



UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE

Probationary Policy

Parts of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 came into effect on 1 August 2025. These strengthen the legal duties of universities in relation to free speech and academic freedom. Regulation of the new duties is undertaken by the Office for Students (OfS), which has published regulatory guidance on the topic.

The University is fully committed to securing and promoting freedom of speech within the law for staff, students and visiting speakers in all activities relating to academic life. The University's [Code of Practice on Freedom of Speech](#) sets out the University's values, approach and associated procedures in detail.

This policy/guidance/information is currently being reviewed against the OfS' regulatory guidance. Any amendments arising from the review will be subject to approval being sought through the University's normal governance processes. In the meantime, **this policy is to be interpreted and applied in a manner consistent with the Code of Practice; in the case of any perceived conflict, the provisions of the Code of Practice will take precedence insofar as that is lawful and reasonably practicable.**

For further information on the new legislation, please see the [Governance and Compliance Division website](#).

Section	Page Number
1. Contents	2
2. Statement of Policy	3
3. Eligibility	3
4. Scope of Policy	4
4.1 Managing Probation	4
4.2 Probationary Periods	6
4.3 Induction and Professional Development	8
4.4 Mentors	8
4.5 Confirmation of Probation	9
4.6 Appraisal following Probation	9
4.7 Appointment Support	9
5. Procedures	10
6. Guidance and Additional Sources of Information	10
7. Policy Ownership and Status	10

2.

Statement of Policy

- The University regards its staff as its greatest asset and is committed to ensuring that all staff members reach their full potential in their roles. The probationary period plays an important part in this process and confirmation that probation has been passed is an important milestone for staff members.
- Probation is a formal arrangement at the start of an appointment during which the probationer has the opportunity to understand the requirements of their role and to demonstrate their suitability within a reasonable timescale. Their performance will be assessed and monitored throughout the probationary period and they should be provided with guidance and support to enable them to become an effective member of the University.
- The probationer is expected to engage fully in this process, ensuring that they complete induction in a timely manner and undertake training where required.

3.

Eligibility

- Subject to the exceptions below, this policy (and related probationary procedures) applies to academic, academic-related, research and assistant staff, whether on open-ended or fixed-term contracts, and whether established or unestablished.
- The term *academic staff* used in this policy means all academic offices (established) and comparable unestablished academic posts below the level of Reader (or Professor Grade 11 under the new academic titles structure [link to paper]), whether open-ended or fixed-term. An *academic office* is one listed in Special Ordinances under Statute C, Schedule C (i) 1.
- This policy (and related probationary procedures) is not applicable to Professors (Grade 12) and Readers (or Professors Grade 11 under the new academic titles structure), as appointment to these offices should only be made in cases where candidates have already achieved international recognition for their academic achievement and contribution.
- There may be occasions where the provision of a probationary period for an appointment is not appropriate (for example, for some fellowships or when appointing an individual to a similar post from a comparable academic institution). In these instances, guidance should be sought from the relevant School HR Team¹.
- In the case of academic staff, where doubt arises as to which probationary procedure should apply, the matter should be referred to the Director or Assistant Director of Human Resources. If a resolution cannot be found, the matter will be decided by the Chair of the HR Committee on behalf of the General Board or, if circumstances require it, by the General Board on advice of the HR Committee.

¹ The term *relevant School HR Team* used throughout this policy (and related probationary procedures) refers to the HR Teams allocated to Schools, UAS and Non-School Institutions.

- In the case of academic-related staff, where doubt arises as to which probationary procedure should apply, the matter will be decided by the Council or General Board, as appropriate, on the advice of the HR Committee.
- Where a member of unestablished staff has already worked for the University for more than one year and is transferring from a post to another within the University, the Appointment Support procedures may be more appropriate than probation (see para 4.7 below).
- This policy should be read together with the procedures relating to specific staff categories which can be found at section 5 of this policy.

