

Royal Northern College of Music
Fitness and Return to Study Policy
Policy (including associated Procedures)
Department: Academic
Document owner: Head of Music Health and Wellbeing
Approval Committee: Academic Board
Revised: July 2024
Period of Approval: 3 Years
Review Date: July 2027

RNCM
ROYAL NORTHERN
COLLEGE of MUSIC

Note: any reference in this Policy to named officers should also be read as a reference in each case to a delegated nominee.

Section A: Fitness to Study Policy

1. Purpose and Scope

- 1.1 The purpose of this policy is to support timely interventions and preserve studentships. It also recognises that the health of a student must come first and that the pressure of academic studies and principal study may also be impacted by the issues faced.
- 1.2 The RNCM cares about its students and if there are significant concerns about the health, wellbeing, behaviour and/or conduct of a student, or their impact on others, the RNCM will take action. The case will be assessed by a two-stage process, which will include an assessment of the impact of the student's health and wellbeing on both themselves and others.
- 1.3 A student's health and wellbeing can have an impact on their academic progression and wider RNCM experience, drawing into question their 'Fitness to Study'. The circumstances under which, Fitness to Study may be questioned are set out in Section 3.
- 1.4 This Policy is not designed to be used to address unforeseen and ad hoc extenuating circumstances, which are dealt with under the Policy on Extenuating Circumstances. However, students who submit multiple Extenuating Circumstances applications, over an extended period of time may be referred to this policy.
- 1.5 The Fitness to Study element of the Policy has two stages and, depending upon the perceived severity of the situation, action may be initiated at either of the two stages without the need to follow the stages sequentially.

2. Key roles and Responsibilities

- 2.1 When a student's fitness to study is called into question, the Head of Disability and Wellbeing Services (HDWS) must refer the matter to the Academic Registrar, who will consider the facts of the case and decide whether or not to invoke stage one of the Policy. The Chair of the Fitness to Study Panel is the Head of Programmes (HoP), or nominee, supported by the HDWS.
- 2.2 Membership of the panel will consist of 3 (including the Chair) experienced members of staff. The Fitness to Study Panel will be supported by the HDWS.
- 2.3 It is the responsibility of the HDWS to consult with the Chair of the Fitness to Study Panel in order for the Chair to decide whether to continue with Stage 1 of the Policy, or in exceptional circumstances, consult with the Academic Registrar to discuss whether an immediate referral to Stage 2 of the Policy should be made.
- 2.4 The Academic Registrar oversees the operation of this Policy and can offer advice and support.

3. Circumstances under which a student's fitness to study may be called into Question.

- 3.1 A student's fitness to study may be brought into question through a wide range of circumstances, which include, but are not restricted to, the following:

- (i) the student has informed the College of problems and/or has provided information which indicates that there is a need to address their fitness to study; and/ or
- (ii) the student's academic performance, their health, wellbeing and behaviour (including attendance/ engagement) is a cause for concern and is thought to be as a result of an underlying mental and/or physical health condition; and/ or
- (iii) the student's health, wellbeing and behaviour (including attendance/ engagement) is having a significant impact on others; and/or
- (iv) serious concerns are raised by a third party (e.g., housemate, colleague, placement provider or medical professional) which indicate a need to address a student's fitness to study; and/ or
- (v) the student is not engaging with communications or offers of support from College or medical/ clinical specialist.

Section B: Fitness to Study Procedure

- 3.2 It is expected that a range of support interventions will have been explored before referral to Stage 1.
- 3.3 During the referral process, the HDWS should explain to the student verbally and in writing, that concerns about their fitness to study have been raised. It should be explained that referral to Stage 1 has been recommended because the student is or has been unwilling to co-operate with support provided by the College or previous support/ treatment has not been effective.
- 3.4 The conversation with the student should be approached in a supportive and understanding fashion. The student should be made aware of the precise nature of the behaviour and/or concerns that have resulted in the referral to Stage 1 of this Policy. The student should be:
 - (i) encouraged to co-operate fully with the Policy;
 - (ii) offered an opportunity to explain their own view of the matter; and
 - (iii) referred to the Fitness to Study Panel.
- 3.5 The discussion with the HDWS should culminate with the student having a clear understanding of why they have been referred to the Fitness to Study Panel under this Policy and the HDWS should carefully document on the case file the reasons for referral and support offered to date.

