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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.

SSP is a privilege not a right. A decision as to whether SSP can be supported must be made by the Head of School on the basis of the resources in the School before the merits of the application can be considered. In supporting applications for SSP, Heads of Schools must be mindful of the School's teaching and supervisory obligations.

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 criteria in assessing any application will be the capacity of proposed programs to contribute to furthering the University's Strategic Plan and to produce research or scholarly outcomes that will contribute to the University's profile.

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 will usually be between three months and twelve months duration.

An SSP must provide 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);
- obtain practical or developmental experiences in the workplace relevant to teaching responsibilities and research activities;
- develop, maintain and improve professional networks nationally and internationally in order to contribute to the University's Strategic Plan.
- 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 School'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** Staff undertaking SSP will be required to sign an undertaking to return to normal duties for a period of time equal to the period of time spent on SSP.
- 16.02.4** Where a staff member resigns from UNE while on SSP, that staff member will usually be expected to return to UNE to resume normal duties within one week of giving notice until the expiration of the period of the notice.

Eligibility

- 16.02.5** Academic staff appointed on a continuing basis with three or more years of service may be eligible for SSP.
- 16.02.6** Where a staff member on a fixed term contract has an entitlement to apply for SSP included in the terms and conditions of appointment, and meets the relevant criteria, that staff member may apply for SSP. In such cases the fixed term contract must be of sufficient length to enable the staff member to comply with the requirement to return to the service of the University following the completion of SSP.
- 16.02.7** 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.
- 16.02.8** Academic staff appointed to organisational units other than a School (e.g. the Teaching and Learning Centre), are eligible to apply for SSP.
- 16.02.9** Part-time staff in continuing positions may apply for SSP on a pro rata basis.
- 16.02.10** Recognition of prior service towards SSP accrual must be determined at the time of appointment to the University.
- 16.02.11** SSP accrues at the rate of two months for each full year of service, up to a maximum of twelve months.
- 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 usually be less than three months or more than twelve months. The normal expected duration of a program will be six months.
- 16.02.14** Applications will be examined critically by the University's SSP Committee 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.

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).

Location

16.02.17 Staff seeking to undertake SSP are required to demonstrate the appropriateness of the location/s.

Committee Membership

16.02.18 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 Pro Vice-Chancellor and 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

16.02.19 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.

16.02.20 The applicant must provide:

- 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, supervised by the applicant indicating the arrangements made to ensure continuation of supervisory duties and that there will be a supervisor on campus who is responsible for all liaison duties (this requirement must be met even where the student is expected to complete before the commencement of the SSP);
- 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.
- contact details in the event they need to be consulted on matters that affect them, such as future teaching allocations.

16.02.21 The Head of School must certify that:

- School and administrative commitments during the period of SSP will be met;
- all necessary preparatory work for the period immediately following the SSP period will be completed prior to departure;

- Adequate provision has been made for the supervision of all postgraduate students for whom the applicant is responsible.

Approval

- 16.02.22** The members of the SSP Committee are available to advise any member of the relevant Faculty on the content of the application.
- 16.02.23** On considering applications the SSP Committee will recommend:
- unconditional approval;
 - approval with specified conditions;
 - an opportunity to revise and resubmit;
 - rejection of application.
- 16.02.24** Applicants will be provided with the reasons for rejection or for requiring an amendment or resubmission of an application.
- 16.02.25** Approval to undertake SSP is conditional upon submission of all relevant documentation as outlined in the *Practices and Procedures* prior to commencement of SSP.
- 16.02.26** 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.
- 16.02.27** Applicants must acknowledge affiliation with UNE in all publications resulting from SSP.

Variations to Approved Programs

16.02.28 Minor variations

- Change of start and end dates of less than two months
- 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.

16.02.29 Major variations

- Change of dates of SSP by two months 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.

Unforeseen interruptions in the SSP Period

- 16.02.30** The University may direct a staff member to postpone a period of SSP. Before doing so, the University will consult the staff in the affected area and explain the reason. If such a direction is issued, the staff member will usually be permitted to undertake SSP in the next available period and will continue to accrue SSP up to the maximum of twelve months.
- 16.02.31** 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, such as renegotiating a memorandum of understanding with an overseas institution. In these circumstances the staff member shall have appropriate expenses paid.
- 16.02.32** 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.
- 16.02.33** 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.

Medical and Risk Assessment

- 16.02.34** 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.
- 16.02.35** 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.

- 16.02.36** 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.
- 16.02.37** A staff member on SSP may be required to change the 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 well-being and safety by visiting a specific country or location during the SSP period.
- 16.02.38** 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 the Supervisor for approval.

Insurance

- 16.02.39** The University will cover staff members engaged on official University business travelling within Australia or Overseas up to six months (180 days).

External Funding

- 16.02.40** 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.
- 16.02.41** 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 used in such activity.
- 16.02.42** 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.
- 16.02.43** The University's [Paid Outside Work Policy](#) applies to activities undertaken and income received while on SSP. A staff member who accepts a position with an external body which will entail more than 7.5 hours per week paid work in a private capacity is not eligible for SSP.

Taxation

- 16.02.44** Financial assistance paid by the School as travel allowance form part of the staff member's assessable income and will be recorded on the staff member's Payment Summary for the year in which they were paid.

Report

- 16.02.45** Within two months of the return to service at UNE after SSP the staff member shall submit a report through the Head of School to the Chair of the SSP Committee.
- 16.02.46** 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.
- 16.02.47** 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.
- 16.02.48** 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.

- 16.02.49** A supplementary report may be submitted to the Chair of the SSP Committee at any time.
- 16.02.50** 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.
- 16.02.51** 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.
- 16.02.52** 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.
- 16.02.53** 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

- 16.02.54** 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 during SSP.
- 16.02.55** The University reserves the right to seek clarification of grants and earnings received while on SSP.
- 16.02.56** 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.

Repayment of an SSP Debt

- 16.02.57** 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 Pro Vice-Chancellor and Dean on the recommendation of the Head of School.
- 16.02.58** Where the staff member does not return to the service of the University for a period equivalent to the SSP period, the staff member will repay to UNE any allowances or financial assistance (or appropriate proportion as determined by the Pro Vice-Chancellor and Dean on the recommendation of the Head of School) received during the SSP period.
- 16.02.59** When signing the SSP application, the staff member will give the University irrevocable authority to deduct any balance owing under 16.02.58 from salary or from any monies due to the staff member where employment ceases prior to completing the repayment.

Records

- 16.02.60** 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.
- 16.02.61** 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, as defined in the Workplace Agreement, depending upon the gravity of the case.