.
- fees and financial liability.

Students are responsible for seeking advice from relevant student funding bodies and/or independent financial advice where required. Guidance can be provided through the Student Finance Support team within the College.

14.0 Student Visa Holders

A LoA/ IoS may have an impact on student visa holders. Advice should be sought in advance of the application through the College's International Department (international@serc.ac.uk).

15.0 Changes to Programme

Students taking a LoA/ IoS should be aware that programmes may be subject to change while they are interrupted and that they may return to an altered programme structure. During return-to-study conversations, students will be notified of any relevant changes to programmes.

Students should be aware that if their programme is to be discontinued or substantially changed, it may not be possible to grant a LoA/ IoS.

16.0 Return to Study

Prior to returning from a LoA/ IoS students must confirm their intention to return by the agreed deadline; failure to do so may result in being withdrawn from the programme.

On return from LoA/IoS, the College will:

- confirm the point of re-entry to the programme.
- make reasonable efforts to support academic re-engagement.
- inform students of any curriculum, assessment or regulatory changes.
- signpost to any college services that might support the return to study.

The Programme Co-ordinator/ Director should also notify Student Finance, the Awarding Organisation/ Body and Training Organisation/department (HLA only) where appropriate.

17.0 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

The College will ensure that decisions in relation to LoA/ IoS are made in accordance with equality legislation and institutional equality screening processes, with appropriate monitoring for adverse impact.

18.0 Appeals

Students may appeal decisions relating to LoA/ IoS through the College's Academic Appeals Process, where procedural irregularity has taken place, or new supporting evidence has been introduced. Information can be found at: Appeals Process - SERC

19.0 Monitoring and Enhancement

The College will monitor:

- the number and outcomes of applications.
- timeliness of decision-making.
- patterns and trends relating to equality and consistency.
- the return of students from leave of absence.

This information will be used to:

- identify areas for improvement.
- inform staff development.
- enhance student guidance and assessment practices.
- support equality impact assessment and quality assurance processes.

20.0 Privacy

All requests will be treated as confidential in accordance with the Privacy Notice detailed in the application/request form (see Appendix 2) and information will only be shared with individuals who have a legitimate reason for being informed.

21.0 Related Policies and Documents

This policy should be read in conjunction with:

- HE Academic Appeals Process
- Complaints and Compliments Policy
- Higher Education Programme SOP
- Student/Programme Handbook and Programme Regulations
- Higher Education Extenuating Circumstances SOP
- Safeguarding, Care and Welfare Policy (includes Wellness to Study)
- Student and Trainee, Performance Management Behaviour and Disciplinary SOP

22.0 Communication Plan

This Procedure will be uploaded to the College intranet and referred to in staff induction and training.

23.0 Review

This procedure will be reviewed annually, or when the need for change has been identified.

Appendix 1- Document Change History

Version	Date	Change Detail
1.0	May 2026	New SOP Introduction of an HE LoA/ IoS following sectoral agreed principles providing further clarity on process for staff and students.

Appendix 2- Leave of Absence/ Interruption of Studies Request Form

PRIVACY NOTICE: Information gathered on this form will be processed within the provisions of the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) and used for the purpose of recording and managing leave of absence. The College is permitted to process personal data where there is a 'lawful basis' to do so. This processing is necessary for the performance of your contract/enrolment. Your information may be shared with relevant College staff for the purpose of recording and managing leave of absence.

Further information on data protection and your rights are available on our website https://www.serc.ac.uk/customer-privacy

SECTION A: To be completed by Student

Personal Information

Full Name: Click or tap here to enter text.

Student Number: Click or tap here to enter text.

Email Address: Click or tap here to enter text.

Contact Number: Click or tap here to enter text.

Programme Information

Programme Code: Click or tap here to enter text.

Programme Title: Click or tap here to enter text.

Year of Study: Click or tap here to enter text.

Mode of Study: Choose an item.

Campus: Click or tap here to enter text.

Programme Co-ordinator/ Director: Click or tap here to enter text.

LoA/ IoS Request Details

Period of leave requested start date: Click or tap here to enter text.

Requested return date: Click or tap here to enter text.

