



Edinburgh University Students' Association's position on "Mandatory Interruptions" as part of the Support for Study process

Background

Edinburgh University Students' Association has historically been an advocate for the university's Support for Study policy.

While we have expressed concerns regarding the policy's implementation and application, we continue to recognise the value in a non-punitive, welfare-focused, flexible and student-led process to address cases where students' behaviour is a cause for concern but may be being exacerbated by factors outwith their control, including disability, medical conditions, or mental ill-health.

Over the past two years, we have become aware of renewed concerns regarding the policy's scope from staff within the university, and in particular a desire for the university to have greater powers in cases where staff are unable to reach a consensus with students going through the Support for Study policy regarding appropriate outcomes.

The university can currently make students take time out from their studies through the penalty of a suspension under the Student Disciplinary process, if a student is found to have breached the Code of Conduct. However, we are aware that some staff are keen for this option to be available for students going through the Support for Study process without the additional disciplinary step.

As Edinburgh's Students' Association and as representatives of its 40,000 members, we believe that any amendment to the Support for Study process to allow for students to be placed on "mandatory interruption" would fundamentally alter the supportive nature of the original policy and would have a significant negative impact, both on individual students going through the Support for Study process and for the student body as a whole.

In particular, we are concerned about the disproportionate impact that mandatory interruptions would have on already marginalised students, who are more likely to struggle to maintain positive mental health, more likely to have their behaviour characterised as disruptive, and less likely to have access to support services and networks beyond the university.

This paper aims to give an overview of our key concerns regarding "mandatory interruptions" in the context of Support for Study, including evidence of the harm such policies have had at other comparative institutions.



Key Concerns

1. Mandatory interruptions as a deterrent to disclosures of mental ill-health, and requests for additional support.

Regardless of the context in which an interruption of studies is taken, it is clear that many students find the experience intimidating, confusing, and destabilising.

It is therefore likely that even the possibility of a mandatory interruption being the outcome of the Support for Study process will act as a barrier to some students who would otherwise be willing to engage with the process, thus undermining the university's work to destigmatise mental ill-health and encourage students to seek support when they are struggling¹².

Even if the university's intention is for mandatory interruption to be a last resort, affecting only a very small number of students each year, a far higher proportion of students are likely to be affected by the knowledge that being forced to take an interruption from their studies is a potential consequence of what claims to be a supportive process.

We also know from students at institutions where mandatory interruption policies are already in place, that students cite anxiety about being allowed to return to their studies after an interruption as another factor in whether or not they disclose mental ill-health³.

2. The inherently punitive nature of mandatory interruptions and the message this sends to students.

From speaking with students here at Edinburgh and reading accounts from students at other institutions who have been placed on mandatory interruptions as a result of Support for Study or Fitness to Study processes, it is clear that students perceive forced interruptions to be inherently punitive.

Regardless of the support which is put in place for students before, during and after an interruption of studies, it is clear that the experience of being forced, against your will to take a break from university life is one which many students find to be at best unsettling and at worst traumatic.

¹ "This policy will also scare students who suffer from mental illness into not wanting to disclose their situation... [making] it even harder reach out to family and friends about their illness. This will further isolate them and will reinforce the stigma." (https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/jo-roy/university-of-toronto-mental-health-policy_a_23477963/)

² "One of the biggest consequences is that students are terrified of being forced to withdraw. They are scared that if they go to the health center and are honest about what they're going through, that they'll immediately be removed from campus." (<https://www.theodysseyonline.com/involuntary-medical-withdrawals>)

³ "I was really terrified about what would happen, hearing statistics about people who take off and never come back, and wondering if that's going to be you." (<https://georgetownvoice.com/2014/11/06/take-it-or-leave-it-does-a-medical-leave-of-absence-help-or-harm/>)

While the decision to place a student on a mandatory interruption may be made with the student's best interests at heart, students on the whole feel that the message sent by mandatory interruptions is that the university does not truly care for those who are struggling and would like to forgo any responsibility to them⁴. Not only is this hurtful to students who experience the Support for Study process, but it also serves to stigmatise conditions - particularly those related to mental health - which are seen as too challenging for the university to manage⁵.

By taking the choice of whether to interrupt out of the hands of individual students, the university turns what could be an empowering experience - with a student taking control of their recovery and wellbeing - into an experience which strips them of agency⁶, and sends the message that university staff - the majority of whom will have no background in physical or mental health - are more capable of deciding what is best for them than they are⁷. Not only is this approach paternalistic and at odds with much of the university's rhetoric around wellbeing and resilience, but it also risks setting students who are struggling back even further.

3. Mandatory interruptions as a cause of additional distress to students.

While we have been pleased to see progress being made on the support available for students who are on interruption (mandatory or voluntary), for many students the experience of taking a break from their studies is a cause of significant distress.

