



Special Circumstances Policy

Purpose of Policy

The University should respond in an equitable and consistent way to requests from students for special circumstances to be taken into consideration for course, progression and award decisions made by Boards of Examiners.

Overview

The policy provides a definition of what constitutes special circumstances, sets out the guiding principles for the consideration of special circumstances, the role of the Special Circumstances Committee and the role of a Board of Examiners in dealing with special circumstances. It also provides details of the actions Boards of Examiners may take in response to special circumstances requests.

Scope: Mandatory Policy

The policy applies to undergraduate and taught postgraduate students, and to the taught components undertaken by research postgraduate students.

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Document control

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Special Circumstances Policy

1 Introduction

1.1 The University is committed to supporting its students. The University will seek to take account of illness, accident or other circumstances beyond students' control that have adversely affected their performance in assessment. Decisions about how to take account of these circumstances in individual cases are made by Boards of Examiners responsible for students' courses and programmes, following input from the Extensions and Special Circumstances (ESC) service and Special Circumstances Committees.

2 Definitions of special circumstances

2.1 Special circumstances are circumstances which are exceptional for the individual student, are beyond that student's control and for which there is sufficient evidence to show that they had a significant adverse impact on the student's performance in an assessment, or resulted in non-attendance or a non-submission for a scheduled assessment.

2.2 Examples of circumstances that the University is likely to accept include:

- Significant short-term physical illness or injury;
- Significant short-term mental ill-health;
- A long-term or chronic physical health condition, which has recently worsened temporarily or permanently;
- A long-term or chronic mental health condition, which has recently worsened temporarily or permanently;
- Death or serious illness of a person with whom the student has a close relationship;
- A long-term relationship breakdown, such as a marriage;
- Exceptional (i.e. non-routine) caring responsibilities;
- Experience of sexual harassment or assault;
- Experience of other types of harassment;
- Victim of a crime which is likely to have significant emotional impact;
- Military conflict, natural disaster, or extreme weather conditions;
- Severe financial difficulties;
- Exposure to a difficult/challenging home environment;
- Exceptional and significant change in employment commitments, where this is beyond the student's control
- Significant problems with access to teaching and learning materials, e.g. due to connectivity, power, or equipment issues;
- Catastrophic technical failure preventing submission of an online assessment by the relevant deadline;
- Lack of access to library resources where there are no viable alternatives.

2.3 Examples of circumstances that the University is unlikely to accept include:

- A long-term or chronic health condition (including mental ill-health) which has not worsened recently, or for which the University has already made a reasonable adjustment;
- A minor short-term illness or injury (e.g. a common cold), which would not reasonably have had a significant adverse impact on assessment;
- Occasional low mood, stress or anxiety;
- Circumstances which were foreseeable or preventable;
- Holidays;
- Pressure of academic work (unless this contributes to ill-health);
- Poor time-management;
- Lack of awareness of dates or times of assessment submission or examination;
- Routine commitments to paid or voluntary employment.

3 Requesting consideration of special circumstances

- 3.1 It is the responsibility of students to submit their application for consideration of special circumstances to the Extensions and Special Circumstances service using the online system as soon as possible and no later than the deadline for the relevant School published on the ESC web pages for each Semester. The ESC service will only consider accepting submissions after this deadline where students provide evidence of exceptional reasons for having been unable to submit on time. No late applications will be considered after the deadline for the relevant Semester published on the ESC web pages.
- 3.2 In their application, students should describe the circumstances, state when the circumstances affected them, and all assessments and courses affected. Students should ensure that they provide sufficient documentary evidence (see Section 6 below). It is advised that students consult their Student Adviser or Student Support Team when completing the application.
- 3.3 In their application, students are able to indicate whether they would wish to undertake a further attempt at assessment, if their application were accepted. The student's preference is not guaranteed to be offered, even where their application is accepted, but Boards of Examiners will consider students' preferences (where provided) where they are deemed relevant to the Board's decision regarding outcome.

4 Confidentiality

- 4.1 The University will treat the information provided by students as confidential in line with the University's Data Protection Policy, and will only share it with staff and External Examiners who have a legitimate need to access the information in order to consider the student's case or to provide students with support.
- 4.2 Students' applications for special circumstances may be shared with staff (e.g. Wellbeing Advisers and Student Advisers) who are not directly involved in the special circumstances process for the purpose of providing additional support.

