

# Fitness to Study

## What it means and how we can get it right

A short introduction

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### At a glance

While there is no sector-wide definition of Fitness to Study, the term broadly refers to **the policies and procedures higher education institutions (HEIs) have in place to manage complex, sometimes high-risk, student cases** in which a student's ability to continue on their programme of study (or return, following an interruption) may be in question.

**Without effective Fitness to Study procedures**, cases can become increasingly frustrating for everyone involved. Levels of risk and complexity, or problematic behaviours, can escalate.

**With effective procedures in place**, the institution's response to complex and high-risk cases can be more controlled, with appropriate escalation in the levels of intervention according to each case. Both the student and colleagues involved are clearer on the actions that will be taken and when.

This short introduction to Fitness to Study provides some **initial reflections on effective protocols**. We also invite you to join our Fitness to Study community of practice group to explore good practice through working together with counterparts in other HEIs.

## What is Fitness to Study?

'Fitness to Study' broadly refers to the policies and procedures higher education institutions (HEIs) have in place to manage complex, sometimes high-risk, student cases - in which a student's ability to continue on their programme of study (or return, following an interruption) may be in question. This set of policies and procedures goes by different names in different institutions; it may be referred to as 'Support for Study' or a 'Serious Welfare Concern Escalation Protocol'.

A common feature of Fitness to Study cases is that they tend to involve a student **presenting a level of risk or complexity that is too high for an HEI to manage through their normal support procedures**. In higher education, we provide many types of support to students - such as additional academic advice, disability support and reasonable adjustments, or clinical support through counselling services. If this standard provision is insufficient to manage the risk or complexity being presented, this is generally when colleagues look to their Fitness to Study procedure for support on how to best respond.

The risk, in these cases, can come in many forms. It may involve risk that a student presents to themselves. Or it may be risk that a student presents to other students, such as other students on their course or in their accommodation, or to staff members or other third parties. These cases can also involve challenging behaviours, which may be related to an underlying and often undiagnosed mental health condition in some cases. Often, a feature of Fitness to Study cases can be that they involve a history of attempts to provide different types of support to a student, sometimes without success in turning the situation around.

### Common features of Fitness to Study cases

Student presents a serious level of risk to themselves

Student's behaviour is having a serious negative impact on other people

Spiralling behaviour

Student may or may not have a diagnosed mental health condition

Earlier attempts at supporting the student may not have worked



## What happens without good Fitness to Study procedures in place?

One of the things that happen in situations in which we do not have good Fitness to Study procedures in place, is that we can find ourselves making more and more accommodations or allowances for a student, in the hope that these will help the student turn things around. This may involve trying different forms of support, providing more and more support, or overlooking certain behaviours and actions by the student, all geared towards being supportive with the best of intentions. In some cases, we may start to feel we are running out of options for support.

For the student themselves, for colleagues, and for others with whom the student interacts, frustration levels may have built up as the situation has continued. At some point, an HEI may reach a point where they opt for a swift change of tempo, from a supportive process to what is suddenly a more formal or more restrictive process. For a student, this sudden switch from support and tolerance to a formal process can feel disorientating and can exacerbate their difficulties. It might also leave an HEI open to challenge; if all of these adjustments were able to be made in the past, a student may wonder (or ask, in the context of a complaint) why similar adjustments cannot continue to be made in the future.



# What does a good approach look like?

It can be helpful to think about there being four main levels of effective response, when Fitness to Study procedures are working well:

- 1 First instance response:** At the earliest stage of a student indicating risk or showing problematic behaviours towards other people (for example, in a seminar or in a meeting with a member of staff), we want colleagues to be able to pick up on the issue, confidently challenge any inappropriate behaviours, and signpost the student into support in a bounded and effective manner. Although this level of response may not always be included in a Fitness to Study policy, it can be a key aspect to get right, to help colleagues across the HEI feel confident in responding with confidence as early as possible.
- 2 Case coordination:** It is likely that, when a student is presenting a level of risk or complexity in one aspect of university life - say in an accommodation setting - the same student may also be presenting the same level of risk and complexity to others. At this level of response, we can bring together the relevant people from different parts of the university to coordinate ongoing actions. Sharing experiences and joining up on how best to respond to a student can be a helpful way to communicate expectations consistently and manage the situation effectively.
- 3 Creation of a formal plan:** Where the coordinated response and provision of support is not resulting in change, we may need to escalate to a different procedure and call in the student for a meeting to agree next steps. Working together with the student, a formal agreement such as a 'behavioural management plan' or 'risk management plan' then sets out what the student needs to change, their responsibilities, and what support will be provided to them, as well as ensuring the student is clear on the consequences if things do not change in the future.
- 4 A formal panel:** A further escalation is required in the most serious cases, often through convening a formal Fitness to Study panel (which operates within a clear policy and regulatory framework). The panel completes a thorough and fair assessment of the situation and is remitted with the ability to impose different types of restrictions or practical measures required to respond to the particular case - such as restricting access to university premises, restricting IT access or imposing a forced suspension.

A tiered approach along these lines, combined with clear protocols supporting good practice at these different levels of response, will help an HEI to respond in a proportionate and timely way to different levels of risk and complexity. It also provides greater clarity and transparency to the student and to any staff members involved.

## Working together to enhance our procedures

We invite you to participate in our **new Fitness to Study community of practice group**. The group provides an opportunity to work with counterparts in different HEIs, over the course of six sessions, to explore good practice in relation to Fitness to Study, share your own experiences of implementing Fitness to Study policies, and review current practice in your own institution.



Learn more about our Fitness to Study community of practice group: [plinthhouse.com/fts](https://plinthhouse.com/fts)