Special Studies Program Procedure

Section 1 - Summary

(1) This Procedure outlines the application process and other requirements for eligibility for the Special Studies (SSP) Program, and must be read in conjunction with the Special Studies Program Policy.

Section 2 - HESF/ASQA/ESOS Alignment

(2) Higher Education Standards Framework: Standard 3.2 Staffing.

Section 3 - Scope

(3) This Procedure applies to all matters associated with the application and approval of SSP applications to eligible staff.

Section 4 - Definitions

(4) Supervisor: refers to the line manager responsible for the staff member's VU Develop plan.

(5) Academic staff: refers to academic and research academic staff Levels A-E other than academic sessional as per the Enterprise Agreement.

Section 5 - Policy/Regulation

(6) Special Studies Program Policy

Section 6 - Procedures

Part A - Summary of Roles and Responsibilities

Roles	Responsibilities
Staff Member	Ensure the application for SSP is submitted before the closing date.
Supervisors	Provide advice during the planning stage and agreement to the proposed SSP once it is finalised.
Deputy Vice-Chancellor Enterprise and Digital	Accountable for content, compliance and adherence to this procedure.
Chief People Officer or nominee	Responsible for the operational implementation of this procedure.

This policy document may be varied, withdrawn or replaced at any time. Printed copies, or part thereof, are regarded as uncontrolled and should not be relied upon as the current version. It is the responsibility of the individual reading this document to always refer to Victoria University's Policy Library for the latest version.

Department Head (for instance Executive Dean or nominee, Institute or Centre Director or nominee)	Endorse the submission of the application.

Part B - General

Purpose

(7) The Special Studies Program releases a staff member from normal duties for periods of one month up to a maximum of six months to pursue planned projects/activities which:

a. align to the Universities Strategic Plan and aligned plans (such as Research with Impact Plan),
b. clearly benefit both the University's national and international scholarly and research reputation and/or community service/engagement,
c. align with the individual's VU Develop plan, and,
d. benefit the individual's work performance and career development.

(8) These projects/activities can be pursued under one or more of the following themes:

a. Learning and Teaching including the VU Block Model and scholarship of teaching,
b. Research with Impact,
c. Academic Citizenship and Engagement, including service to the University and engagement with industry or the community,
d. Productivity Enhancements (professional staff only).

(9) The granting of SSP is merit based and is a competitive process.

(10) The number of Special Studies Programs approved in any year may be limited by the University's budgetary considerations.

Eligibility

(11) Academic and professional staff at level HEP 9 or above who;

a. are currently employed on a 0.5 time fraction or greater,
b. have completed their VU Develop Plan in the preceding year,
c. have completed their mandatory compliance training modules,
d. have completed at least two years of service (or its equivalent in broken periods of service) at Victoria University, and,
e. have a contract which extends at least one year from the date on which the application for SSP is made should they have a fixed term appointment.

(12) The use of SSP to support the completion of a PhD will be limited to a single SSP period and this should normally be towards the end of the staff member's candidature unless otherwise agreed with the Deputy Vice-Chancellor in the respective Portfolio, and be accompanied by a statement of support from the applicant's principal supervisor for their PhD studies.

(13) Applications from professional staff below HEP 9 may be considered in exceptional circumstances where a persuasive case is made.

This policy document may be varied, withdrawn or replaced at any time. Printed copies, or part thereof, are regarded as uncontrolled and should not be relied upon as the current version. It is the responsibility of the individual reading this document to always refer to Victoria University's Policy Library for the latest version.

(14) Staff members on formal performance management plans are ineligible to apply for SSP.

(15) SSP leave is accrued at the rate of one month for half a year of service and up to six months after three years of service.

(16) A subsequent period of SSP will not normally be considered until at least twelve months has elapsed after resuming normal duties following the conclusion of any previous SSP period.

(17) A request to postpone an approved SSP application is subject to the Department Head approval or the relevant Vice-Chancellor's Group member in the case of professional staff.

Part C - Conditions of SSP

(18) A staff member on approved SSP is expected to resume full normal duties at the University for a time not less than the period of the SSP, on its completion.

(19) If the staff member does not comply with this requirement, repayment of salary, allowances and an amount equal to the employer superannuation contribution paid during the period, or a pro rata proportion of the amount, is to be made to the University within one month from when the breach occurred.

(20) A staff member who has completed a period of SSP must submit a report on the activity/project no later than six weeks after the completion of the period, using the SSP Report template located on the People and Culture SharePoint page.

