

Special Studies Program Procedures

Section 1 - Purpose and Scope

(1) These procedures are intended to give effect to the uniform implementation of the [Special Studies Program Policy](#) and the requirements and responsibilities of academic employees involved in the process.

Section 2 - Accrual and Taking of Special Studies Program

Eligible Service

(2) In determining eligible service for special studies program purposes, the University may recognise prior continuous paid full-time or fractional service with other Australian higher education institutions provided that the employee was eligible to apply for participation in a special study or similar program in their former institution(s).

(3) Recognition of prior service is dependent upon there being no more than two months break between cessation of employment with the releasing institution and commencement with Southern Cross University. The period between cessation and commencement shall not count as service for special studies program purposes. Where there has been a break of more than two months, no period of prior service will be recognised.

(4) The extent of any recognition of previous relevant service will be established by [HR Services](#) at the time the employee commences employment with this University.

(5) Absences on long service leave, special studies or similar program and leave without pay will not count as service for special studies program purposes.

(6) Any special studies program period reverts eligible service to zero. Eligible service commences on return to normal university duties following completion of the special studies program.

Accrual

(7) Special studies program accrues at the rate of one month for every six months of eligible service, up to a maximum of 12 months accrual after six years of eligible service. The total program accrual will be calculated up to the date when the program commences.

(8) Special studies program does not accrue while participating in special studies program or during absences on long service leave or leave without pay.

(9) Participation in the special studies program, no matter the period, will reduce all special studies program accruals to zero. Accrual will recommence at the rate of one month for every six months of eligible service upon commencement of normal University duties, following completion of the special studies program.

Duration of Program

(10) The duration of the program will be determined by the length of eligible service, the needs of the employee's

program, and will not be less than two months. Ordinarily, special studies programs will not exceed six months. Only in very exceptional circumstances will programs of more than six months duration be approved by the Vice-Chancellor.

(11) The commencement date for the special studies program is to be negotiated with and agreed to by the Head of Work Unit.

Location During Special Studies Program

(12) Normally, special studies programs will only be approved if a minimum of six weeks of the program is undertaken at another location at least 400 kms from the employee's base workplace.

(13) Where the program outcomes can be completed without travel of six weeks (or greater) or where an applicant has caring responsibilities, approval will be considered.

Leave during Special Studies Program

Annual Leave

(14) As part of the special studies program approval, it is expected the employee takes a reasonable period of annual leave, commensurate with the annual leave accrued during the program. For a program of six months duration this is two weeks.

(15) Normally no other requests for additional leave during the special studies program period will be considered.

(16) Requests for additional leave immediately prior or immediately following participation in the special studies program must be advised in the application for the special studies program.

(17) Requests for additional leave, following approval of the special studies program, will not normally be considered.

Personal Leave

(18) Personal leave of more than two weeks that is supported by a medical certificate and completely overlaps with the special studies program period will, subject to the University's personal leave provisions, be re-credited to the employee. The period of re-credited special studies program may be taken at a time to be negotiated and agreed to by the Head of Work Unit.

Section 3 - Application and Approval Process

Application Process

(19) Employees should discuss their plans for special studies program with their Head of Work Unit, as soon as possible, preferably the year before they plan to apply. HR Services will call for applications for the special studies program. Applicants are required to consult with their supervisor and Head of Work Unit before submitting an application.

(20) Employees are required to complete a [special studies application](#) and provide the following information:

- a. a copy of the Academic CV and Portfolio;
- b. most recent completed [Performance Review Plan](#) (PRP);
- c. if applicable, a copy of the report from the most recent special studies program, including supervisor comments; and
- d. any other documentation in support of the application, i.e. letters of invitation from other institutions.

(21) The onus is on the applicant to present a clear and comprehensive description and rationale for all parts of the program, including all visits undertaken and other activities pursued. Applications must clearly:

- a. identify the outcomes by which the Head of Work Unit and Executive Member can evaluate the program's success;
- b. align the program's outcomes with the University's [SCU Strategy 2030](#), the Work Unit Plan, PRP goals and workload profile; and
- c. identify the expected benefits to personal and professional development.

(22) In completing the Expected Outcomes section of the application, tangible benefits to the individual and to the University, such as the publication of journal articles, are to be included. Where outcomes include journal articles, indicate the journal for which the publication(s) will be targeted and the expected timing of submission to the journal. Where a future grant application may be identified as an outcome, the proposed funding provider should be nominated together with the expected date of application.