4. Stage 1 – Action

- 4.1 The decision to invoke Stage 1 will be taken by the Academic Registrar in consultation with the HDWS and HoP / Programme Leader / ADR / School. Once the decision has been made to invoke Stage 1 of this Policy, a Fitness to Study Panel meeting will be convened.
- 4.2 The student will normally be given at least 10 working days' notice of the meeting and will be informed of its purpose and provided with any documents to be considered at the

meeting. The student will be asked to provide, at least 5 working days before the meeting, any documents the student wishes to be considered.

- 4.3 The student may be accompanied at the meeting by a fellow student or a member of staff of their choosing. Should a student decide not to participate, the meeting will normally proceed in their absence.
- 4.4 The meeting is convened in order for the Panel to assess the fitness to study of the student and suggest arrangements to further support the student, to address their behaviour and/or conduct appropriately and set up formal review mechanisms. During the meeting, the panel will consider:
- (i) the nature and extent of any health condition/ personal circumstances which are impacting the student's ability to study;
 - (ii) the prognosis of a condition and its implications for the student;
 - (iii) the extent to which any condition/ personal circumstances may affect the student's fitness to study and ability to manage the demands of student life;
 - (iv) any impact that the condition may have on or risk it may pose to others;
 - (v) whether any additional steps should be taken by the RNCM to enable the student to study effectively; and
 - (vi) whether the student will require any ongoing medical treatment or support.
- 4.5 Should the student refuse to provide additional medical or evidence relating to personal circumstances, the RNCM will continue the process under this Policy based on the information already in its possession or use another appropriate means to address the issue. The student should be informed of this and of any potential consequences, for example, that a decision may be made under this Policy without full medical information/ other evidence, or that the matter may be escalated to Stage 2 of this Policy due to a lack of engagement by the student. The student's refusal to participate in the Policy, including any potential consequences, will be recorded on the student's file.
- 4.6 Those present at the meeting will have the discretion to consider the issues as they see fit. This may include calling witnesses and making further enquiries to assist their deliberations.
- 4.7 A record of the discussions, and any actions agreed with the student, should be made and sent to the student within 10 working days of the date of the meeting by way of an outcome letter from the HDWS on behalf of the Chair. The student will be asked to agree to the record of the discussions and any actions attributed and to respond to this effect within 10 working days of receipt. A copy will be kept on the case file. In the absence of a response, the RNCM will confirm the record and implement accordingly.

5. Stage 1 – Outcomes

- 5.1 Following consideration of all the evidence, the Fitness to Study Panel may recommend one or more of the following outcomes:
- (i) no further action is required;
 - (ii) that the Health and Wellbeing Hub will monitor the student's fitness to study for a specified period of time. To enable such monitoring, a support plan shall be agreed with the student to outline any steps that the student will need to take and/or any support to be provided to the student to address the concerns identified. Any support plan will be reviewed on a regular basis in consultation with the student. The student will be informed that dis-engagement with the support plan will normally result in their fitness to study being considered further under stage 2 of this Policy;
 - (iii) the Fitness to Study Panel would support the student's request for an interruption to their studies or provide a supporting statement for adaptations to assessment submission/ completion, for consideration under the Extenuating Circumstances Policy.
 - (iv) the case will be referred for consideration under Stage 2 of this Policy. This will only be appropriate in the most serious of cases, for example, where the student may pose a serious risk to their own health and safety or that of others, and it is thought that the suspension or exclusion of the student may be necessary
- or*
- the student has not agreed to a recommended course of action proposed as a result of a Stage 1 meeting.
- or*
- despite completing the recommendations at Stage 1 the situation has not sufficiently improved.

6. Stage 1 – Review

- 6.1 A review period should be agreed at the meeting, to allow the student to consider their behaviour and/or conduct, to seek further advice and support as necessary, as well as addressing the actions outlined by the Fitness to Study panel. At the end of the review period, the HDWS will consider whether the concerns have been addressed appropriately and record the outcome.
- 6.2 If the concerns have been addressed appropriately, this will be noted and no further action taken. If the concerns have not been fully addressed, then:
- 6.2.1 a further meeting of the Fitness to Study Panel will be convened to consider how to ensure that appropriate support to study continues to be provided; and the Fitness to Study Panel may:
 - (i) set a further review period; and/or
 - (ii) recommend that the case be progressed to Stage 2 of this Policy as appropriate.
- 6.3 If a student is unable or unwilling to co-operate at this point, the student will be informed by the HDWS that action under Stage 2 of the Policy will be taken.