(21) The report must contain sufficient detail to enable the success of the SSP project/activities to be assessed. If the SSP as reported differs significantly from the approved program, reasons for the variation must be given. The Department Head will be required to sign off and comment on the report, especially on the extent to which the aims of the approved program have been achieved.

(22) The report, including the Department Head comments, which must have been reviewed by the staff member, must be submitted by the Department Head to the Chief People Officer for inclusion on the staff member's personnel file and uploading to the VU intranet for publication.

(23) Failure to submit a satisfactory report within six weeks of returning from SSP will preclude the staff member from consideration for further SSP and will be considered a serious breach of duties.

(24) The University expects high quality outcomes and the development of professional expertise from all periods of SSP. For this reason, these outcomes will normally be considered when assessing an academic staff member's application for promotion or a professional staff member's application for an advertised position.

(25) It is the responsibility of the Department Head to manage staff absences on SSP but generally not more than 5-7%, calculated over a three-year baseline, of eligible staff members of a college/area/department may be on SSP in any one semester/at any time.

Part D - Criteria for Assessment

(26) Eligible staff may apply for the Special Studies Program under any of the categories listed in clause (8) above.

(27) The number of SSP's approved in any year may be limited by the University's budgetary considerations.

(28) Applications will be assessed, as part of a competitive process, on the merit of the application reviewed against the criteria outlined in this document.

(29) The SSP Committee will assess application against the following criteria:

This policy document may be varied, withdrawn or replaced at any time. Printed copies, or part thereof, are regarded as uncontrolled and should not be relied upon as the current version. It is the responsibility of the individual reading this document to always refer to Victoria University's Policy Library for the latest version.

a. Clear and demonstrable outcomes that contribute to the achievement of priorities within the VU strategic plan and (where applicable) associated plans,
b. clear and demonstrable outcomes that contribute to the achievement of the University's scholarly endeavours, and/or research with impact, and/or community service and engagement and its national/international reputation in teaching and learning and/or research,
c. benefits to the staff member's department, work performance and career development,
d. the applicant's plans for ensuring that SSP outcomes are applied to the benefit of the University and to the individual on return to normal duties,
e. demonstration of the appropriateness of the place/s where it is proposed that the activity/program be pursued. The University recognises that there may be significant advantages for an individual in basing themselves at another institution for a period of time,
f. the staffing needs of the College/Department,
g. where relevant, the successful achievement of previous periods of SSP,
h. consideration of the staff member’s past achievements on an individual basis and considering any disruptions to their career,
i. consideration of relevance to the block model (and where appropriate dates must align with the block teaching calendar).

Part E - Period and Location of SSP Leave

(30) Applications for periods of SSP of between one and six months will be considered. Applicants are required to justify the length and timing of the proposed SSP, as mutually agreed with their Department Head.

(31) Periods of SSP are inclusive of public and University holidays occurring during the period.

(32) For their wellbeing, staff are expected to use any annual leave accrued during SSP within the period and indicate when it will be taken.

(33) Confirmations from host institutions must be attached to an application. Normally written confirmation from the host is required; however, an email confirmation indicating the sender's authority to make an offer (with a formal letter to follow) will be considered where the author's name, title and institution are clearly detailed. Where the appropriate confirmation is not provided, the application will not be considered.

Part F - Financial Support

(34) Allowances, as outlined in clause 43 below, for approved programs will be met from the SSP fund in the case of both academic, research and professional staff. The number of SSP programs approved in any year will be constrained by the funds available.

(35) SSP funding is not available to replace a staff member granted SSP. In respect of workload management it is incumbent on the relevant Department Head to consider workloads before supporting an application, and to manage any workload issues during the period of SSP.

(36) Ten percent of the salary which is payable to a staff member on overseas or interstate SSP may, at the staff member's request, be paid in advance with the remainder being paid as salary at ninety percent of the normal fortnightly rate.

(37) When an SSP allowance has been granted it will be available, on request, thirty days in advance of departure, unless earlier payment is approved by the relevant Department Head.

(38) For SSP based in Melbourne - While normal base salary is usually paid if the approved program is adhered to, the

University reserves the right to pay less than the normal base salary to a staff member, who while undertaking an SSP, will receive outside remuneration. A staff member will be eligible to earn up to 20% above their normal base salary only if the extra income is used to cover the costs associated with taking the SSP, over and above costs that might reasonably be expected to be incurred. Applicants must disclose any possibility of such remuneration in their application and declare it on their return.