Request for fees suspension: ☐Yes ☐No

Reason for requesting a leave of absence:

Please explain the reason for your request and attach supporting evidence where required.

Click or tap here to enter text.

Student Declaration

I confirm that the information provided in this form is accurate to the best of my knowledge.

Student signature: Click or tap here to enter text.

Date: Click or tap here to enter text.

Submission guidance:

This form should be submitted as early as possible to your Programme Co-ordinator/ Director once the issue has arisen. Retrospective LoA/ IoS will be considered only where there is a clear and evidenced reason for delayed disclosure.

SECTION B – To Be Completed by Curriculum Management or nominated representative

Outcome

Leave of Absence/ Interruption of Study Approved: Choose an item.

Reasons for decision:

Please add a rationale for the decision made

Click or tap here to enter text.

Note: If LoA/ IoS approved please complete section 2-6. If not approved, please complete section 6 only.

Approved Dates

Start date: Click or tap here to enter text.

Return date: Click or tap here to enter text.

Conditions or Requirements for Return

Please state any conditions or requirements that must be met before the student returns to study. Please include any requirements relating to curriculum changes.

Click or tap here to enter text.

Fees Suspension (where applicable)

If fee suspension has been requested, has LoA/ IoS evidence been forwarded to Student Finance (studentfinance@serc.ac.uk) Choose an item.

Date forwarded: Click or tap here to enter text.

Authorisation

Name of Curriculum Manager or nominated representative: Click or tap here to enter text.

Signature: Click or tap here to enter text.

Date: Click or tap here to enter text.

Notes:

- Please inform the student in writing of the decision including any conditions of return and key dates
- Please add a copy of this document and any evidence to the relevant Progress/ Exam board folder.
- For HLA students please send a copy to trainingorganisation@serc.ac.uk

Appendix 3- LoA/IoS Review Outcome Templates

Template 1- LoA/IoS Approved

Date:

Student Name:

Student ID:

Programme:

Subject: Outcome of Leave of Absence/ Interruption of Studies Request

Dear [Student Name],

Thank you for submitting your request for a **Leave of Absence / Interruption of Studies (LoA/IoS)**, received on **[insert date]**. Your application, including the supporting evidence provided, has now been considered in line with the College's Leave of Absence / Interruption of Studies Policy.

Your request for a **Leave of Absence / Interruption of Studies has been approved**.

The agreed period of leave is as follows:

- **Start Date:** [Insert date]
- **Expected Return Date:** [Insert date]

This decision reflects that your circumstances meet the criteria for a temporary suspension of study where engagement with your programme is not currently possible.

Conditions of Leave and Return

The following conditions and/or requirements apply to your return to study:

- [Insert any conditions, e.g. confirmation of fitness to return, engagement with support services, updated evidence]
- [Insert any curriculum or programme considerations, if applicable]

Prior to your return, you must confirm your intention to re-engage with your programme by the agreed deadline. Failure to do so may result in withdrawal from your programme.

Important Information During Your Leave

While on approved Leave of Absence / Interruption of Studies:

- You will not be expected to attend classes or complete assessments.
- Your access to College facilities and services may be restricted (this includes, but is not limited to IT systems, access to class material on VLE, attendance at classes, Library services, visas for International students)
- Supporting Services such as Pastoral Support, Counselling, Careers, guidance from Student Finance and Learning Support in relation to your return will remain in place.
- You will remain subject to College regulations and conditions of enrolment.

Funding and Financial Implications

Please note that your leave may have implications for:

- Tuition fees and financial liability
- Student funding or loan arrangements

You are advised to seek guidance from Student Finance or relevant funding bodies as appropriate.

Programme Considerations

Please be aware that:

- Programme content, structure, or regulations may change during your period of leave
- You will be informed of any changes on your return and supported to re-engage with your studies

Next Steps

You should now:

- Contact your Programme Co-ordinator/Director if you require clarification on this decision.
- Ensure awareness of any deadlines or actions required.
- Engage with appropriate support services where needed.
- Contact your Programme Co-ordinator/Director prior to your return.

If you have any questions about this outcome, please contact [insert contact details].

