

Q. Why is UCC introducing a Fitness to Continue in Study Policy

A: Answer:

There has been a number of incidents in recent years whereby the actions, behaviour, welfare or wellbeing of a student has deteriorated to a level that causes concern to themselves, to other students, or to staff of the University. Occasionally students have been so unwell as to be a source of real distress to themselves or others and/or not been well enough to attend lectures, classes, laboratory or field work required as part of their courses. There are currently no agreed formal university procedures in place to determine a student's "Fitness to Continue in Study". In particular there are no procedures to adequately deal with circumstances where a student wishes to continue to attend where this may not be in his/her best interests or where he/she is distressing others, yet not breaching the Student Rules. The introduction of this policy and procedure will formalise the procedures to support students in distress. The policy and procedure will also formalise the procedures to determine a student's fitness to remain in study, and formalise the procedures to facilitate a supported exit and supported return to study for students following a period of absence.

Q. Which Students are subject to the Fitness to Continue in Study policy (FTS policy)?

A: Answer:

All students registered in UCC on Programmes that are **not** subject to Fitness to Practise requirements, see <http://www.ucc.ie/en/academicsecretariat/fitnesstopractise/>, including any student visiting UCC for a period of study, or research, under the Erasmus Programme, Junior Year Abroad Scheme or other similar programme involving placement in UCC of a student from another domestic or international university or institution.

Q. Will FTS procedures improve the support provided to students?

A: Answer:

Yes. There will now be a standardised written record of the circumstances where a student is a cause for concern, (where that concern has not been resolved using usual current procedures and existing informal supports). The new procedures also provide for the development of an agreed support and follow-up plan for the student. Furthermore in more complex cases, provision is made for the convening of a multi-disciplinary team (MDT) case review, to again consider the student's support needs, develop an action plan and arrange follow-up. This MDT review will result in the university professional support services, incl. Student Health, Student Counselling, Disability Support Services, International Education Office, Head of the student's own Academic unit and the Head of Student Experience and others, considering the case, reviewing the support needs and developing an agreed follow up plan. The MDT can also access expert independent external medical opinion. This MDT review represents a major new development in the co-ordination of response and planning of supports for students causing concern.

Q. How was the Fitness to Continue in Study Policy Developed?

A: Answer:

A working group was established by the Head of Student Experience and a desktop exercise conducted to review Fitness to Study policies from 15 Universities in UK and NI. The exercise also involved analysis of a comparative study of these policies conducted by King's College in London, which was in the process of developing a FTS policy and procedure. The elements common to the majority of these policies were identified and underlying principles considered. These were then incorporated into the Draft policy and sent to the University Solicitor's for comment, amendment and approval. The policy has been considered by Academic Board which made a number of recommendations that are incorporated into this draft, where possible. Academic Board also recommended that a briefing session for Heads of School/Academic unit be arranged. This was held on Monday 26th May 2014.

Q. What key elements were identified as being common to most policies reviewed?

A: Answer:

The following key elements were identified as common and desirable in a FTS policy

- Examples of circumstances where a student's fitness to study may be a concern
- A range of levels of response, escalating according to the level of concern
- Procedures for Emergency situations/Emergency responses
- Procedures for assessment of Fitness to Study, including obtaining expert external opinion
- Procedures for identifying support needs and development of a follow-up plan
- Example outcomes from each level of response
- A clear statement of the importance of Data Protection/Confidentiality
- Clarity around the relationship with existing University policies and procedures
- A Right of Appeal
- A Right of suspension/temporary exclusion where safety concerns exist
- Return to Study Procedures

Q. What key principles were identified as being common to most policies reviewed?

A: Answer:

The following key principles were identified

- The importance of separating Fitness to Continue in Study from Disciplinary Procedures
- The importance of ensuring there are formal support procedures in place
- The importance of adequate recording and tracking procedures to ensure no-one "falls through the cracks"
- That centralising the procedures leads to reduced variability in the application of procedures
- That centralising the procedures leads to greater retained learning for those applying the procedures

Q. Does the UCC draft policy contain any “new” or “unique “elements

A: Answer:

Yes. The UCC FTS policy contains a section not found in other policies that expressly identifies the university’s commitment to Tolerance of Difference, Embracing and Supporting Diversity (Section 7). It was felt important that this be included to confirm that the university celebrates difference and that a student will not be considered “unfit” by virtue of a different lived experience

The UCC FTS policy is the only one of the 16 policies reviewed with the word “Support” in its title.

Q. Where is the “locus of support” likely to lie following the introduction of the Policy and Procedure to Support and Determine a Student’s Fitness to study”

A: Answer:

The primary locus of interaction and support for our students will continue to be at the level of their academic unit. The majority of students do not come to the attention of or need the services of the University professional support services. This is likely to remain the situation and students will continue to need the support of and be supported by staff at the level of their academic unit.

Q. Will this policy and procedure need to be invoked for all students causing concern?

A: Answer:

No. The majority of students are likely to continue to be supported at an informal level, without the need to invoke formal procedures at level 1, level 2 or level 3. In a recent e-mail discussion group of universities in the UK/institutions of 10-20K students, it was reported that invoking level 2 responses (convening of a MDT) occurred between 5 to 10 times per year, and invoking level 3 response was needed once or twice every 1 or 2 years. This suggests that the majority of students causing concern can still be supported at a local academic unit level through continuation of usual informal procedures or, on occasions invoking level 1 response of these formal procedures, which of course can be done at the unit level under the direction of the Head of School/Academic unit. Examples of the types of complex cases that UCC and UK institutions have dealt with are included in a separate document.

Q. I would like to make a comment or recommendation to the working group. How do I do that?

A: Answer:

Please e-mail the Chair of the working group, Dr Michael Byrne at m.byrne@ucc.ie