5 Long-term or chronic physical or mental health conditions

- 5.1 The University supports students with long-term or chronic health conditions, including mental ill-health, if a student is deemed to be disabled as defined by the Equality Act 2010, by putting in place a 'Learning Profile' to provide reasonable adjustments to study and assessment support arrangements. Students are responsible for contacting the Disability and Learning Support Service (DLSS) to discuss the adjustments and support that they need.
- 5.2 Where a student has received reasonable adjustments in recognition of a long-term or chronic health condition, the ESC service would not support a case for special circumstances in relation to the condition, unless the condition has worsened significantly (whether temporarily or permanently) during the period relating to the special circumstances case. Where a student submits a special circumstances case on the basis that there has been a significant change in their circumstances, they must provide evidence regarding this change in their condition. Where a student has had reasonable opportunity to contact the Disability and Learning Support Service (DLSS) to discuss the adjustments they need for a long-term or chronic health condition, but has not done so, the ESC service would not support a case for special circumstances in relation to the condition.
- 5.3 Where students submit repeated requests for special circumstances relating to the same health condition, their School or the ESC service should advise them to discuss the adjustments and support that they need with the Disability and Learning Support Service (DLSS).

6 Evidence to support special circumstances applications

- 6.1 In order for the ESC service to accept a student's special circumstances application, the ESC service must be satisfied that the student has provided sufficient evidence regarding the circumstances and the impact they had on the student's performance in an assessment.
- 6.2 In all applications, students are expected to provide their own account of the circumstances. Wherever possible, students should also provide corroborating evidence from a third party. Students will not be expected to provide evidence confirming the death of another person. The following can be acceptable forms of evidence, although some will carry greater weight than others:

Greater weight:

- An independent assessment of the student's illness by a medical practitioner, obtained at or immediately after the time of the circumstances;
- Evidence from another professional service, e.g. Student Counselling, obtained at or immediately after the time of the circumstances;
- Written accounts from University staff who have directly witnessed the circumstances, or their impact on the student's wellbeing or ability to perform in assessment, e.g. Student Advisers, Wellbeing Advisers, Residence Life Wardens;

- Written account from University staff member whom the student has informed of the circumstances but who have not directly witnessed the circumstances, or their impact on the student's wellbeing or ability to perform in assessment; Written account from an independent third party from outside the University who directly witnessed the circumstances, e.g. notary;
- Documentary evidence from other sources, e.g. police report, legal documents.

Less weight:

- Self-certification form completed by the student describing medical circumstances, their timing and impact;
- Medical certification, or evidence from other professional services, which merely restates the student's own account rather than providing an independent assessment of the student's illness;
- Written account from the student's family or friends who have directly witnessed the circumstances, or their impact on the student's wellbeing or ability to perform in assessment.

6.3 The following are unlikely to be acceptable forms of evidence:

- Medical certification, or evidence from other professional services, obtained a significant period of time after the circumstances;
- Written accounts from the student's family or friends, if they have not directly witnessed the submitted circumstances or their impact upon the student.

6.4 In weighing the evidence, the ESC service should consider what evidence it was reasonable for the student to have obtained.

6.5 The strength of evidence required to support a student's special circumstances case is proportionate to the volume of assessment affected. So, if the submitted circumstances affected a single component of assessment with a relatively low weighting for a 20 credit course, the ESC service may be satisfied with relatively modest evidence, whereas if the submitted circumstances affected all components of assessment for a 40 credit course, the ESC service would require stronger evidence.

6.6 In some cases, General Practitioner practices may ask students to obtain written confirmation from the University that it requires medical documentation to support requests for consideration of special circumstances. A model letter that Schools may give to students whose GP practices need this is available at:

http://www.ed.ac.uk/files/atoms/files/special_circumstances_medical_request.docx

Any fee charged by a GP practice for the provision of medical documentation needs to be paid by the student. If students are in financial hardship and are not able to pay any fees for these GP letters, they should be encouraged to contact Scholarships and Student Funding Services.

www.ed.ac.uk/student-funding/financial-assistance

6.7 All written documentation must be submitted in English.

7 Membership and operation of decision-making bodies

Extensions and Special Circumstances (ESC) service

- 7.1 The ESC service will operate according to the guidance set out in the Special Circumstances Policy as well as the Taught Assessment Regulations.
<https://www.ed.ac.uk/student-administration/extensions-special-circumstances>

Special Circumstances Committees (SCCs)