- 6.4 The outcome of the review should be sent to the student within 5 working days of the date of the end of the review period in the form of a letter. The student will be asked to agree the record and any actions attributed and respond to that effect within 5 working days of receipt. A copy will be kept on the student's file.

7. Stage 2 – RNCM

- 7.1 Stage 2 of this Policy will be implemented by the Academic Registrar following a referral from the Fitness to Study Panel if any or all of the following apply:
- (i) the initial concerns raised about a student are sufficiently serious to warrant interruption or withdrawal - for example, if the student poses a potential threat to their own health and safety and wellbeing or that of others, or disruption to the RNCM community.
 - (ii) the student is unwilling to co-operate with Stage 1;
 - (iii) the action taken under Stage 1 has not remedied the identified behaviours and/or conduct; and/or
 - (iv) the student's condition deteriorates to such an extent during Stage 1 of this Policy that, in the best interests of the student and/or others, it is felt appropriate to escalate the case.
- 7.2 Subsequent parts of this Policy and procedure will be dealt with under the Student Conduct Policy and Disciplinary Procedures, with reference to Section 7 'Disciplinary Offences' point (x) 'Failure to comply with a previously imposed penalty or reasonable instruction, under this policy or another other College Code, policy, rule or regulation'.
- 7.3 Following any action taken under the Student Conduct Policy and Disciplinary Procedure, the HDSW will oversee the management of the impact of that action on the student's academic progression, in liaison with the HoP / Programme Leader, in order to consider any additional wellbeing support for the student.
- 7.4 Appeals on the outcome of stage 2, can be made in accordance with the Student Conduct Policy and Disciplinary Procedure.

Section C: Return to Study Procedure

8. Approval of Return to Study

- 8.1 After interruption, a student will only be permitted to return to study if, on the basis of medical assessments and other relevant evidence, the RNCM is satisfied that the student is fit to study and understands and can comply with any conditions imposed for their return, in accordance with Section C: Return to Study.
- 8.2 Once a student who has been interrupted under the Policy on Fitness to Study and in accordance with Student Conduct Policy and Disciplinary Procedure, has been assessed and confirmed as fit to return to study, relevant information is shared (e.g. with Halls) and appropriate support is made available upon their return.
- 8.3 This Policy and procedure allows subsequent action to be taken should the behaviours and/or conduct identified during a Fitness to Study investigation, reoccur.

9. Key Roles and Responsibilities

- 9.1 The RNCM's Fitness to Study Panel (as set out in Section 1) will oversee the return of students who have interrupted, as a result of the Policy on Fitness to Study and in accordance with Student Conduct Policy and Disciplinary Procedure.
- 9.2 The RNCM will require medical evidence which medically assesses the student's ability to manage the demands of studying, taking account of the nature and extent of the student's previous problems and the RNCM's concerns about them. Where necessary, additional specialist advice and/or an opinion may be sought.

10. During Suspension/Exclusion

- 10.1 Students will be encouraged to maintain contact with the Wellbeing Advisers during their period of interruption to advise on their progress and to facilitate a return to study when the student is well enough. This level of contact may not be possible for some students and is dependent on their condition and/ or treatment.

11. Returning to Study

- 11.1 Where possible, students will return from an interruption once deemed fit to study, but the return may only be practical at certain times of the year. Therefore, the return point will be agreed by the Head of Programmes/ School (for example at the start of an academic year for taught students).
- 11.2 Students will normally be expected to return to the same mode of study as they were originally undertaking, i.e. full-time or part-time where permitted. Where a request to return to studies includes a request to return to a previous year of study, this may be considered by the Head of Programmes.

