

# Special Studies Leave

## Section 1 - Policy Statement

### Part A - Policy Declaration

(1) The Special Studies Leave Policy sets down the framework and principles relating to the University's special studies leave provisions, including the requirements and responsibilities of academic employees involved in the process.

### Part B - Policy Description

#### Objectives

(2) The purpose of special studies leave is to strengthen the University by fostering the intellectual and professional development of its academic employees consistent with the University's strategic objectives and commitment to equal opportunity.

#### Scope

(3) This policy applies to fixed term or continuing academic employees.

### Part C - Content and Implementation

(4) Special studies leave is granted as a privilege and not as a right. The University regards this leave as a means by which academic employees can engage in a period of continuous scholarship and/or a period of professional practice appropriate to the employee's employment responsibilities in order to enhance their research productivity, teaching practice, professional practice, artistic developments and/or qualifications. This leave is regarded by the University as an investment in the future and not a reward for past performance.

(5) Within the broad parameters set by this policy, special studies proposals will be considered in relation to the scholarly performance and development needs of the individual, the requirements of the University's academic programs, and the University's strategic priorities. The range of approved programs is therefore expected to reflect the breadth and diversity of the University's objectives and take account of the target groups identified in the University's Equity and Diversity Plan.

#### Eligibility

(6) An employee will not be granted special studies leave until a minimum of two years' service has been completed at Southern Cross University.

(7) Academic employees appointed on a continuing basis, or on a fixed-term basis of four years or more at the commencement of a period of special studies leave, may make application for paid leave and financial assistance in accordance with this Policy. Where an employee has been employed on consecutive fixed-term contracts, aggregated service will be calculated to establish the four year requirement, provided no breaks in service of more than two months occur between contracts.

(8) An employee must also be able to return to the University's service for at least a 12 month period, within the terms of their appointment, following completion of the period of special studies leave. Service for this purpose does not include long service leave unless specifically authorised by the Vice Chancellor.

(9) Special studies leave eligibility accrues at the rate of one month for every six months of service, up to a maximum of 12 months eligibility after six years of service. The total period of qualifying service will be calculated up to the date when the period of leave begins.

(10) Special studies leave eligibility does not accrue while on special studies leave.

(11) The taking of any period of special studies leave, no matter how long, will reduce to zero all accrued eligibility for special studies leave. Accrual will recommence at the rate of one month for every six months of service upon commencement of normal University service following completion of a period of special studies leave.

## **Qualifying Service**

(12) In determining qualifying service for special studies leave 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 study leave or similar program in their former institution(s).

(13) Recognition of prior service is dependent upon there being not 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 qualifying service for special studies leave purposes. Where there has been a break of more than two months, no period of prior service will be recognised.

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

(15) Absences on long service leave, special studies leave and leave without pay will not count as service in determining eligibility for special studies leave.

## **Duration of Leave**

(16) The period of leave granted 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, periods of special studies leave will not exceed six months. Only in very exceptional circumstances will periods of more than six months leave be approved by the Vice Chancellor.

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

(18) Periods of special studies leave are inclusive of annual leave accruing during the absence.

## **Sick Leave Whilst on Special Studies Leave**

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

## **Location During Special Studies Leave**

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

## Special Studies Leave Committee

(21) Applications will be considered by a Special Studies Leave Committee, comprising:

- a. Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor: Chair;
- b. Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research);
- c. Chair of the Academic Board or nominee; and

(22) Four Committee members, including at least one female and one male, are required for a Committee quorum. If necessary, the Vice Chancellor or nominee may appoint an additional member to address these requirements.

(23) The Committee will make recommendations, including a priority listing, to the Vice Chancellor.

## Application Process

(24) HR Services will call for applications for Special Studies Leave. Applicants are required to consult with their supervisor and Head of Work Unit before submitting an application.

(25) Employees are required to complete a [Special Studies Leave Application](#) and provide the following information:

- a. a copy of the Academic Staff Portfolio;
- b. a copy of the study leave report from the most recent period of study leave taken, including supervisor comments;
- c. dates on which the last three PMDRs were completed; and
- d. any other documentation in support of the application, i.e. letters of invitation from other institutions.

(26) Applications for special studies leave will be considered on the basis of the quality and merit of the proposed program. 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; and
- b. align the program's outcomes with the University's Strategic Plan, the School or Work Unit Plan, the 3 Year Staff Activity Profile and PMDR goals; and
- c. identify the expected benefits to personal and professional development.

## Approval Process

(27) The Committee will assess applications in the context of the value to the employee and to the University of the proposed program and the appropriateness of the place or places where it is to be pursued.

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

(29) For second and subsequent periods of special studies leave, the Committee will look at the value to the employee and the University of the previous period of special studies leave.

(30) 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, no more than one period of special studies leave of six months duration will be considered to support progress toward completion of a postgraduate award.