4. Scope of Policy

4.1 Managing Probation

- The probationary process is managed by the probation reviewer. This is the Head of Institution², although, depending on the size of the department or faculty and the nature of the probationer's job role, the Head of Institution may delegate these duties to another member of staff, for instance the probationer's line manager, supervisor or Principal Investigator. However, in these instances, the Head of Institution will retain overall responsibility for the probationary process and will decide (or recommend as appropriate) whether to confirm the appointment or otherwise.
- At the start of the probationary period, the probation reviewer should draw attention to:
 - the applicable probationary arrangements;
 - the key duties of the role;
 - the standards of work required;
 - goals to be achieved within specified deadlines;
 - particular areas of work to be given priority;
 - the expectation to promote the University's value of mutual respect;
 - standards expected around time-keeping, attendance, communication, relationship building, strategic focus, people development, innovation and change and negotiating and influencing, as relevant to the role;
 - any areas where particular care of sensitivity is needed.
- Thereafter the probation reviewer is responsible for ensuring that a probationer completes induction in a timely way after taking up their appointment; for providing guidance and support during the probationary period; and for monitoring and assessing performance throughout. They should meet with the probationer at appropriate intervals to discuss progress and identify areas for training and development and they should also ensure that a mentor is identified where appropriate.
- A written record of feedback and any steps required of the probationer, should be kept using the templates where indicated in this policy and procedures.

² The term *Head of Institution* used throughout this policy (and related probationary procedures) refers to Heads of Departments and of other academic institutions; Chairs of Faculty Boards not divided into Departments; and the administrative Heads of Institutions.

- For successful completion of probation, there must be clear evidence that the probationer has been performing according to the relevant criteria for the role and at a level appropriate in the University context. The evidence required will depend on the staff category, for instance, holders of an academic office under the Academic Career Pathways scheme (research and teaching) are required to undertake research; teach and/or develop researchers³ and demonstrate service to the University and to the academic community. Further details on performance criteria can be found in the probationary procedures at section 5 below.
- It is important that the probationary period is managed effectively to ensure that a probationer is given the best opportunity to succeed in their role. Where a probationer does not complete probation successfully and their appointment is terminated as a result, this is a dismissal in law and the University must be able to demonstrate that the probationary procedure was conducted properly and fairly.
- Accordingly, assessment of performance should be fair, even-handed and evidence-based and the probation reviewer is responsible for ensuring that there is clear documentary evidence of review meetings and appropriate support during the probationary period.
- In assessing performance, consideration should be given to any contextual factors which may have affected the probationer's ability to perform to their full potential (for instance, caring responsibilities, periods of maternity/paternity/adoption leave, bereavement, ill health or injury, medical treatments or a disability).
- Where the probationer has indicated that they are disabled within the meaning of the Equality Act 2010, the probation reviewer should take care to ensure that reasonable adjustments are made to the workplace and/or working arrangements so that the probationer is not at a substantial disadvantage when compared to a non-disabled person. Probation reviewers should refer to the University's policies regarding disability and employment for further guidance and information in these circumstances.
- Should a probationer feel that formal and final assessments are not being conducted in a fair or timely manner or that sufficient support has not been available to them during their probationary period, they should raise this with their line manager or with the relevant School HR Team without delay.
- Probation reviewers can find practical guidance on how to support and assess probationers in the University's Practical Guidance for Probation Reviewers, which is intended to be a toolkit for institutions.
- For the avoidance of doubt, instances of misconduct will usually be dealt with under the relevant disciplinary procedure rather than the probationary procedure, although any disciplinary warnings may be taken into account when assessing the probationer's overall suitability for a role under the probationary procedure.

³ This would include post-doctoral researchers where relevant.

4.2 Probationary Periods

- Except for specified exceptions (see Section 3 above), all staff should be given a probationary period, which will be confirmed in their individual contract of employment. Probationary periods vary depending on the staff category, seniority and purpose of the role. The probationary period will be as set out below unless otherwise specified in the contract of employment.
- Where a probationer is on secondment during the whole or part of their probationary period, it may be appropriate to adjust the length of the probationary period to allow for assessment of performance in their substantive post.
- Probationary periods may be extended or curtailed, depending on the circumstances. Further details of these arrangements are contained in the probationary procedures referred to at Section 5 below.

