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OVERVIEW

The purpose of the Special Studies Program (SSP) is to strengthen the University of New England by fostering the intellectual and professional development of its academic staff. SSP provides an opportunity to undertake an approved program of scholarly and research activity of mutual benefit to the University and academic staff. The capacity of proposed programs to contribute to the furtherance of the University's Strategic Plan and to produce research or scholarly outcomes that will contribute to the University's Research Profile will be important criteria in assessing any application.

This policy recognises the role of academic peer judgment in assessing the merit of programs and the capacity of the applicant to undertake, and produce outcomes from, the proposed program within the context of management of the overall resources of the cost centre.

The terms 'School', 'Head of School' and 'Pro Vice-Chancellor and Dean' shall refer to the 'organisational unit', 'the Director or equivalent', and the 'Pro Vice-Chancellor' most closely aligned to the unit.

POLICY

SSP may be undertaken by a staff member who can demonstrate that value will eventuate from such a program and that the obligations and commitments of the staff member to ongoing activities can be accommodated to the satisfaction of the Head of School. The program must be between three months and twelve months duration and may be either an external program or an internal program.

An External Program provides academic staff with the opportunity to:

- undertake, at another institution, sustained research and/or creative activity relevant to the research or academic directions of the University;
- develop research (particularly with government, commerce and industry, professional organisations, other institutions of learning and the community);
- obtain practical experiences in the workplace relevant to teaching responsibilities and research activities; and/or
- develop, maintain and improve professional networks nationally and internationally in order to contribute to the University's Strategic Plan.

To gain approval for an external program, a staff member must spend a minimum of two-thirds of the program away from Armidale.

An Internal Program provides academic staff with the opportunity to:

- undertake sustained research and/or creative activity relevant to the research or academic directions of the University;

- develop research (particularly with government, commerce and industry, professional organisations, other institutions of learning and the community);
- complete or make progress towards an additional higher qualification relevant to the applicant's University role; and/or
- carry out work to fulfil commitments to outside funding bodies or pursue research outcomes (for example on research data already accumulated or relevant to the University's commitment to local and/or regional engagement).

16.02.1 Subject to the University's overall financial circumstances, this policy specifies the terms and conditions under which approval may be granted to undertake a SSP.

16.02.2 Academic staff members are entitled to apply for SSP in accordance with the terms of this policy. Applications will be assessed on the basis of the overall strength of the program and the mutual benefit that the program will bring to the University and the staff member.

16.02.3 For each calendar year the Head of School, with the approval of the Pro Vice-Chancellor and Dean, will nominate the number of SSPs which could be accommodated during each semester.

Eligibility

16.02.4 Academic staff appointed on a continuing basis with three or more years of service may be eligible for SSP.

16.02.5 Where a staff member on a fixed term contract has an entitlement to apply for SSP included in their terms and conditions of appointment, and they meet the relevant criteria, they may apply for SSP. In such cases the fixed term contract must be of sufficient length to enable them to comply with the requirement to return to the service of the University following the completion of their SSP.

16.02.6 Academic staff appointed to fixed term positions, who are subsequently appointed without a break in service to a continuing position, may count continuous prior service towards eligibility for SSP.

16.02.7 Academic staff appointed to organisational units other than a School (e.g. the Teaching and Learning Centre), are eligible to apply for SSP.

16.02.8 Part-time staff in continuing positions may apply for SSP on a pro rata basis.

16.02.9 Recognition of prior service towards SSP accrual must be determined at the time of appointment to the University.

16.02.10 SSP accrues at the rate of two months for each full year of service, up to a maximum of twelve months.

16.02.11 If a staff member with an approved SSP is directed by the University to postpone the program, they will be permitted to undertake SSP in the next available period and will continue to accrue SSP above the twelve month maximum.

16.02.12 Periods of long service leave, leave without pay or SSP will not count as service for the purpose of SSP eligibility or accrual.

