

COLLEGE OF SCIENCE AND ENGINEERING

SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

A common sense guide

At its best, University life is rich and rewarding. But all of us go through difficult times. We must all must work under pressure. We ask a lot of ourselves. If you find yourself struggling due to illness, an accident or bereavement, your Director of Studies (DoS) is available for help and support.* Your DoS is able primarily to offer academic advice and is only part of a network of student support, including the counselling service, the University Health Centre and the EUSA Advice Place**. Part of our commitment to you – as a member of our University community – is that we will go to lengths to help you if you are unfortunate enough to be troubled by circumstances beyond your own control. However we also must treat our students as adults and we expect you to take full responsibility for your own education at the University.

** If your DoS is away from Edinburgh, they will let you know when they'll be back and what you should do in their absence. If you are in any doubt, contact your School Teaching Organisation or Graduate School.*

*** See <http://www.tla.ed.ac.uk/resources/refguide/index.htm>*

Special circumstances (SC) denotes a formal process whereby students request (via their DoS) exceptional concessions related to specific pieces of course assessment on the basis of a verifiable medical problem, bereavement, or accident (or equivalent; see indicative list below). Considerable time and effort are involved in any SC submission: for the student, their DoS, administrative staff (who must log and process forms), and members of a Special Circumstances Committee that must consider requests for concessions prior to Examination Boards. A flowchart showing the procedure is attached.

The decision to apply for Special Circumstances should not be taken lightly. If you apply, your case must be truly 'special' and exceptional. Concessions are usually granted only if there is clear evidence of underperformance on a specific piece of assessment. You must write up a statement of your own case for SC, or help your DoS to write it, and take responsibility for gathering unambiguous evidence to back it. All of this takes time and effort to compile. Your time, especially in the run-up to exams, is extremely precious. It is best-invested – all else being equal – in revising.

It is extremely rare for submitted SC evidence to lead to a change in a course mark. The College guidance is that where marks are not available or not robust, a further opportunity for assessment may be given in cases where SC is accepted.

There is, for good reason, increasing concern nationally about the tendency for SC to be claimed as a sort of 'insurance policy' against poor assessment results. A task force at the University of Manchester was convened in 2008 after it was found that more than 25% of all students in some Faculties had claimed SC. The task force found that students interpreted repeated notices of deadlines for the submission of SC as encouragement to report 'every small setback'. It recommended 'a change in approach whereby students understand it is normal to experience problems of one sort or another as part of life and the university is not here to provide the solution'.

We are committed to the principle of equity in the treatment of all of our students. We consider all SC submissions individually and with great care. The relevant question we consider is not ‘did this circumstance perhaps negatively affect my performance?’ Rather, it is ‘would one expect this circumstance to directly negatively affect the performance of ANYONE who encountered it?’ We treat all SC that come without clear or sufficient evidence equally: as insufficient to grant concessions.

To be clear: we will do all we can to help students who are unfortunate and find themselves in legitimate difficulty. However we do expect students to fully consider whether the circumstances are truly exceptional and significant. We will grant no concessions unless SC are adequately documented and truly SPECIAL.

Legitimate grounds for SC are:

- a serious illness or injury* for which there is medical evidence**;
- an accident for which there is evidence in the form of (e.g.) a police, hospital or dentist report;
- the death or critical / significant illness of a member of your immediate family;
- a significant family crisis where there is evidence of acute stress caused;
- other unforeseeable events occurring on or close to exam dates or major coursework deadlines that have a direct and significant, negative effect on performance

**Disabilities are dealt with via procedures that are distinct from SC. The University’s Disability Office can provide guidance (<http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/disability-office>). Also excluding conditions for which formal adjustment has already been made.*

***It is your responsibility to notify your DoS (or Teaching Organisation) in writing of any SC and submit any required medical certificates or supporting documentation as early as possible, and no later than two working days after your last assessment. If you do submit it after this time, you must give a good reason why it is late.*

(Generally) inappropriate grounds for SC include:

- minor illness, such as a common cold or headache;
- occasional low mood, stress or anxiety not diagnosed as illness
- inefficient time management;
- failure, loss or theft of data, a computer or other equipment
- financial difficulties;
- commitment to paid employment, voluntary work or vacation work
- death of a pet;

Note: the above list is indicative. *University guidelines may be found at:*
http://www.docs.sasg.ed.ac.uk/AcademicServices/Guidance/Special_Circumstances_Students.pdf

College of Science and Engineering

If you feel that you have special circumstances* (SC): guidance for students

1. Inform your Director of Studies (DoS) as soon as possible and discuss it with him / her .



2. You and your DoS complete the College SC form, describing the nature of the SC, the course assessments affected, and attach evidence to support your case**.

Note: The SC form is available from the College web page.



3. Your DoS submits a copy of the form to the Special Circumstances Committees*** (SCC) for each of the courses affected.

Note: It is important that the SC form is submitted before the SCC meets, otherwise they might not be able to consider your case.

Dates of meetings of SCC and BoE are available from the College web page.



4. The SCC considers the severity of the SC and to what extent they may have impacted upon your assessment. It makes a recommendation to the Board of Examiners**** (BoE).



5. The BoE decides your final course mark or degree classification, taking into account the SC recommendation. This may include the following outcomes:

- (a) If the BoE feels that you have completed sufficient coursework or examination for it to come to a robust judgement on to what extent you have met the learning outcomes for the course, without taking into account the bits affected by SC, it can come to a final mark.
- (b) If the BoE does not feel it can come to a final mark, it can permit you to take the assessment again. (It may specify that this will not count towards the maximum number of resits permitted.)
- (c) If the BoE feels that evidence of achievement of the learning outcomes for the course is inadequate to adjust marks, it can come to a final mark and also refer the SC to a later BoE that decides on progression from one year to the next, or on degree classification. Such factors may be taken into consideration when the later BoE is considering borderline cases.
- (d) The BoE may adjust a final course mark (by up to 5 marks out of 100). This requires quantitative evidence for an adjustment and is a most uncommon outcome.
- (e) The BoE may consider that the extent or impact of the SC was not significant and may note the submission but take no further action.

*Special circumstances: Any personal circumstances which are clearly beyond the student's control and for which there is sufficient documentary evidence to show that these circumstances may have adversely affected a student's performance in an assessment.

**Such evidence may include (e.g.) a police, hospital or dentist report. Your DoS will treat this information sensitively and will only share it with your permission and only to those people who are required to know (e.g. SCC or designated College Officers).

***Special Circumstances Committee: A Sub-Committee of the Board of Examiners, usually a small number of experienced members of the Board, including the Convener, who review the SC forms submitted by DoSs.

****Board of Examiners: A Board of academic staff teaching on your courses, together with an External Examiner, who decide the final course mark or degree classification.