(39) For SSP based outside of Melbourne - To offset costs associated with SSP, an applicant may wish to undertake some teaching, contract research or consulting during the SSP and accept remuneration for that work. In such a case the applicant is expected to make a case for the SSP under the appropriate categories and to state explicitly in their application the proportion of the total working time to be taken up by the income generating duties. Remuneration received from teaching, contract research or consulting will be considered under the terms of clause (41) below.

(40) Estimates of the proposed extra income and costs must be included in the SSP application. Upon return the staff member will be required to certify the accuracy of the estimates of extra income and costs incurred and provide a full statement of extra income and costs. Adjustments may be made to the base salary on the basis of extra income earned that was not expended on extra costs associated with the program. Decisions on adjustments to base salary will be made by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Enterprise and Digital on the recommendation of the Chief People Officer.

(41) Paid work that is not approved as part of the applicant's SSP, other than that set out in this Procedure may not be undertaken.

(42) The savings achieved by the University in withholding a proportion of a staff member's salary shall be credited to the staff member's organisational unit.

(43) In addition to their normal salary, members of staff granted SSP will receive an allowance as follows:

a. SSP in Melbourne
    i. Nil assistance
b. SSP outside Melbourne
    i. Contribution to economy return airfares for the staff member and accompanying dependents to the destination of their SSP to a maximum of $1,300 in Australia and New Zealand and $4,200 elsewhere. All airfares must be booked in accordance with the University's Travel Policy. These traveling allowances will normally only be paid if more than 50% of the proposed SSP is spent at the location away from Melbourne.
    ii. An allowance of up to $1,500 towards living costs for the SSP recipient and up to $1,500 for an accompanying spouse/partner and up to $800 for each dependent child, provided that the accompanying family members will be spending at least 50% of the time joining the recipient at the out-of-Melbourne location.
c. Per Diems are not available for costs associated with SSP activities.
d. Periodic reviews based on market standards, institutional considerations and feedback from stakeholders will form the benchmarking, reviewing, and indexing of allowances.

(44) Staff members will be able to take shorter, more frequent SSPs when appropriate, but only the first two in each six-year period will be supported by any travel or financial assistance.

Part G - SSP Application Submission

The Application

(45) Applicants must submit an electronic copy of their signed application to ssp@vu.edu.au by the nominated closing date.

(46) Applications must be signed by the relevant Department Head.

(47) Applications must include:

a. A completed application form (accessed via the People and Culture SharePoint page),
b. A document addressing the criteria in Part B of the SSP Procedure including details of any proposed income generating activities and costs, demonstration of record/achievements/outputs/impacts under relevant category headings,
c. A full curriculum vitae,
d. Supporting evidence such as the confirmation from a host institution or evidence of a book writing proposal, and
e. A copy of the report of the most recent SSP for those who have undertaken a program previously. For professional staff, a statement of previous VU supported professional development and the use made of it.

(48) It is a requirement for intending applicants to consult with their Department Head or nominee regarding their submission and the timing of their SSP. The Department Head comment, advice and recommendation will be provided to the applicant prior to submitting their application. It is the responsibility of the applicant to enhance or amend their application as a result of any advice they receive from their Department Head, Academic or Research peers or mentor.

(49) If the application includes a proposal to write a book, the applicant must provide evidence of a contract or advanced negotiations with a publisher. Where such evidence is not provided, the application will not be considered.

(50) An SSP application for accelerating the completion of a higher degree must specifically document the work to be undertaken and the outcomes to be achieved. At the conclusion of the SSP, the staff member's report must indicate the extent to which the work plan has been achieved and the contribution made to completion of the higher degree. Any reason for not achieving the intent of the program must be clearly documented as such a failure of achievement may adversely affect future applications for promotion.

Part H - University Special Studies Program Committees

(51) Applications for SSP from academic, research and professional staff will be considered by separate University committees. The role of the committees is to decide;

a. whether the application should be approved,
b. the period of SSP that should be approved,
c. the level of financial assistance to be provided, and
d. any variation to the proposal recommended prior to approval.

(52) People and Culture will designate an officer to attend the deliberations of the Committees for both Academic/Research and Professional staff, as an equity observer, and to have access to all documentation.

(53) The Committee for Professional staff applications will be appointed by the Chief People Officer and will comprise:

a. Chief People Officer or nominee as Chair,
b. A nominee of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Enterprise and Digital,
c. an elected professional staff representative on the Academic Board nominated by the Chair of Academic Board, and,
d. the Chief Student Officer or nominee.