12. Notice of Return

- 12.1 All students who have interrupted under the Procedure on Fitness to Study in accordance with the Student Conduct Policy and Disciplinary Procedure should indicate their intention to return to study by formally notifying the Deputy Registrar and Head of Student Services (DRHSS) 8 weeks before they are due to return. If the period of suspension or temporary exclusion is less than one month, then the Head of Disability and Wellbeing Services (HDWS) will agree with the student the timescale for notification of return, in liaison with the DRHSS and Head of Student Services and Head of Programmes and Assessment (HPA).
- 12.2 The Programme and School will attempt to contact the student and will offer support in relation to a potential return to study and to arrange an audition. A successful audition is required in order to return to studies, regardless of the length of interruption.
- 12.3 The return to study process can take some time (e.g., due to the need for additional information). Students should, therefore, begin the return to study process as early as possible and comply with any deadlines given to them.
- 12.4 If no notification of intention to return is received, students will be contacted 1 month prior to the agreed return date (or such other time as agreed if the period of interruption is less than one month), it will be assumed that they are not returning on the agreed date.

13. Return to Study Approval Process

- 13.1 The HDWS will oversee the Return to Study Approval process.
- 13.2 The RNCM will have defined the conditions of return to study after a suspension or exclusion under the Procedure on Fitness to Study.
- 13.3 Where conditions were placed upon the return of a student, the Fitness to Study Panel will consider the medical evidence and any additional information, including any information which may be provided directly by the student.
- 13.4 The student will be asked to provide the Fitness to Study Panel with a written statement of their views and any independent medical evidence they wish to be taken into account. The decision to allow the return of the student is the responsibility of the RNCM Fitness to Study Panel. If the Fitness to Study Panel determines that the student is not fit to return, the Fitness to Study Panel will refer the case back to Stage 2 of the Procedure on Fitness to Study. The decision will be issued to the student in writing in advance of their return date.
- 13.4 In making the decision, the Fitness to Study Panel will consider the student's individual support needs, including the requirement for any reasonable adjustments and may impose such conditions which they deem appropriate to the relevant case, such as a return to study plan or a requirement for regular progress checks.
- 13.5 If the student does not consent to provide medical evidence, the Fitness to Study Panel will decide whether there is sufficient information on which to assess whether the student is fit to return to study.

14. Support to Study after Returning

- 14.1 Once return to study has been approved, all students must attend a return to study meeting with relevant staff within the Programme team, including the HDWS. This meeting would normally be within one month of the return date and a record would be kept of the meeting and a 'Support Plan' produced and monitored.
- 14.2 Any further health, wellbeing, behaviour and/or conduct issues, related to the same condition, which arise once a student has returned to study will be immediately referred back to the Procedure on Fitness to Study.

15. Confidentiality

- 15.1 We expect that all those involved will, where possible and appropriate, respect the confidentiality of the matters concerned; however, there may be circumstances in which confidentiality cannot be maintained.
- 15.2 A student's informed and express consent should be obtained in any circumstances (other than as set out in paragraph 7 below) in which confidential information about the student is to be shared. Where a student decides not to provide their consent, this decision should, subject to paragraph 4.3 below, be respected and any consequences of such non-disclosure, for example, in terms of providing additional support, should be explained to the student and recorded on the student's file.
- 15.3 If it is not possible for consent to be obtained from the student (e.g., because the student is incapacitated) or if consent is refused, in very exceptional circumstances the RNCM may still go ahead and share confidential information about that student. Examples of

circumstances when such a decision might be taken to share confidential information include where a:

- (i) student's health has deteriorated to the extent that it is threatening their personal safety;
- (ii) student is at risk of serious abuse and/or exploitation; and/ or
- (iii) student's behaviour and/or conduct is adversely affecting the rights or safety of others.

- 15.4 Where the consent of the student has not been obtained, it will be the responsibility of the Academic Registrar, to decide whether or not to share confidential information about that student. If the decision is taken that confidential information should be shared without the student's consent, the student must be informed of this unless it is determined that to do so will increase the risk of harm to the student or others.
- 15.5 Where a decision is made to share confidential information about a student without the student's consent, a record will be kept stating the nature of the information shared, with whom the information has been shared and the time and date of the disclosure.
- 15.6 All students information used within the context of this policy and associated procedures is in compliance with our publish Privacy Statement: [Applicants and Students Privacy Statement - Royal Northern College of Music \(rncm.ac.uk\)](https://www.rncm.ac.uk/about/college-information/privacy/student-emergency-next-of-kin-contact-statement/)
- 15.7 Please note our statement on the use of Student Emergency/ Next of Kin contact information, which can be found at: <https://www.rncm.ac.uk/about/college-information/privacy/student-emergency-next-of-kin-contact-statement/>