(31) Approval of an application will at all times be subject to Work Unit and University convenience. Accordingly, special studies leave is to be organised so it causes minimum disruption to normal teaching and research programs. Approval is therefore conditional upon:

- a. the proposed special studies leave 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 the specific approval of the relevant Executive Member and available Cost Centre 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.

(32) Approval for special studies leave will be contingent on the completion of Section D in the Special Studies Leave Application: 'To Be Completed by the Head of Work Unit'. The relevant Head of the Work Unit will:

- a. include a statement concerning the academic merit of the special studies program, and the relevance of the proposed program to the University's strategic objectives and to the employee's agreed career projection as outlined in the Academic Staff Portfolio;
- 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 leave;
- c. 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
- d. include a statement on the financial impact of the proposed leave on the Work Unit and the strategy for dealing with it.

(33) Applicants will be informed of the reasons for rejection or amendment of an application by the relevant Executive Member following the decision of the Vice Chancellor.

(34) Once the Vice Chancellor has approved an application for special studies leave, minor changes may be made to the proposed leave program, but the changes are subject to the relevant Head of Work Unit and Executive Member's approval prior to commencement of the leave. Proposed significant changes will require the approval of the Deputy Vice Chancellor on the recommendations of the relevant Head of Work Unit and Executive Member.

## **Consultancies and Paid Employment**

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

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

## Financial Assistance for Special Studies Leave

(37) Employees proceeding on special studies leave 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 leave 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 proceeding on special studies leave will be granted financial assistance on the following basis. Staff on fractional appointments may apply for assistance on a pro-rata basis.

- a. Where employees undertake travel which contributes directly to the achievement of special studies leave objectives:
  - i. a travel grant to the value of the employee's return economy airfare by a reputable airline to the principal place of study leave. Where two or more periods of travel are detailed, the travel grant will only be paid for travel to the principal place of study leave;
  - ii. a contribution of up to 60% of the cost of dependents' return economy airfares to the principal place of the employee's study leave may be paid, provided the dependents are accommodated with the employee while absent on study leave for a minimum of six weeks; and
  - iii. the cost of library fees, bench fees etc. incurred by the employee while undertaking special studies leave.
- b. Where the employee receives earnings of the type referred to in clause (35) above, 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 (35)] 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 leave is taken; the cost of maintaining two dwellings where an employee must retain their normal residence for dependants who do not accompany them on special studies leave; and/or additional costs associated with the leave 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 clause (39)b then the normal Policy governing outside earnings by members of 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 while on leave will be treated sympathetically, provided that a reasonable case can be made for such a waiver.

## Advance on Financial Assistance

(41) The financial assistance, as provided in clauses (36) - (39), 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 clause (39)b; 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 end of the period of special studies leave. 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.

## **Insurance**

(42) An employee on special studies leave is covered by insurance for the duration of the absence as per the [Travel and Entertainment Policy](#).

(43) If the length of travel exceeds six months the employee must contact the Manager, Insurance and Risk Management ([insurance.risk@scu.edu.au](mailto:insurance.risk@scu.edu.au)) to discuss insurance requirements.

(44) Employees taking University equipment off campus must obtain prior approval from the relevant Head of Work Unit or Executive Member and report this approval to the Director, Financial and Business Services to enable the Asset Register to be maintained and to ensure insurance cover is adequate.

## **Reports**

### **Special Studies Leave Report**

(45) Within two months of return from special studies leave, the employee shall submit a written report on the work undertaken to their Supervisor 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.

(46) 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 leave.

(47) If a report is not received from the employee within two months of their return to the University, eligibility towards a further period of leave will not recommence until and from the time that the report is received.

(48) 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**

(49) At the conclusion of the special studies leave 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.

## **Taxation**

(50) Staff on special studies leave 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 personal leave.

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

## **Voluntary Separation Within One Year of Taking Special Studies Leave**

(52) Where an employee resigns or retires within one year of returning to duty after a period of special studies leave, they will be liable 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.

## **Records**

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

## **Part D - Delegations**

(54) The Vice Chancellor has the delegation to approve special studies leave applications for academic staff.

(55) The Nominated HR Manager has the delegation to approve payment in advance for travel grants associated with approved special studies leave applications.

## Status and Details

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| <b>Status</b>             | Historic                               |
| <b>Effective Date</b>     | 11th June 2014                         |
| <b>Review Date</b>        | 11th February 2017                     |
| <b>Approval Authority</b> | Vice Chancellor                        |
| <b>Approval Date</b>      | 6th June 2014                          |
| <b>Expiry Date</b>        | 2nd December 2014                      |
| <b>Head of Work Unit</b>  | Kath Drew<br>Director, Human Resources |
| <b>Enquiries Contact</b>  | HR Services                            |