(23) After the employee has completed sections A – C, the application and attachments are referred to the Head of Work Unit. Their Head of Work Unit will complete Section D and may ask the employee to strengthen their application and/or adjust the timing of the proposed program of study. They will also provide the following feedback:

- a. include a statement concerning the academic merit of the special studies program, and the relevance of the proposed program to the University's and Work Unit's goals and objectives and to the employee's agreed career projection as outlined in the PRP;
- b. provide evidence of any recent significant contributions to the University that indicates the potential of the employee to benefit the University from the proposed program;
- c. make comment on the employee's behaviour, contribution and performance including demonstration of the University's values;
- d. following consultation with other employees within the Work Unit, include a statement on the impact the employee's absence will have on the Work Unit; and
- e. include a statement on the financial impact of the proposed program on the Work Unit and the strategy for dealing with it;
- f. the timing of the proposed program and if required, seek adjustments to the proposed program to ensure teaching, research and administration requirements are met; and
- g. if they are unable to recommend the application.

(24) After Section D has been completed, the employee is required to submit their application to HR Services, before the advertised closing date.

(25) Copies of applications, and associated documentation are referred to Committee members. Separate from the application submitted, a report on research publications, research grant funding and internal postgraduate supervision from the Research Management System (IRMA) will be provided to the Committee by Research Services.

(26) Where a number of employees from the one work unit have applied for special studies program for the same period, the Head of Work Unit ranks the applications based on the perceived benefits to the employee, the work unit and the University. Rankings may be reviewed by the Special Studies Program Committee in determining their decision to recommend applications to the Vice-Chancellor.

Approval Process

(27) Applications for the special studies program will be considered on the basis of the quality and merit of the proposed program.

(28) The Committee will assess applications in the context of:

- a. research and or scholarship of teaching priorities of the University and Work Unit;
- b. the value to the employee, with due consideration to early career researchers and employee's applying for the first time;
- c. the employee's behaviour, contribution and performance in line with the [University's Code of Conduct](#) and Values;
- d. contribution to the University's and Work Unit's strategic goals and objectives;
- e. the appropriateness of the place or places where it is to be pursued.

(29) In assessing applications, the Committee will consider the strength of the employee's performance looking for evidence of productivity and achievements (since the last special studies program, where applicable), which must be detailed sufficiently in the application to enable an assessment to be made.

(30) For second and subsequent special studies program applications, the Committee will look at the value to the employee and the University of previous special studies programs.

(31) In making its recommendations to the Vice-Chancellor, the Committee will take into account the type and extent of other forms of support the employee has previously received to undertake developmental activities. Normally only one application to the special studies program to support progress toward completion of a postgraduate award, will be considered.

(32) Approval of an application will at all times be subject to work unit and University convenience, and available budget allocation. Accordingly, the special studies program is to be organised so it causes minimum disruption to normal teaching and research activities. Approval is therefore conditional upon:

- a. the proposed special studies program fulfilling the stated objective of this Policy;
- b. teaching and administrative commitments being met during the employee's absence without the appointment of additional employees. Any exception to this requirement is subject to available funding;
- c. the Head of Work Unit certifying that the employee's examination commitments and attendance at meetings associated with examinations will be completed prior to departure;
- d. the Head of Work Unit certifying that, where an employee has responsibilities as a supervisor of candidates for higher degrees, honours or diplomas, alternative supervisors have been approved by the appropriate committees. It is recognised that it may not be possible to have these arrangements approved at the time of submitting the application form, but arrangements must be completed before final approval for departure; and
- e. satisfactory arrangements being made and approved prior to departure.

(33) Approval for the special studies program will be contingent on the completion of Section D in the Special Studies Program Application: 'To Be Completed by the Head of Work Unit'.

(34) After considering the recommendations of the Special Studies Program Committee, the Vice-Chancellor will make a final determination concerning the application.

(35) Applicants will be informed of the reasons for rejection or amendment of an application by a member of the Committee following the decision of the Vice-Chancellor.

(36) Once the Vice-Chancellor has approved an application to the special studies program, minor changes may be made to the proposed program, but the changes are subject to the relevant Head of Work Unit's approval prior to commencement of the program. Proposed changes to program activities or significant changes to program dates, will require the approval of the Chair of the Committee on the recommendation of the relevant Head of Work Unit.