Duration of SSP

- 16.02.13** The period of SSP must not be less than three months or more than twelve months. The normal expected duration of a program will be six months. Applicants should plan to undertake SSP in terms of three month blocks, however, where a staff member teaches programs in non-standard teaching periods (eg. trimesters) a case may be made for varying this.
- 16.02.14** Applications will be examined critically and must be strongly supported by the Head of School with clear indications as to the effect on School activities and how teaching arrangements and research student supervision will be handled.

Leave While on SSP

- 16.02.15** The SSP application may incorporate a period of pro rata annual leave within the proposed SSP period (e.g. two weeks in a six month SSP). Such annual leave will be deemed to be part of the total SSP period.
- 16.02.16** Public holiday entitlements will be those applicable in the country in which the staff member is resident when the holiday occurs (rather than as gazetted for Australia).

Unforeseen interruptions in the SSP Period

- 16.02.17** While on SSP, and only in cases of extreme urgency, a staff member may be asked by the University to assist in a specific situation. In these circumstances the staff member shall have appropriate expenses paid.
- 16.02.18** A staff member on SSP may apply for leave (other than recreation or long service leave) as allowed for under University policies. Such leave will be deemed to be part of the total SSP period. This leave can be applied for through the Head of School.
- 16.02.19** Where more than three consecutive working days are lost to the SSP for unforeseen interruptions the staff member may apply to extend the SSP period or to have the days re-credited to their accrual.

Location

- 16.02.20** Staff seeking to undertake an external program are required to demonstrate the appropriateness of the location/s. Except in special circumstances, and with strong justification, SSP should not normally consist merely of a series of brief visits to a number of institutions or sites.
- 16.02.21** It is strongly preferred but not mandatory that the minimum period overseas be taken in one continuous block. External programs that involve splitting the period to be spent overseas must be specifically justified and will be considered as one program for the purposes of financial assistance.

Variations to Approved Programs

16.02.22 Minor variations

- Change of start and end dates of less than two weeks
- Inclusion of visits to additional institutions
- Attendance at extra conferences - under two weeks in total

Minor variations must be approved by the Head of School prior to submission to Human Resource Services.

16.02.23 Major variations

- Change of dates of SSP by two weeks or more
- Substitution of a different project for an approved project
- Substitution of location to another country or institution
- Cancellation of portion of program
- Additional location in another country
- Attendance at extra conferences – over two weeks in total
- Substitution of different type of location (eg. industrial rather than tertiary institution)

Major variations must be supported by the Head of School and approved by the Chair of the SSP Committee prior to submission to Human Resource Services.

Medical and Risk Assessment

16.02.24 Staff who have a current workers' compensation claim at the time of SSP must contact the Return to Work Co-ordinator in HRS prior to departure. Commencement of the SSP will be dependent on a medical clearance.

16.02.25 A staff member who has incurred a workplace-related injury while on SSP should:

- Seek medical attention from an authorised medical practitioner;
- Complete and submit a UNE Incident Report
- Notify the Return to Work Co-ordinator; and
- Notify the University's insurance officer.

All documentation, including medical certificates, must be forwarded to the appropriate UNE officer.

16.02.26 The University reserves the right to recall a staff member to Australia if the staff member has incurred a workplace-related injury overseas, and the University judges that the treatment of the injury can be managed more cost effectively in Australia.

16.02.27 A staff member on SSP may be required to change their itinerary or to return to UNE, if, in the view of the University the staff member is, or will be, exposed to significant risks to their well-being and safety by visiting a specific country or location during the SSP period.

16.02.28 Staff undertaking fieldwork must comply with the University's [Fieldwork Policy](#) where applicable. Prior to the commencement of any fieldwork the staff member must, as a minimum, submit a completed Fieldwork Risk Assessment form to their Supervisor for approval.

16.02.29 Staff members borrowing University equipment must obtain Head of School approval and report this approval to the University officer responsible for insurance matters to ensure that cover is arranged.