- 7.2 Each School is responsible for having one or more Special Circumstances Committees (SCCs) to consider requests for consideration of special circumstances and report to its Boards of Examiners in relation to students on its courses and taught programmes. Schools may set up one SCC per Board of Examiners or SCCs which cover a number of Boards of Examiners.
- 7.3 To be quorate, a SCC will consist of an academic Convener along with at least two other members of staff, one of whom must be a member of academic staff (and the other of whom can be a member of academic or professional services staff). Schools can include additional members (from among academic or professional services staff), but should seek to keep the membership as small as is consistent with robust decision-making, in order to avoid providing sensitive information about students to more people than is necessary.
- 7.4 If a Board of Examiners is very small and wishes to operate as its own SCC, this requires College approval. The Board sets up a SCC as a sub-committee of the Board. The Convener of the Board of Examiners may also convene the SCC but this is not a requirement.
- 7.5 SCCs will meet before the relevant Board of Examiners meetings take place. SCCs can also conduct business by correspondence where it is necessary to consider cases submitted after the scheduled SCC meeting, as long as all decisions are confirmed by a quorate membership (see 7.3).

Special Circumstances Committees: expedited decisions

- 7.6 Where the ESC service has accepted an application from a student requesting disregarding of late penalties, or an extension to a coursework deadline of more than seven days (where this will not lead to a deadline beyond the end of the next examination diet), SCCs are able to make expedited decisions (i.e. in advance of the next scheduled meeting of the SCC). The Convener of the SCC (or delegated authority), acting with another member of staff with relevant expertise, has delegated authority on behalf of the Convener of the Board of Examiners to decide to disregard late penalties for submission of assessed coursework (see 10.2 c). Where an SCC is able to make an expedited decision on an application, it will do so within 10 working days of receipt of the application from the ESC service.

Boards of Examiners

- 7.7 The operation of Boards of Examiners (including quorum) is defined in the Taught Assessment Regulations, and Handbook for Boards of Examiners for Taught Courses and Programmes.

8 Process for consideration of applications

Extensions and Special Circumstances (ESC) service

- 8.1 In relation to each request for consideration of special circumstances, taking into account all information available to it, the ESC service determines:
- Whether there is sufficient evidence regarding the submitted circumstances and their impact on the student's performance in an assessment;
 - Whether the submitted special circumstances were exceptional for the individual student, whether they were beyond the student's control, and whether it is reasonable to conclude that they would have adversely affected the student's performance in an assessment (with reference to Section 2);
 - During what period the submitted special circumstances were affecting the student's performance.
- 8.2 Based on their assessment, the ESC service will determine whether the application is accepted. The ESC service will forward accepted applications for consideration by the relevant Special Circumstances Committee(s) in the School(s) responsible for the course(s) to which the application relates. The decision by the ESC service to accept an application is binding on a Special Circumstances Committee.
- 8.3 Where the ESC service does not accept an application, they will inform the student of this, providing an explanation for their decision. Students have the right to appeal a decision by the ESC service not to accept an application under the Student Appeal Regulations.

Special Circumstances Committee

- 8.4 On receipt of an application from the ESC service, the Special Circumstances Committee will consider all of the information available to it, which may include information regarding the student's performance in the affected assessment(s) (including provisional marks, where available), and their performance in other assessments (as relevant).
- 8.5 The Special Circumstances Committee will make a recommendation to the Board of Examiners regarding the appropriate action to take with regard to the affected assessments, courses, or programme, in the light of the reported special circumstances. The SCC can either make a specific recommendation

or recommend a range of options to the Board of Examiners. These recommendations are not binding on the Board of Examiners.

8.6 The Special Circumstances Committee will provide a report of its recommendations to the relevant Board of Examiners through the ESC online system.

8.7 When considering special circumstances cases, SCCs should take into account whether students were granted permission for a coursework extension as a result of the same special circumstances (see Taught Assessment Regulation 28).

9 Special circumstances: general points about Board of Examiners decisions

9.1 In coming to a decision where special circumstances are considered, Boards of Examiners should act in the best academic interest of the student without disadvantage or advantage in relation to their peers.

10 Special circumstances: decisions regarding course outcomes

10.1 Where a student's special circumstances application has been accepted, the relevant Board of Examiners decides on one or more of the options set out in the table below, taking into account the recommendations of the SCC.

10.2 For certain categories of decision, the Board will need to seek approval for the action from the relevant College committee. Where this is necessary, this is indicated below.