Yours sincerely,

[Name]

[College Role]

Template 2- LoA/IoS Not Approved

Date:

Student Name:

Student ID:

Programme]:

Subject: Outcome of Leave of Absence/ Interruption of Studies Request

Dear [Student Name],

Thank you for submitting your request for a Leave of Absence / Interruption of Studies (LoA/IoS), received on *[insert date]*. Your application, including the supporting evidence provided, has now been considered in line with the College's Leave of Absence / Interruption of Studies Policy.

Your request for a **Leave of Absence / Interruption of Studies has not been approved**.

This decision has been made following consideration of your application and supporting evidence and is based on the following:

- *[Insert rationale – e.g. insufficient evidence, circumstances more appropriately managed through Extenuating Circumstances, continuation of study viable, etc.]*

Where a Leave of Absence is not appropriate, alternative options may be available.

Support and Next Steps
You are encouraged to discuss your situation with your Programme Co-ordinator/Director or Student Support Services. Depending on your circumstances, the following options may be more appropriate:

- Extenuating Circumstances (for short-term academic impact)
- Additional Learning Support or reasonable adjustments
- Continuation of study with support
- Formal withdrawal from the programme

Review and Appeal
If you believe that this decision has not been made in line with College procedures, or if you have new supporting evidence that could not reasonably have been provided earlier, you may submit an appeal under the Academic Appeals Policy.

Appeals can be made in line with regulations outlined in the SERC Academic Appeals Process available on our website and the HE Student Handbook and must be received by 2.00pm on **[insert date following appeals sop]**. Appeals should be submitted to academicappeals@serc.ac.uk.

Next Steps

You should now:

- Contact your Programme Co-ordinator/Director if you require clarification on this decision.
- Ensure awareness of any deadlines or actions required.

- Engage with appropriate support services where needed.

If you have any questions about this outcome, please contact [insert contact details].

Yours sincerely,

[Name]

[College Role]

Appendix 4- LoA/ IoS- Student Summary

Taking a Break from Your Studies (Leave of Absence/Interruption of Studies)

A Leave of Absence (LoA) or Interruption of Studies (IoS) is a temporary pause in your programme.

- You stop attending classes and assessments for an agreed period.
- You are expected to return and complete your programme later.

This is different from:

- Short-term absence → refer to Extenuating Circumstances.
- Withdrawal → leaving your programme completely.

When can I apply?

You can apply if you are **temporarily unable to study**, for example:

- Physical or mental health difficulties
- Caring responsibilities
- Bereavement or family crisis
- Financial hardship
- Exceptional opportunities (e.g. sport, employment)
- Military service

Not normally approved for:

- Extending deadlines
- Holidays
- Improving grades without valid reasons

What evidence do I need?

Your evidence must be relevant, proportionate and to support a decision. Examples include:

- Medical note (no diagnosis required)
- Letter from professional/support service
- Financial or employment evidence
- Supporting statement for personal circumstances

How do I apply?

1. Speak to your Programme Co-ordinator/Director or Student Support
2. Submit a formal request, with evidence, using the LoA form
3. Apply as early as possible

You will receive a **written outcome (normally within 10 working days)**

How long can I take off?

- Usually up to **one academic year**
- Shorter periods may be agreed
- Extensions only in exceptional cases

What happens during your leave?

While on LoA/IoS:

- No classes or assessments
- Limited access to college services
- Still subject to programme regulations

It may affect:

- Fees
- Student loans or funding
- Contact student finance for support and guidance

Returning to your programme

Before you return:

- Confirm your return by the agreed deadline
- Meet any conditions

On return, the College will:

- Confirm where you restart
- Support your re-engagement
- Inform you of any programme changes

If you don't confirm your return you may be withdrawn.

If your request isn't approved
You will be supported to consider:

- Extenuating Circumstances
- Continuing with support
- Withdrawal options

What if you disagree?
You can appeal the decision based on procedural irregularity or new evidence.

Support is available
Contact your Programme Co-ordinator/Director, Student Union, Learning Support Services or Student Finance.

If you're struggling, speak to someone early — support is available and LoA is just one option.

Your data
Your information is confidential and handled in line with data protection law.