Section 4 - Benefits

Financial Assistance for Special Studies Program

(37) Employees undertaking the special studies program shall be paid at their normal salary rate. However, up to half their normal salary may be paid in advance as a lump sum up to six weeks before departure date, if the program is to be undertaken overseas.

(38) Subject to receipt of a PAYG Withholding Variation from the Australian Taxation Office (ATO), the advance payment may be paid tax free or at a reduced tax rate. Employees must comply with ATO requirements when applying for a variation. Employees receiving salary in advance under the provisions of a PAYG Withholding Variation must observe University and ATO requirements for the documentation and recording of activities and expenses.

(39) Within the relevant budget allocation, employees participating in the special studies program will be granted financial assistance on the following basis:

- a. Where employees undertake travel which contributes directly to the achievement of special studies program objectives a travel grant (paid as an allowance with and in addition to normal pay and taxed accordingly):
 - i. to the value of the employee's return economy airfare by a reputable airline to the principal place, being the location where the greatest amount of time is spent, of study. Where two or more periods of travel or locations are detailed, the travel grant will only be paid for travel to the principal place of study or equivalent; and
 - ii. a contribution of up to 60% of the cost of dependents' return economy airfares to the principal place of the employee's study may be paid, provided the dependents are accommodated with the employee while absent for a minimum of six weeks.
- b. Where the employee receives earnings of the type referred to in clause (46), or other financial assistance including provision for travel, such earnings or assistance will be treated in the following manner:
 - i. the total university financial assistance for the employee will be deducted from the total actual travel costs of the employee. Any positive balance will be deducted from total external assistance and earnings (described in clause 46) net of tax and costs incurred in gaining this assistance/earnings;
 - ii. any remaining amount of external assistance and earnings will then be deducted from the university financial assistance on a dollar-for-dollar basis except to the extent that the employee can make a case to the Vice-Chancellor for the reduction or waiving of this requirement due to significantly higher costs of living in the location(s) where special studies program is undertaken; the cost of maintaining two dwellings where an employee must retain their normal residence for dependants who do not accompany them; and/or additional costs associated with the program such as attendance at a major overseas conference; and
 - iii. should there still be a balance of external assistance and earnings remaining after meeting the requirements of this clause then the normal policy governing outside earnings by academic employees will apply to that sum.

(40) Notwithstanding the provisions of clause (39) b, all requests for waiving reimbursement to the University of additional earnings during special studies program will be treated sympathetically, provided that a reasonable case can be made for such a waiver.

Other University Funds

(41) To assist employees in the delivery of their special studies program objectives, employees may access, within the terms, conditions and/or guidelines that apply:

- a. Academic Pursuit funds; and/or
- b. External research grant funding.

(42) Funds can be used to support reasonable actual expenses in accordance with the University [Travel & Entertainment Policy](#) and [Procedures](#). Funds may not be used to support additional expenses due to the academic employee being accompanied by their dependants or private costs during periods of annual or other leave taken in conjunction with the program.

(43) These funds must not be used for any items or expenses that have already been provided from another source, i.e. special studies program travel grant.

(44) Internal Research Funds are not available to off-set expenses associated with the special studies program.

Advance on Financial Assistance

(45) The financial assistance, as provided in these procedures, may be claimed by arrangement with HR Services prior to departure subject to the following:

- a. where outside financial assistance is received after the financial assistance has been paid but prior to departure, the employee will be required to refund, before leaving, any excess allowance subject to policy conditions; and
- b. if any subsequent change occurs to earnings or outside financial assistance on which the initial financial assistance has been based, an appropriate financial adjustment will be made at the completion of the special studies program. Where the adjustment requires an employee to refund part or all of the financial assistance, repayment shall be made forthwith or, at the employee's request, by deductions from salary over a period of up to six months.

Consultancies and Paid Employment

(46) Where consultancies and paid employment or other income-earning activity, including teaching, are proposed in conjunction with a special studies program, the employee will submit details of the work to be undertaken (with comment on its relevance to the agreed program), and the salary, fee, grant or other assistance to be received by the applicant and the proportion of the program duration to be taken up in such activity. This information shall be included in the application to the special studies program, or provided without delay should such a proposal develop after the application has been submitted or approved.

(47) The University's [Outside Work Policy](#) applies to activities undertaken and income received (whether in cash or kind) while undertaking the special studies program.