Financial Assistance

- 16.02.30** A staff member with an approved external SSP may apply to the Chief Operating Officer to access financial assistance to support travel and associated expenses. Staff on fractional appointments may apply for financial assistance on a pro rata basis.
- 16.02.31** A staff member applying for SSP must undertake to resume normal duties at the end of the SSP for an equivalent period of service to be eligible for financial assistance.
- 16.02.32** The value of such assistance will be as determined by the University from time to time and will be detailed in the attached schedule.
- 16.02.33** Financial assistance from the central SSP fund will only be available to staff who are undertaking an external program. Staff on an internal program may apply to the Head of School for financial assistance related to short term activities away from Armidale.
- 16.02.34** If a staff member and partner are both employed by the University and both apply to undertake a SSP, they shall be treated as separate applicants for financial assistance but may not claim the partner as a dependant.
- 16.02.35** Where, under the Study Leave Policy in force until 2007, a staff member received a payment in advance of accrual, the amount of the financial assistance available will be reduced accordingly.
- 16.02.36** Where the staff member's travel or other expenses are met from other sources, financial assistance is not available under this policy.
- 16.02.37** If a staff member takes SSP for a period of at least three months at an institution where UNE has an MOU or partnership agreement in place, an additional incentive payment of \$1000 may be applied for through the Vice-Chancellor's Strategic Initiative Fund (see paragraph 16.02.77).
- 16.02.38** A staff member must obtain the approval of the relevant University authority to access any University funds to apply toward their SSP (e.g., research grant funds).

Repayment of an SSP Debt

- 16.02.39** At the time of application for SSP staff members are required to give a signed undertaking that they will return to the service of the UNE and resume normal duties for at least the same length of time as the SSP period. The return to service requirement may be waived by the relevant PVC and Dean on the recommendation of the Head of School.
- 16.02.40** Where the staff member does not return to the service of the University for a period equivalent to the SSP period, he/she will repay to UNE any allowances or financial assistance (or appropriate proportion as determined by the PVC and Dean on the recommendation of the Head of School) received during the SSP period.
- 16.02.41** Prior to the commencement of SSP, the staff member will give irrevocable authority to deduct any monies owing as a result of SSP from salary or from any monies due to the staff member where employment ceases prior to completing the repayment.

External Funding

- 16.02.42** Staff may, with the prior permission of the Head of School, enter into arrangements with an external source to defray expenses incurred while on SSP. Such benefits may include grants, scholarships or fellowships and must be declared.
- 16.02.43** Where consultancies or other income-earning activities (including incidental teaching) are proposed in conjunction with SSP, the staff member shall submit details of the work to be undertaken (with comment on its academic appropriateness) any fee, grant or other assistance and the proportion of the SSP to be taken up in such activity.
- 16.02.44** Any source of external funding which includes a salary component (whether paid on a regular basis or as a lump sum) or a travel or living expenses component, must be declared.
- 16.02.45** The University's policy on outside work by academic staff members applies to activities undertaken and income received (whether in cash or kind) while on SSP (See [Paid Outside Work Policy](#)).
- 16.02.46** A staff member will not be entitled to financial assistance under this policy (including the payment of salary) where such external funding (other than Paid Outside Work) is available.

Taxation

- 16.02.47** All travel expenses incurred overseas must be substantiated.
- 16.02.48** The University may be liable for FBT on that portion of a travel grant which relates to any personal leave taken during the program. To comply with ATO requirements, a staff member in receipt of a University travel grant must keep a Travel Diary of activities that clearly demonstrate, consistent with ATO ruling MT 2038, when he/she was engaged in University work and when on personal leave.
- 16.02.49** If personal leave is proposed, the applicant accepts responsibility for any liability for FBT, including any additional tax liability arising from failure to keep adequate records. Any arising FBT paid by the University shall become immediately repayable by the staff member to the University.