Academic staff on the Research and Teaching Academic Career Pathways scheme

- The probationary period for the holder of an academic office will be **5 years** unless it is reduced (to a period of not less than 3 years) or waived, on the recommendation of the Selection Committee and subject to the approval of the Head of School. An example of where it may be appropriate to waive probation would be where the holder of the academic office has held a senior academic position at another university and has already acquired relevant skills and experience.
- The probationary period for the holder of a fixed-term academic office will be appropriate to the length of the fixed term.
- Notwithstanding the above, the probationary period of the holder of an academic office in the School of Clinical Medicine, who is appointed for a fixed term of 4 years, shall be 12 months.
- Probationary periods for comparable unestablished academic posts are set out below:

Appointment Duration	Length of Probation Period
Up to 1 year	6 months
More than 1 year and up to 2 years	1 year
More than 2 years and up to 4 years	2 years
More than 4 years	3 years

Academic staff on the Teaching and Scholarship Academic Career Pathways scheme

- The probationary period for open-ended academic staff on the Teaching and Scholarship Academic Career Pathways scheme, who are on Grade 9 or above will be 3 years unless it is reduced (to a period of not less than 2 years) or waived, on the recommendation of the Selection Committee and subject to the approval of the Head of School. For academic staff in the School of Clinical Medicine or clinical academics in other schools, it will be 5 years unless it is reduced (to a period of not less than 3 years) or waived, on the recommendation of the Selection Committee and subject to the approval of the Head of School. An example of where it may be appropriate to waive probation would be where the member of staff has held a senior academic

position at another university and has already acquired relevant skills and experience.

- The probationary period for open-ended academic staff on the Teaching and Scholarship Academic Career Pathways scheme, who are on Grades 6 to 8 will be 2 years unless it is reduced (to a period of not less than 1 year) or waived, on the recommendation of the Selection Committee and subject to the approval of the Head of School. An example of where it may be appropriate to waive probation would be where the member of staff has held an academic or equivalent teaching position at another university and has already acquired relevant skills and experience.
- Probationary periods for fixed term posts on the Teaching and Scholarship Academic Career Pathways scheme are set out below:

Appointment Duration	Length of Probation Period Grade 9 and above	Length of Probation Period Grades 6-8
Up to 1 year	6 months	6 months
More than 1 year and up to 2 years	1 year	1 year
More than 2 years and up to 4 years	2 years	2 years
More than 4 years	3 years	2 years

Academic-related and Assistant staff

Probationary periods for academic-related and assistant staff are set out below:

Appointment Duration	Grade	Length of Probationary Period
Up to 3 months	All (including ungraded)	None
More than 3 months but less than 1 year	All (including ungraded)	3 months
1 year or more	Grade 1-3	3 months
1 year or more	Grade 4-7	6 months
1 year or more	Grade 8+	9 months

Research Staff

Probationary periods for research staff are set out below:

Appointment Duration	Length of Probationary Period
Up to 3 months	None
More than 3 months but less than 1 year	3 months
1 year or more	6 months

4.3 Induction and Professional Development

- Induction is an essential part of probation and comprises local and central induction as set out below. The probation reviewer is responsible for ensuring that the probationer completes induction within the specified timescales, and that a copy of a completed induction checklist (HR24) is retained.
- *Local induction:* The probation reviewer should arrange a structured local induction programme commencing at the start of the appointment. This is essential to ensure that new staff members settle into their role and it is considered to be a major contributory factor in the retention of new staff. This programme should also assist academic staff to understand the objectives of their individual institution and the expected standards of excellence required to build a successful career at Cambridge.
- *Central induction:* this consists of an online induction programme and attendance at a face-to-face 'Welcome to New Staff' event. The 'Welcome to New Staff' event includes a welcome address from a senior member of the University; information about the collegiate system; informal networking opportunities; and an exhibition of services available to staff. General information on induction can be found on the University's induction pages <https://www.induction.admin.cam.ac.uk/>.
- In addition, a tailored induction programme for new academic staff is provided through the 'Academic Life at Cambridge' programme. This includes an annual welcome event and access to key resources and updates via Sharepoint: <https://universityofcambridgecloud.sharepoint.com/:f:/r/sites/HR/ppd/events/Shared%20Documents/Academic%20Life%20at%20Cambridge?csf=1&e=IN6xei>. Postdoctoral staff will find bespoke induction support at the webpages of the University's Office for Postdoctoral Affairs at <https://www.opda.cam.ac.uk/further-support/inductions>.
- Guidance, templates and checklists to assist institutions in planning and delivering an effective induction programme can be found at the University's induction webpages, <https://www.induction.admin.cam.ac.uk/guidance-managers>.
- Further to induction, the University places great emphasis on the development of its staff and offers a range of opportunities as part of a Development Programme, including an Introductory Seminar on opportunities available. Further information can be found at the University's Personal and Professional Development webpages at <https://www.ppd.admin.cam.ac.uk/>. The University's Researcher Development Programme can also be found at <https://www.rdp.cam.ac.uk>.

