

FITNESS TO STUDY POLICY

Scope and Purpose	This document outlines the Fitness To Study Policy, applying to all students, both Undergraduate and Postgraduate, studying validated courses at Belfast School of Theology (BST).
Policy Owner	Head of Education (with coordination from Head of Operations)
Process approval and review	This Policy is approved by the Board and will be reviewed at the end of each academic year or more often as required.
Date last reviewed	June 2026
Date next review	June 2027

Introduction

Belfast School of Theology (BST) offers a range of programmes with their own requirements and expectations. BST recognises the importance of a student's health and wellbeing in relation to their academic performance and retention and their wider student experience, and it is with this in mind that a framework of support to study is necessary to ensure safety and apply due process.

Aims and Objectives

BST understands that on occasions students may experience wellbeing difficulties that have a detrimental impact on their ability to study, beyond the normal sickness absence, and normal extenuating circumstances procedures. This policy's aims are to ensure a consistent approach to supporting students whose mental and/or physical wellbeing is of such concern that interventions need to be put in place by BST to support them. The emphasis of this policy is on supporting a student's wellbeing, where there is a detrimental impact on the student's ability to study, or the impact on others around them, or a risk under Safeguarding or Health and Safety.

The objective of this policy is to support the retention of the student where possible on their chosen course of study. However, it needs to be recognised that some students may not be able to continue with their studies at that moment in time (and therefore may need to intercalate).

Scope

All students enrolled on any validated course at BST are covered by these procedures. The procedure is applicable to any activity the student is engaged in as part of their studies (lectures, assessment, etc.) including activity on campus (including accommodation owned by BST), placement attendance and any other activity constituting their study experience (e.g. field trips).

“Fitness to study” as used in this policy pertains to the entire student experience, and not just a student’s ability to engage with their studies.

Procedure

BST recognises that concerns may be raised about a student’s wellbeing by a variety of individuals, for example staff, other students, and third parties (such as health professionals, placement providers or the police) as well as the individual student concerned. BST will encourage students to take responsibility for their own wellbeing wherever possible.

This Procedure seeks to promote early intervention, active collaboration between staff, students and third parties with a consistent approach. Matters will be dealt with sensitively and in a non-judgemental and coordinated manner across BST to maintain the dignity of the student as much as possible.

Whilst BST will seek to work with students in a spirit of cooperation, cases may arise in which it may, under the terms this policy, be determined that a student is unfit to study and that their registration should be suspended or terminated.

BST will be mindful of the sensitivity inherent in fitness to study concerns, and therefore be diligent in its obligation to comply with Data Protection legislation. In particular, it should be noted that information about a student's mental or physical health or disability is classed as sensitive personal data. BST has a duty to handle this type of information with care and confidentiality. Any disclosure about a student's health, whether verbally or in writing, should normally be with the student's full knowledge and express agreement. Where consent is withheld, disclosure may be possible in some circumstances, for example if there is a significant risk to health and safety. Advice should be sought where necessary.

The policy procedures follow three distinct stages reflecting the potential impact the wellbeing issue(s) have on the student's ability to function whilst at BST. The three stages reflect the level of difficulty the student faces or the risk/disruption highlighted, as well as the type of intervention required by BST and the responsibilities of the student. In the event that a student is unable or unwilling to participate in any of the processes associated with this policy and procedures, BST will continue with the process regardless, where it is deemed reasonable to do so given the risk involved. Concerns relating to a student should, in the first instance, be raised in confidence with the Programme Lead who will then refer the matter as appropriate.

Stage 1 – Initial/ Emerging Concern

Initial and/or Emerging Concerns are typically attributed to low levels of risk, that do not require immediate additional specialist support. A Stage 1 concern would normally consist of an informal meeting of the Programme Lead with the student as soon as possible.

Outcomes that may be required from this intervention include:

a) No further actions

Or one or more of the following:

- b) That the student should be asked to moderate their behaviours, address the concern, or to seek help with the presenting issue within an agreed timeframe.
- c) The Programme Lead may direct the student to support services within BST including the Disability Support Officer and Pastoral Care Worker, and encourage the student to engage (but acknowledge that neither service provides mandated interventions).
- d) The student decides to submit Extenuating Circumstances to Cumbria University.
- e) The student takes time off due to ill health, or where appropriate they intercalate.

Where the student responds positively, no further action would be required. Where the student fails to respond positively, or refuses to engage in the process, progression to stage two would be required.

Stage 2 Continuing/ Moderate Concerns

Continuing and/or Moderate concerns may be attributed to needing an appropriate and timely intervention from one or more internal support services (the Disability Officer, by way of example), or external support services (such as a G.P appointment).

Outcomes that may be required in this intervention include:

- a) Consultation with other members of staff in BST: for example, the Principal, Module Leaders, Pastoral Care, or Ministry Placements Programme Lead, for further information or advice.
- b) Putting in place reasonable adjustments and/or other support structures and interventions where appropriate.
- c) Recommendation that the student is advised to take a period of voluntary absence (sickness absence or intercalation).
- d) The student decides to submit Extenuating Circumstances.

e) Unless it is decided that no further action needs to be taken, an Action Plan should be drawn up outlining specific behaviours and concerns that need to be addressed.

Stage 3 Severe/ Enduring Concerns

Severe and/or Enduring Concerns may be attributed to needing an immediate and/or emergency intervention as appropriate to the situation. Where the fitness concerns are critical a 999 call will be required for the appropriate emergency response as the first port of call. The student should have Intercalation options discussed with them at the appropriate time (e.g. if and when they can make informed decisions). Where there is a reasonable belief that there is a risk to the health, safety or wellbeing of a student, or that the behaviour linked to the student's wellbeing is currently or potentially going to adversely affect the teaching, learning or experience of other students or BST activities, then a temporary suspension without prejudice may be put in place, following the BST procedures. A formal meeting with the student's Programme Lead would be convened when the student is able to partake in such a meeting.

Outcomes that may be required in this intervention include:

- a) The student decides to intercalate.
- b) The student withdraws from their studies.
- c) The student decides to submit Extenuating Circumstances.
- d) A formal interview/hearing takes place.
- e) Putting in place reasonable adjustments and/or other support structures and interventions.
- f) The student may be suspended without prejudice.
- g) Where a student is resident in Stranmillis University College accommodation, any expulsion or suspension of a student for reasons which might cause a threat to other

halls of residence students will be notified to Stranmillis University College due to our, and their, duty to care.

Return to Study

Where a student has required a substantive break in their studies due to illness, compassionate pastoral support should be in place ready for their return. BST may require an assessment from a relevant medical professional that the student is fit to return to study. A referral to the Disability Support Officer for advice on reasonable adjustments may be made. A carefully managed and monitored return to study is likely to enable a positive experience for the student and improve retention. It should be recognised at the stage where a student intercalates that access to services external to BST may take several weeks or months and beyond to access, and for treatments and interventions to show positive effect.

Appeals

If at any stage a student is not satisfied with any decision made concerning his or her fitness to study the BST Complaints Procedure should be followed.

Confidentiality

BST takes account of relevant legislation such as the Data Protection Act, and the general rights and expectations of a student to confidentiality. In serious cases BST will consider whether the student's emergency contact should be informed. Personal sensitive data and data of a confidential nature will be handled appropriately.