Committee Membership

- 16.02.50** The SSP committee will have the following membership:
- Chair or Deputy Chair of the Academic Board or nominee (Chair);
 - Two academic staff members from each Faculty, nominated by the PVC/Dean - at least one of these will be at the level of Professor or Associate Professor;
 - One academic staff member from each Faculty, elected by the relevant Faculty.

Application

- 16.02.51** Applicants must demonstrate, and applications will be considered on, the merit of the project proposed, the capacity of the applicant to fulfil the aims of the program, the staff member's record of achievement (including outcomes from any previous SSP or study leave) and its relevance to University needs and strategies.

16.02.52 The applicant must provide:

- evidence that the proposed program fulfils one or more of the objectives of the SSP for either an External Program or an Internal Program;
- evidence that they are capable of carrying out the program in the form of a record of prior achievement;
- a list of all postgraduate students, for whom they are supervisor, indicating alternative supervisors for all candidates to cover the entire period of the program. (This requirement must be met even where the student is expected to complete before the commencement of the SSP);

or

strong justification to continue in a supervisory role for a particular student;

- a list of all committees (Academic Board, University, Vice-Chancellor or Faculty) of which they are a member, to enable replacements to be designated by the relevant Committee. Staff members are not required to attend any Committee meetings while on SSP.

16.02.53 The Head of School must certify that:

- School teaching and administrative commitments will be met without the appointment of additional staff or that there is funding relief available;
- all administrative and teaching related commitments, which would otherwise be covered by the staff member during the SSP period, will be completed prior to departure;
- where a staff member has responsibilities as a supervisor of candidates for higher degrees, alternative supervisors have been nominated (and have agreed in writing) for all candidates to cover the entire period of the program.

Approval

16.02.54 The members of the SSP Committee are available to advise any member of their Faculty on the content of their application.

16.02.55 Applications will be considered by the SSP Committee which will recommend:

- unconditional approval;
- approval with specified conditions;
- an opportunity to revise and resubmit;
- rejection of application.

16.02.56 Applicants will be provided with the reasons for rejection or for requiring an amendment or resubmission of an application.

16.02.57 All approvals to undertake SSP are absolutely conditional upon submission of all relevant documentation as outlined in the *Practices and Procedures* prior to commencement of SSP.

16.02.58 The SSP Committee will provide its recommendations on the academic merit of the program to the relevant Pro Vice-Chancellor and Dean who will make the final decision.

Report

- 16.02.59** Within two months of the return to UNE from SSP the staff member shall submit a report to the Head of School.
- 16.02.60** The report should include:
- sufficient detail on the work undertaken during the SSP period to impart an understanding of the experience;
 - a summary, in a chronological narrative form, of the activities undertaken, persons contacted or worked with and places visited;
 - the projected outcomes as set out in the application or an approved variation and an indication of whether those outcomes have been attained;
 - any specific unanticipated outcomes; and
 - a précis intended for the information of Academic Board and Council.
- 16.02.61** The Head of School will provide evaluative comments on the report to the staff member (who will acknowledge in writing that they have seen the comments) and forward the report and comments to the Chair of the SSP committee.
- 16.02.62** A copy of the report, together with the SSP Committee Chair's comments, will be forwarded to the Pro Vice-Chancellor and Dean for information.
- 16.02.63** If the report is not submitted within two months of returning to service, further SSP will not accrue until the report is received. Where there is an outstanding report, no further application for SSP will be considered.
- 16.02.64** In exceptional circumstances an extension on submission of the report may be applied for (in writing). The Chair of the SSP Committee may grant such an extension.
- 16.02.65** If the SSP Report has not been received from the staff member within six months of the return to UNE and no extension has been approved, disciplinary action may be taken against the staff member. Such action may range from initiation of Unsatisfactory Performance procedures to recovery of any financial assistance provided for the SSP.
- 16.02.66** The Chair of the SSP Committee will present a report to the Academic Board, on an annual basis, summarising the results achieved by all those who undertook SSP in the preceding calendar year. The report shall consist of the précis reports referred to previously.