Action	College approval required?
a) No action – for example, circumstances already addressed through actions already taken	No
b) No action at course level; flag for consideration in relation to progression or award decision	No
c) Disregard penalties for late submission of coursework; offer an extension of more than 7 days to a deadline for coursework	No
d) Disregard missing component(s) and derive overall mark/grade from completed work (see 10.3)	No
e) Disregard unreliable component(s) and derive overall mark from completed work if to the student's benefit (see 10.3)	No
f) For pre-Honours courses, if the student has failed the course, allow further re-assessment attempts in line with Taught Assessment Regulation 27	No
g) For pre-Honours courses, record the course as a 'null sit', with the option of allowing the student to be examined at a subsequent diet, and / or to	No

submit missing assessment and / or repeat some or all assessments, on a first sit basis	
h) For Honours and postgraduate taught level courses, record the course as a 'null sit', with the option of requiring the student to be examined at a subsequent diet, and / or to submit missing assessment and / or repeat some or all assessments, on a first sit basis	No - If in current session (August resits count as the current session) Yes – College approval required if in next session
i) In exceptional cases, permit the student to resubmit a revised dissertation for a postgraduate Masters programme	Yes – College approval required
j) In exceptional cases, permit the student to take specially prepared alternative assessments, including oral assessment	Yes – College approval required
k) If course result is borderline (within 2 percentage points of the pass mark), award pass	No

10.3 Where marks/grades for specific components of assessment are missing or deemed unreliable, a Board of Examiners can only derive an overall mark/grade for the course from the existing assessed work if it is satisfied that there is sufficient evidence of attainment of the Learning Outcomes in other components of the course.

10.4 Boards of Examiners cannot adjust marks / grades as a consequence of special circumstances.

11 Special circumstances: decisions regarding progression and award

11.1 Where a student's special circumstances application has been accepted, the relevant Board of Examiners decides on one or more of the options set out in the table below, taking into account the recommendations of the SCC.

11.2 For certain categories of decision, the Board will need to seek approval for the action from the relevant College committee. For very exceptional actions, the relevant College committee would need to seek approval for the action from the Senate Academic Policy and Regulations Committee (APRC).

Action	College or APRC approval required?
a) No further action – for example, adequate action already taken in relation to the outcome of individual course(s);	No
b) For Honours level year of programme, if the student has satisfied requirements in line with Taught Assessment Regulation 52, award credit on aggregate for relevant courses of that year of the degree programme	No
c) For postgraduate taught programmes, if the student has satisfied requirements in line with Taught	No

Assessment Regulation 56, award credit on aggregate for relevant courses	
d) Where a mark for a course is missing or deemed unreliable, exclude the affected course(s) from the classification calculation	No
e) Take account of special circumstances for progression, degree classification, award of merit/distinction, and/or award	No
f) Exceptionally, to allow a student to graduate without the required number and / or level of credits for the degree	Yes – College and APRC approval required

11.3 For decisions regarding *aegrotat* degrees and posthumous degrees, see the relevant Undergraduate and Postgraduate Degree Regulations.

12 Notifying students of the outcomes of requests for consideration of special circumstances

12.1 The ESC service will notify students of the decision regarding whether or not their special circumstances application has been accepted using the online system within five working days. The School will notify students of any action taken by the Board of Examiners in relation to their special circumstances application using the online system no later than five working days after the publication of ratified marks as noted in the University Key Dates. The School will also inform the student's Student Adviser of the decision.

13 Reporting and maintaining records on requests for consideration of Special Circumstances

13.1 Where the ESC service decides not to support the request for consideration of special circumstances, the service will record the reason for this decision in the relevant online system.

13.2 The School will minute SCC meetings (including meetings conducted by correspondence), recording all decisions and recommendations in the relevant online system. The SCC will report its decisions and recommendations to the Board of Examiners in as concise a form as is consistent with clarity and the student's interest, where possible maintaining the anonymity of the student.

13.3 The ESC service and the School will maintain records in line with Data Protection guidelines.

14 Sources of further guidance

14.1 Further guidance for students regarding the special circumstances process is available at:

<https://www.ed.ac.uk/academic-services/students/assessment/special-circumstances>

- 14.2 Edinburgh University Students' Association provides further guidance to students regarding special circumstances, and the Students' Association Advice Place can provide independent advice to students regarding the preparation of their requests for consideration of special circumstances. <https://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/adviceplace/academic/specialcircumstances>
- 14.3 In order to support consistency of handling of student requests for consideration of special circumstances, Colleges and Schools must not produce their own supplementary guidance.

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