As well as more practical concerns regarding finances, housing and immigration status, students on interruption are likely to become detached from any existing support

⁴ "Well the truth is," he says, "we don't necessarily think you'll be safer at home. But we just can't have you here." (<https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2014/01/24/we-just-cant-have-you-here/>)

⁵ "As much as the university had previously recommended both its counselling services and for students to get help during mental health crises, this incident flew entirely in the face of those statements. Not only had the student been forcibly removed against her will from campus but she now faced being deprived of her main sources of on-campus support because she was deemed a liability." (<https://www.rootedinrights.org/students-with-mental-health-disabilities-are-not-a-burden/>)

⁶ "I was never forced to seek help. It was a personal decision that I had come to after months of thought and reflection. I sought help because I was lucky enough to have a strong support system that guided me to resources that could make me better, and had the agency to decide whether or not I had to take time off." (https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/jo-roy/university-of-toronto-mental-health-policy_a_23477963/)

⁷ "In one case, involving Bluffton University in Ohio, OCR ruled that the institution had acted on the basis of the mental illness manifested by a student who had attempted suicide and had failed to provide a hearing, consult with medical personnel, examine objective evidence, or evaluate the real nature and extent of the risk she posed to herself or others. The school was forced to change its policy and reimbursed the student for her room, board, and book fees." (<https://ps.psychiatryonline.org/doi/full/10.1176/ps.2006.57.7.914>)

mechanisms, both in terms of professional services and peer networks.⁸⁹¹⁰ Where an interruption is the result of an informed choice made by a student, this is challenging but not insurmountable, but where a student has been placed on a mandatory interruption, this can serve to exacerbate many of the issues which originally resulted in them being placed on interruption.

There is also an assumption that when students take an interruption they will be leaving the university for an equally or more supportive environment, usually their family home. However, it is important to recognise that for many students, this simply isn't an option and in some cases returning home is likely to cause additional stress¹¹. In these cases, rather than an interruption serving as an opportunity for a student to recover, they are left in limbo with even less support than they would have had as a student.

4. Who decides when a student is well enough to return to their studies?

There appears to be an assumption in these discussions that given six months to a year, students will be able to access support, complete their recovery, and return to the university as though nothing had happened¹².

However, the reality is that the majority of students who are placed on mandatory interruptions have gone through the Support for Study process as the result of chronic conditions which are unlikely to be "cured" in such a short period, particularly given that access to support services is challenging and that students are likely to face long waiting times for any treatments they may require.

This presents a challenge for students who wish to return to their studies but who are not "better" by the university's measures, and raises questions about how "well" students need to be in order to earn their place here. We recognise that many students continue at Edinburgh whilst living with disabilities and other health conditions which may be having a negative impact on their wellbeing and academic performance, so why should a student who

⁸ "It is not the duty of any institution of higher learning to push out its most vulnerable students, forcing them out of an environment that is stable and secure." (https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/jo-roy/university-of-toronto-mental-health-policy_a_23477963/)

⁹ "'I'm sorry,' I say. 'What makes you think I will be safer away from school, away from my support system?' School was my stimulation, my passion and my reason for getting up in the morning." (<https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2014/01/24/we-just-cant-have-you-here/>)

¹⁰ "For me, school and the friends and relationships I had there were my biggest reasons to fight my battle. After losing school, a job related to school, and the support systems, administratively, mental health and friend wise, I felt lower than ever." (<https://www.theodysseyonline.com/involuntary-medical-withdrawals>)

¹¹ "The assumption that sending a student home will reduce the stress they experience is naïve at best, given that home may be precisely the source of conflict in the student's life." (<https://ps.psychiatryonline.org/doi/full/10.1176/ps.2006.57.7.914>)

¹² "'At the time I had to explain to [my therapists], 'Look I know right now I'm not at a place to go back, I'm asking you to please write this letter so that I can go back in January. They'd say to me, 'Okay I'm writing this letter, but if you're not ready by January, I'm going to send another letter down there telling them not to take you,'" said DuBois, who was left feeling as if a time limit were being placed on a full recovery." (<https://georgetownvoice.com/2014/11/06/take-it-or-leave-it-does-a-medical-leave-of-absence-help-or-harm/>)



has been placed on a mandatory interruption be denied the right to return, simply because they cannot meet a standard which is not required of other students.

Conclusion

From the research we have conducted, it is clear that many students who have been placed on mandatory interruption consider that to have been an unsupportive experience. Even those who acknowledge that taking a break from their studies has benefitted them are clear that they would have much preferred for the decision to have been theirs to make, with guidance and support offered by staff.

We recognise that those wishing to implement this policy amendment have good intentions, with only a small group of students potentially impacted. However, the negative, real impact it has had on students in other institutions (explored above) and the principle of stripping a student's autonomy should serve to stop this amendment from being approved.

Instead, the options for support while on an Interruption of Studies should be enhanced to encourage more students to see this as a viable option they would choose themselves under the existing policy. This included being able to remain in their accommodation, have access to University services, and have their case managed and checked in with regularly. Choice is key, and making the choice to interrupt more appealing is a far more ethical and acceptable route.