Financial Report

- 16.02.67** On the conclusion of an external SSP the staff member shall submit to the Chief Operating Officer a written statement detailing any outside earnings and other assistance, including research grants, travel grants and/or scholarships, the value of travel and accommodation, received by the staff member over the duration of their SSP.
- 16.02.68** The University reserves the right to seek clarification of grants and earnings received while on SSP.
- 16.02.69** The University may seek repayment of the travel grant if, in its view, the financial assistance received is not consistent with University policy or with the goals of the SSP program as set out by the staff member.

Records

- 16.02.70** A copy of the report, together with the SSP Committee Chair's comments, will be placed on the staff member's personal file, together with all other documentation relating to a staff member's SSP.
- 16.02.71** A deliberate misrepresentation in an application or a report under this policy, or failure to make a good faith attempt to carry out the approved SSP plans may constitute insufficient performance, unsatisfactory performance or misconduct, depending upon the gravity of the case.

Practices and Procedures

The following practices and procedures are provided to facilitate implementation of the above policy. They do not form part of that policy:

Applications

- 16.02.72** Applications for SSP will normally be called twice a year and must be submitted on the “SSP Application Form” available from the Human Resource Services web site.
- 16.02.73** Applications must include the report submitted on the applicant’s last SSP or study leave, if applicable.
- 16.02.74** If the applicant is the Head of School, the relevant section of the application will be completed by the Pro Vice-Chancellor and Dean/Director.
- 16.02.75** SSP will not normally be granted unless approval of the application is recommended by the Head of School.
- 16.02.76** Where a Head of School or Pro Vice-Chancellor and Dean opposes an application he/she shall inform the staff member whether it is the program and/or timing of the SSP that is not supported. In these circumstances the comments submitted by the Head of School and Pro Vice-Chancellor and Dean are to be signed by the applicant. The applicant has the right of rebuttal.
- 16.02.77** Application for financial assistance for SSP at an institution with which UNE has an MOU or partnership arrangement may be made through the PVC-Dean to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and must include the following documentation:
- evidence of institution’s link with UNE;
 - copy of itinerary from SSP application;
 - proof of acceptance of visit by host institution;
 - copy of letter approving SSP;
- A list of such institutions is available from the International Office.
- 16.02.78** The travel grant and, where applicable, the MOU or partnership institution incentive payment, may be claimed as required for the payment of airfares or other legitimate expenditures by arrangement with University authorities prior to departure.
- 16.02.79** All travel expenses incurred must be substantiated. This involves obtaining receipts or similar documents from the supplier of goods or services that shows the nature and date of the expense. The ATO will no longer accept per diem claims for deductions in excess of the reasonable amount without substantiation. The requirement of substantiation applies to all travel expenses incurred overseas. Retention of receipts or similar documents is therefore essential for audit purposes.

Prior to Departure

- 16.02.80** Staff members proceeding on SSP must contact the relevant officer in Human Resource Services (HRS) at least four weeks prior to departure to ensure that all requirements have been met.
- 16.02.81** Documentation granting permission to undertake travel for SSP will not be approved until consultations and the following documentation have been submitted:

- A8 – for all domestic and overseas travel
- Overseas Travel Declaration
- Travel Agent's itinerary
- Insurance form – for overseas travel in excess of two months
- Up-to-date itinerary, with contact details
- Return to University Service
- Authority to deduct monies to repay SSP debt on termination of employment
- Multipurpose Leave form (if requesting annual leave during SSP)

Further Information

Human Resource Services, ext 3612, ext 3417

¹ Policies, procedures etc which will be superseded by this document:

Study Leave Policy, Ref: 03/2535, 12 November 2007

Schedule 1: Levels of Financial Assistance

Type of financial support	Amounts per SSP
Support for airfares for staff member	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Up to \$1,000 for travel in Australasia2. Up to \$2,800 for travel elsewhere overseas
Living Away from Home Expenses	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Staff member only: \$600 per month2. Staff member accompanied by dependants: \$1000 per month