4.4 Mentors

- The probation reviewer should wherever possible assign an appropriate colleague to act as a buddy to the probationer, to help them familiarise themselves with the department, its procedures, the location of key equipment and sources of help and information.
- A mentor may also be identified at this stage as a means of providing structured support to a member of staff, outside of the probationary review process. It is particularly relevant for academic members of staff to be assigned a mentor, but can also be appropriate for staff in academic-related, assistant and research posts. Please see the University's mentoring web pages at <https://www.hr.admin.cam.ac.uk/policies-procedures/mentoring-information-new-staff> and mentoring scheme for Postdocs at <https://www.opda.cam.ac.uk/further-support/mentoring> for more information.

4.5 Confirmation of Probation

- The process of managing the probationary period and confirming the appointment or otherwise is contained in the probationary procedures for specific staff categories, set out in Section 5 below.

4.6 Appraisal following Probation

- Once probation is successfully completed, the University's Staff Review and Development Scheme sets out a framework for appraisals and is part of an ongoing review process. The first review should take place within a few months of the end of the probationary period (once a decision has been made to confirm the appointment).
- As this process is intended to be forward-looking, the appraiser will agree an action plan that is in line with the strategic and operational needs of the institution and will address the training and development needs of the individual. Details of the scheme can be found at <https://www.hr.admin.cam.ac.uk/policies-procedures/staff-review-and-development>.

4.7 Appointment Support

- Where an existing unestablished member of staff, who has worked for the University for more than one year and who has successfully completed their probationary period in one role, is transferring to another, it may be appropriate to follow an Appointment Support process rather than apply a further probationary period.
- The Appointment Support process offers a structured approach where that staff member can receive support and feedback on performance and the University can assess their suitability for the post. It is recommended to be between three and six months, depending on the duration of the appointment, in order to fully assess the skills and experience of the staff member and to provide support and training.
- It is the responsibility of the Head of Institution to manage this process, although depending on the size of the department or faculty and the nature of the job role, the Head of Institution may delegate these duties to another member of staff, for instance the staff member's line manager, supervisor or Principal Investigator.
- The Head of Institution, or their delegate should hold a preliminary one-to-one meeting with the staff member soon after they start their new role, at which the duties of the post, mutual expectations and any support and development needs will be discussed.
- The Head of Institution, or their delegate will hold further progress meetings throughout the Appointment Support period; for example, two further progress meetings and one final review meeting over the period, provided that progress is satisfactory.
- The Head of Institution, or their delegate will hold a final review meeting at the end of the appointment support period to be recorded on the Appointment Support Review Form.
- On the basis of a successful final review meeting, the Head of Institution, or their delegate, will provide written confirmation of completion of the Appointment Support process.

- Where the staff member has not met the required standard during the Appointment Support period, despite reasonable training and support, the situation will be considered within the context of the relevant capability policy.
- Depending on the seriousness of the concerns around performance and the potential impact on the school or institution, the Head of Institution or their delegate, after consulting with the relevant School HR Team, may curtail the Appointment Support period early, in order to engage the relevant capability policy.

5.

Procedures

The University has probationary procedures in place for specific staff categories. For the relevant procedure, please click on the links below:

[Probationary Procedure for Academic Staff](#)

[Probationary Procedure for Academic-Related, Assistant and Research Staff](#)

[Probationary Procedure for Academic Staff in the School of Clinical Medicine and clinical academics in other schools](#)

6.

Guidance and Additional Sources of Information

Policies and Guidance	Templates and Documentation
Practical guidance for Probation Reviewers [insert link]	Appointment Support Review Form [insert number]. Confirmation of Appointment Letter (HR30)

7.

Policy Ownership and Status

- This policy is not contractual. It will be reviewed by the HR Division on a regular basis and amendments may be made in the light of any changes in legislation or operational requirements.

Version	Summary of Amendment	Date
V1	New Policy	01/10/21