(54) The Committee for Academic and Research staff applications will be appointed by the Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Chief Academic Officer and will comprise:

a. Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Chief Academic Officer or nominee as Chair,
b. Deputy Vice-Chancellor Enterprise and Digital or nominee,
c. Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Research & Impact or nominee,
d. One internal staff member nominated by the Chair of Academic Board,
e. One nominee of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Research & Impact,and
f. one nominee of the Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Chief Academic Officer.

(55) It will be the responsibility of the chairs of the SSP committees to ensure that due consideration is given to discipline and ensure gender balance in the committee.

(56) All SSP Committees must have a standing agenda item calling for declarations of actual, potential or perceived conflicts of interest. If a member of a SSP Committee has an interest such that a reasonable observer, knowing all the facts, could reasonably conclude that the interest could affect the decision or functioning of the Committee, the member must disclose the interest.

(57) Notification of an actual, potential or perceived conflict of interest should be made to the Chair of the Committee.

(58) If a declaration is made, the Committee must consider the relevant circumstances including the seriousness of the conflict, the risk that a conflict exists, the likelihood that decisions may be influenced, and the ability to obtain alternative suitable representation on the Committee.

(59) The response to a declaration may be to:

a. determine that the issue will not affect, or be perceived to affect, the functioning of the Committee;
b. require the individual to withdraw from the meeting for those proceedings directly affected by the potential conflict, or
c. request that the individual resigns from the Committee. The meeting will be deemed to still be quorate in such circumstances.

(60) Except for the Chair, SSP Committee members for both academic/research and professional staff committees will serve for a period of two years and a maximum of two consecutive terms. The Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Research & Impact may serve for a longer period at the Chair’s discretion.

(61) Unsuccessful applicants may request verbal feedback from the Chair of the committee.

(62) The SSP committees' decisions must be justified in a report submitted to the Department Head. The report must clearly state the committee's assessment of the merit of each of the applicant's proposed outcomes. The report to the Department Head should be presented within 10 working days of the meeting of the Committee.

Part I - Appeals

(63) A staff member whose application for SSP is unsuccessful may appeal against the decision in writing to the Chief People Officer, within one month of the date of notification. Applicants may appeal against SSP decisions only on the grounds that the Committee has not followed correct procedure, that is, has failed to comply with the provisions in the SSP Policy and these procedures.

(64) Appeals cannot be based on an applicant’s disagreement with the Committee’s decision or views regarding the merit of their application.

(65) The case will be considered by an SSP Appeals Committee appointed by the Chief People Officer and comprising:

a. a nominee of the Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Chief Academic Officer as Chair,

This policy document may be varied, withdrawn or replaced at any time. Printed copies, or part thereof, are regarded as uncontrolled and should not be relied upon as the current version. It is the responsibility of the individual reading this document to always refer to Victoria University's Policy Library for the latest version.

b. a Department Head as appropriate, who is not from the applicant's organisational unit, and
c. a continuing member of the academic or research staff or a member of the Professional staff of the division as appropriate, nominated by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Enterprise and Digital.

(66) The SSP Appeals Committee may consult with the Chair of the University committee, or with any other person who may be able to provide information on the process followed during the initial SSP Committee meetings.

(67) The decision to uphold or reject an appeal rests solely with the SSP Appeals Committee. In the case of an appeal that is upheld, the application will be referred to the original Committee for reconsideration.

Part J - General Advice and Support

(68) The University will provide general information to prospective applicants to assist them with the preparation of their application for SSP.

(69) Information will be available on the relevant intranet page and information sessions will be conducted on dates specified on the SSP SharePoint Site.

(70) Applicants are strongly encouraged to speak to their supervisor/manager for general advice.

Part K - Forms

(71) The application form and other specified templates/materials identified above are available from the SSP SharePoint Site.

Status and Details

Status	Current
Effective Date	4th October 2024
Review Date	4th October 2027
Approval Authority	Vice-Chancellor
Approval Date	4th October 2024
Expiry Date	Not Applicable
Accountable Officer	Lisa Line Deputy Vice-Chancellor Enterprise and Digital Lisa.Line@vu.edu.au
Responsible Officer	Simone Wright Chief People Officer +61 3 9919 5447
Enquiries Contact	Candi Luu P&C Co-ordinator +61 3 9919 8509

This policy document may be varied, withdrawn or replaced at any time. Printed copies, or part thereof, are regarded as uncontrolled and should not be relied upon as the current version. It is the responsibility of the individual reading this document to always refer to Victoria University's Policy Library for the latest version.