Section 5 - After Special Studies Program Approved

(48) After receiving advice that the special studies program has been approved, the employee may commence planning for the program. Employees are to book and pay for their own travel.

(49) Finalised travel itineraries are to be referred to HR Services with a completed [Special Studies Information Form](#) indicating:

- a. dates of annual leave to be taken during the program and confirmation that the associated leave request has been submitted in [MyHR](#);
- b. travel details;
- c. any additional leave, subject to clauses (15) to (17), immediately prior to or immediately after the program; and

d. financial assistance requested.

(50) Completed documents are to be received in HR Services prior to the employee commencing the program. If salary payment in advance is required, documents should be received in HR Services at least four weeks before the special studies program commences.

(51) Travel grants and contribution to dependents airfares will be paid as an allowance with and in addition to normal pay and taxed accordingly.

Section 6 - Conditions

Reports

Special Studies Program Reports

(52) Within two months of completing the special studies program, the employee will submit a written report on the work undertaken to their Supervisor and Head of Work Unit who will forward the report with comment to the relevant Executive Member or Vice-Chancellor, as appropriate. The report should normally be between 1,500 and 2,000 words in length, and must include:

- a. a written abstract of the report (about 500 words);
- b. an explicit evaluation of the scholarly outcomes in relation to the specific goals and projected outcomes in the application that was approved;
- c. details of future publications or equivalent that are expected to be submitted within 12 months of return from leave; and
- d. a specific statement on the value of the knowledge gained in relation to the member's work with the University.

(53) Where applicable, before forwarding the report to the Vice-Chancellor, the relevant Executive Member will add evaluative comments on the outcomes from the period of special studies program.

(54) The report and abstract will be made available to the University Council on request and a copy must be forwarded to HR Services.

Financial Report

(55) At the conclusion of the special studies program the employee is required to provide the relevant Executive Member a written statement either:

- a. detailing earnings and other assistance, including the precise value of travel and accommodation, received by the employee; or
- b. confirming that no such earnings or assistance have been received.

(56) If the special studies program report and/or associated financial report/statement is not received from the employee within two months of their return to work, the employee will be required to reimburse the financial assistance provided by the University.

Taxation

(57) Employees participating in the special studies program are reminded that in order to comply with the Taxation Commissioner's requirements they must keep a record of their activities which clearly demonstrates, consistent with Australian Taxation regulations, when they were engaged in University work and when on leave.

(58) Any additional liability arising from the employee's failing to keep adequate records will be seen as the personal responsibility of the employee.

Records of Leave

(59) Employees are required to keep a record of their activities during periods of special studies program that clearly demonstrates when they were engaged with University work and when they were on leave.

Insurance

(60) The University's Corporate Travel Insurance covers employees on authorised University Business travel (including the special studies program) up to a maximum of 180 consecutive days.

(61) Corporate Travel Insurance is subject to certain terms, conditions and exclusions. Employees should familiarise themselves by reviewing the [Corporate Travel Insurance website](#) and contacting the [Insurance Office](#) with any questions prior to their departure.

(62) Corporate Travel Insurance does not cover accompanying dependants. Employees are responsible for arranging and paying for any additional travel insurance. University funds cannot be used.

(63) Employees with more than 10 working days personal travel (this includes any periods of annual or other leave) are responsible for obtaining their own travel insurance for the personal component of the travel prior to leaving Australia.

(64) Any trip greater than 180 days must be advised to the Insurance Office at least three (3) weeks prior to departure. Staff are responsible for paying any additional costs in the event the trip extends beyond 180 days due to personal travel arrangements.

University Equipment

(65) Before taking University equipment off campus employees must complete a [University Equipment Off-Campus Authority](#) and email the approved authority to Assets Accounting to enable the Asset Register to be maintained and to ensure insurance cover is adequate.

Voluntary Separation within One Year following Special Studies Program

(66) Where an employee resigns or retires within one year of returning to duty after the conclusion of the special studies program, they will be required to repay, on a pro-rata basis, either all or a portion of any financial assistance provided by the University. In special circumstances, this requirement may be waived by the Vice-Chancellor.

Section 7 - University Records

(67) All documentation relating to an employee's special studies program shall be placed on or copied to their personnel file in HR Services.

Status and Details

Status	Current
Effective Date	20th April 2020
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Approval Authority	Head, Governance Services
Approval Date	20th April 2020
Expiry Date	Not Applicable
Responsible Executive	Kim Franks Vice President (People and Culture)
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