

Exceptional Leave Policy

Version control		
Document name	Exceptional leave policy	
Owner	GP Training Academic Council	
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Version	Version 1.0	
Approved	GP Training Academic Council	
Date	30 April 2025	

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1.0 Purpose

This policy outlines what constitutes exceptional leave per the Trainee Leave Policy. The reader is referred to the Trainee Leave Policy for information on how to apply for an exceptional leave.

2.0 Scope

This policy applies to the national programme of GP training, its constituent schemes, and clinical learning environments affiliated with those schemes.

3.0 Policy statement

3.1 Definitions

The Trainee Leave Policy defines exceptional leave as follows:

“Non-statutory leave, which trainees may take in exceptional circumstances with the agreement of the scheme directing team (SDT) and the employer. This includes but is not limited to:

- Out of programme research experience
- Career break
- Out of programme clinical experience
- Out of programme for approved clinical training

Exceptional leave from the training programme is agreed by the trainee with the training programme in the first instance, then with the employer.”

“Acting Up as a Consultant” is not a recognised exceptional leave activity.

Occasions where exceptional leave is granted are likely to be uncommon given the short length and nature of the training programme. Trainees may normally be approved for one exceptional leave during their GP training and for a maximum of one year.

3.2 Obtaining approval

To take exceptional leave, a trainee must obtain approval from both the Irish College of GPs (the College) and their employer.

Exceptional leave or an extension to an existing exceptional leave will only be considered prospectively. Under no circumstances can an absence from training be retroactively approved as exceptional leave.



A trainee must submit an application for an exceptional leave to the SDT who will ensure its completeness before putting it forward to the GP Training Directorate for review and decision. Approval from the GP Training Directorate does not guarantee approval from the employer. It is the trainee's responsibility to get approval from their employer for an exceptional leave. The College will not advocate to the employer on behalf of the trainee to facilitate the approval of an exceptional leave.

Employment contract related issues around an exceptional leave are to be dealt with by the trainee directly with their employer. In particular, the HSE have strict rules around the approval of career breaks for non-consultant hospital doctors (NCHDs). Trainees should seek the advice of their respective employer's HR department for advice on their eligibility and on all statutory rights and contractual arrangements.

Under some conditions, described below, the GP Training Directorate may award credit toward CSCST. The quantum of time recognised by the College is not negotiable.

Per the Trainee Leave Policy, the minimum standard for an application for an exceptional leave is 6 calendar weeks. However, trainees should make every effort to submit their application to the SDT at least 12 calendar weeks before the proposed start date to allow ample time for review and, in the event of approval, also to request approval from their employer. This will permit the employer time to consider the request for exceptional leave, and, if approved, to prepare for a seamless transition (e.g. manage coverage, on-call rota, etc.).

Trainees who undertake an exceptional leave without approval or who exceed the time approved will be exited from the GP training programme in accordance with the Disciplinary Action Policy or will be required to resign from the programme as the case may be and will be required to re-apply with the next cohort if they wish to return to training.

3.3 Criteria for exceptional leave

The criteria are:

- The leave period will coincide with the training year and other programme requirements so as to not disrupt progression in the training programme and to reduce administrative burden on the schemes and employers (July to July);
- Generally, a trainee cannot take consecutive exceptional leaves. However, the GP Training Directorate has discretion to consider mitigating circumstances and approve exceptional leaves where there are sound educational reasons to do so. (For example, a trainee may be required to undertake time out of programme for clinical experience in preparation for out of programme research experience to undertake a PhD degree);
- Exceptional leave cannot immediately follow a period of extraordinary statutory leave except in circumstances where a period of ill-health prevents the trainee from continuing their training and they have exhausted their statutory entitlement;
- Relevance to the trainee's future as a general practitioner, training rotation numbers, service requirements, etc.

3.4 Eligibility to apply for exceptional leave

- Can be taken after completion of Year 2 of the GP Training programme. Occasions where exceptional leave is approved for trainees earlier in their training are likely to be rare given the length and nature of the GP training;
- The trainee is reported to be progressing as expected or faster than expected by the Competency and Progression Committee (CPC) (Recommendation A or D);
- The trainee has been offered a placement related to their application for exceptional leave and, if applicable, approved for funding.

3.5 Types of exceptional leave

Here is an overview:

Categories of exceptional leave	Maximum time permitted	Credit toward CSCST	Examples
Out of programme for clinical experience	1 year	0	Working in the developing world
Out of programme approved clinical training	1 year and may be extended to 2 years at ND discretion	Up to 1 year	Secondment to another training programme e.g. sister programme in a European country
Out of programme research experience	3 years	Up to 1 year	Research or academic post in a recognised academic GP department in a university toward a degree
Career break	1 year	0	Care of a relative; medical treatment (could apply same criteria as IST requests); representing Ireland in the Olympics

3.6 Out of programme for clinical experience (OOP-CE)

CE may be approved for a trainee to gain clinical experience which may benefit the trainee, e.g.

- Enhance clinical experience and skills related to the curriculum so that they may experience different working practices or gain specific experience in an area of practice;
- Contribute to recognised global health initiatives.
- The application for leave should detail the rationale for the request and the specific capabilities to be acquired during the period of CE. It should also be supported by a letter from the organisation with whom the CE is to take place, such as an offer letter describing the role.
- A CE may be approved for a period of maximum one year. No credit will be awarded towards the GP training programme.

3.7 Out of programme approved clinical training (OOP-CT)

This facilitates trainees to step out of training to undertake approved clinical training outside of their GP training programme. This will normally be a maximum of one year. In exceptional circumstances it can be up to two years at the discretion of the National Director of GP Training.

CT may be for example a specialist training opportunity such as a clinical fellowship in Ireland or abroad or secondment to another training programme (e.g. a sister programme in a European country approved by the College.)

The trainee is required to include a support letter from the relevant College or Faculty they wish to enrol with in their application for exceptional leave.

3.7.1 Awarding credit for OOP-CT

Credit towards CSCST can be granted for a period of up to 1 year if the post is in a location recognised for training by the College and in a GP training programme. Credit approval depends on whether the training environments meet the standards set by the IMC for curriculum in the national GP training programme. Assessment of progress will be capability-based, rather than time-based. The period of recognition may be reduced if the training placement did not provide the expected capabilities.

3.8 Out of programme research experience (OOP-RE)

This category is utilised when a trainee wants to undertake a period of research in a recognised academic GP department in a university, leading to an MSc, MD or PhD. The trainee may apply for an RE for a period of up to three years.

Trainees who wish to undertake an RE must have their research programme agreed with their named academic supervisor. This should form part of the documentation sent to the SDT when requesting exceptional leave.

Both the trainee and the named academic supervisor must remain aware that normally a maximum of three years is agreed for RE. If a request to exceed this is to be made, such a request must be made to the ND at



least six months prior to the extension commencing. The request must come from the named academic supervisor, who must set out clear reasons for the extension request.

Trainees in their final training year will not normally be granted OOP-RE. Integrated / run-through academic programmes (e.g. ICAT) provide structured and protected academic time for trainees on programme and are not considered under this policy.

3.8.1 Awarding credit for RE

OOP-RE may count towards the trainee's CSCST up to 1 year only if it has been prospectively approved by the SD or ND and demonstrates achievement of capabilities defined in the relevant specialty curriculum. The total amount calculated depends on the nature of the research undertaken and its relevance to the GP training programme.

3.9 Career Break (OOP-CB)

A planned CB will permit a trainee to step out of the training programme for a designated and agreed period to:

- Manage domestic responsibilities such as caring responsibilities for dealing with serious illness in family members that cannot be accommodated through less than full-time training;
- Childcare responsibilities that cannot be accommodated through less than full-time training;
- Deal with a period of ill-health after having exhausted statutory leave entitlements; or
- Accomplish a clearly identified life goal which cannot be deferred until after CSCST is achieved
 - A clear project would need to be provided to support the application and evidence that it represents something akin to a once in a lifetime opportunity that would otherwise be missed (e.g. training to compete in the Olympics).

Taking a career break for travel or to work as a medical practitioner outside of the conditions under section 4.1 above will not be approved.

Periods of ill health should in the first instance be managed under the Trainee Leave Policy as extraordinary statutory leave. CB is an inappropriate way of managing health issues if statutory leave entitlement options have not yet been exhausted.

3.9.1 Planning and managing OOP-CB

CB can be taken with the agreement of the GP Training Directorate at their discretion. Limiting factors will include:

- The ability of the programme to fill the resulting gap in the interests of patient care and others on the training programme;
- The capacity of the programme to accommodate the trainee's return at the end of the planned break;
- Evidence of the trainee's ongoing commitment to and suitability for training;
- The impact of a gap in training on deskilling and any subsequent need for remedial training.

The GP Training Directorate has discretion to consider a second year of CB in exceptional circumstances on a case-by-case basis and they may take into account prior exceptional leave taken for other reasons. Any further extension beyond a two-year period out of training would not normally be approved (except when needed to cope with unusual domestic difficulties).

Trainees wishing to take a CB longer than one year will normally need to resign from the training programme and reapply in open competition for re-entry if they wished to return to GP training.

Trainees on CB must keep their SD updated on any activity or work that they undertake within their remit of holding a licence to practice.

Although trainees on a career break will be encouraged to keep up to date through attending educational events, there is no entitlement to study leave funding for this. Arrangements will be subject to local agreement. Since this is not prospectively approved training, it cannot be counted as credit toward CSCST but may reduce the remediation time upon return.

3.10 Impact of exceptional leave

3.10.1 Employer

It is the responsibility of the trainee to speak to their current employer to establish how their leave will affect their:

- Immigration/visa status;
- Continuous employment;
- Incremental progression;
- Parental leave entitlement;
- Employer contributions to superannuation;
- Any other employment matters.

3.10.2 Irish Medical Council

It is also the responsibility of the trainee to understand the impact of an exceptional leave on their registration with the Irish Medical Council (IMC).

3.10.3 The College

The Trainee's CSCST date will be reassessed on return to the GP training programme in the light of educational progress and the time left in programme.

A period of remediation may be necessary before the trainee returns formally to the programme. This will be at the discretion of the GP Training Directorate. For information on the process to return to training following a trainee's out of programme activity (extended leave), refer to the Policy on Managing Absences from Training and the Return to Training Procedures.

3.11 Progress report

Trainees on exceptional leave are expected to maintain contact with their SDT by notifying them of their intended return to training 6 months in advance and by providing reports on their time while out of programme. Trainees on career breaks are not required to provide a progress report.

The purpose of documenting performance during and out of programme activity is both to assess progress towards meeting the approved academic programme requirements (if applicable) and to ensure that progress is made so that return to the GP training programme is within the agreed timescale.

Once prospective approval of the posts and programmes has been obtained, it is still for the College to confirm whether the training (including relevant research) has been completed satisfactorily and satisfies the requirements of the curriculum when awarding credit towards a recommendation for CSCST.

3.11.1 Progress report for clinical experience

If the leave period is to gain clinical experience, CPC review continues and includes an indicative intended date.

3.11.2 Progress report for clinical training

If the trainee is on leave for approved clinical training where credit toward CSCST will be awarded upon completion, a routine assessment of progression should be made by the placement organisation.

3.11.3 Progress report for research experience

Trainees must submit an annual progress report to their SDT along with a report from their named academic supervisor. In addition, all trainees on an RE should have a formal assessment of academic progress, which is submitted as part of the documentation for the SDT as described above for joint clinical and academic programmes. The report must indicate whether appropriate progress in the research has taken place during the previous year and whether the planned date of completion of the research has changed. Any request for a potential extension to the leave will need to be considered separately by the ND.

3.12 Notification to the Irish Medical Council

Notification should be made through the DIME system via the employer and the College should notify the Medical Council through the Annual Returns process.

When a trainee is out of programme not attached to a training post on the DIME system they automatically revert to the general register. The suspension of their registration is a decision for the individual and in line with the Medical Council's guidance on same.

4.0 Related and supporting documentation

- Trainee Leave Policy
- Policy on Managing Absences from Training
- Trainee Exceptional Leave Application Form
- Return to Training Procedure
- Disciplinary Action Policy

5.0 Contact

Quality assurance and enhancement

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