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
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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<tr>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Approved: 17.03.16</th>
<th>Starts: 17.09.18</th>
<th>Equality impact assessment: 02.06.16</th>
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<tr>
<td>Approving authority</td>
<td>Curriculum and Student Progression Committee (CSPC)</td>
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| Related policies, procedures, guidelines & regulations | Taught Assessment Regulations, Postgraduate Assessment Regulations for Research Degrees: www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/academic-services/policies-regulations/assessment
Guidance on policy, principle and operation of Boards of Examiners: www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/academic-services/staff/assessment/boards-examiners
Degree Regulations & Programmes of Study: www.drps.ed.ac.uk/
Special Circumstances Form: www.ed.ac.uk/files/atoms/files/special_circumstances_form.docx | | | | |
| UK Quality Code | UK Quality Code Chapter B6: Assessment of students and the recognition of prior learning | | | | |
| Policies superseded by this policy | Special Circumstances Policy approved on 29th August 2013 | | | | |
| Alternative format | If you require this document in an alternative format please email Academic.Services@ed.ac.uk or telephone 0131 650 2138. | | | | |
| Keywords | Special Circumstances, Special Circumstances Committee, Board of Examiners | | | | |
Introduction

The University is committed to supporting its students. Special Circumstances Committees (SCCs) will seek to take account of illness, accident or other circumstances beyond students’ control that have adversely affected their performance in assessment.

Definitions of special circumstances

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.

Examples of circumstances that a SCC 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;
- Bereavement 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.

Examples of circumstances that a SCC 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;
- Financial issues;
- 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;
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- Failure, loss or theft of data, a computer or other equipment;
- Commitments to paid or voluntary employment;
- Death of a pet.

3 Requesting consideration of special circumstances

3.1 It is the responsibility of students to submit their request for consideration of special circumstances to the Convener of the relevant Special Circumstances Committee as soon as possible and not more than a week after the student’s final assessment for the semester. SCCs will only consider accepting submissions after this deadline where students provide evidence of exceptional reasons for having been unable to submit on time.

3.2 Students should submit the Special Circumstances form in consultation with their Personal Tutor, Programme Director, or Student Support Team. In the form they 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). The form is available at:

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

4 Confidentiality

4.1 Schools 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.

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 Student Disability Service 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, a SCC 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 Student Disability Service (SDS) to discuss the adjustments they need for a long-term or chronic health condition, but has not done so, a SCC would not support a case for special circumstances in relation to the condition.
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5.3 Where students submit repeated requests for special circumstances relating to the same health condition, the School should advise them to discuss the adjustments and support that they need with the Student Disability Service.

6 Evidence to support special circumstances cases

6.1 In order for a SCC to support a student’s special circumstances case, the SCC 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 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;
- Death certificate, order of service, or newspaper death announcement;
- 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. Personal Tutors, Student Support Officers, Residence Life Wardens;
- 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:

- Written account from University staff 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;
- 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;
- Student’s own word, where the student provides good reason for not providing corroborating evidence from a third party (only admissible for circumstances lasting up to seven days).

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;
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- Written accounts from the student’s family or friends, if they have not directly witnessed the submitted circumstances.

6.4 Where possible, students should provide corroborating evidence from a third party. In some circumstances, where the student has demonstrated good reason for not providing corroborating evidence from a third party, the student’s own account can be sufficient evidence. However, for circumstances lasting more than seven days, students should always provide corroborating evidence.

6.5 In weighing the evidence, the SCC should consider what evidence it was reasonable for the student to have obtained.

6.6 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 SCC may be satisfied with relatively modest evidence, whereas if the submitted circumstances affected all components of assessment for a 40 credit course, the SCC would require stronger evidence.

6.7 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

6.8 All written documentation must be submitted in English.

7 Membership and Operation of the Special Circumstances Committee

7.1 Each School is responsible for having 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.

7.2 To be quorate, a SCC will consist of an academic Convener along with at least two other academic members of staff. Schools can include additional members, including professional support staff.
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7.3 If a Board 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.

7.4 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 7.2).

7.5 SCCs will not consider information relating to students’ marks when making a decision on Special Circumstances.

8 Roles of Special Circumstances Committees and Boards of Examiners

8.1 In relation to each request for consideration of special circumstances, taking into account all information available to it, the Special Circumstances Committee 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);

- When the submitted special circumstances happened;

- Exactly what impact the submitted special circumstances had on the student’s performance in an assessment, for example, whether they had an adverse impact on assessment(s) or resulted in non-attendance or a non-submission for relevant scheduled assessment(s).

8.2 Having considered these specific issues, the SCC will make a summary decision regarding whether the relevant Board of Examiners should consider taking action regarding the student’s course outcome or progression / award decision in the light of the student’s special circumstances.

8.3 The Special Circumstances Committee will provide a written report of its decisions on these matters to the relevant Board of Examiners. The decisions made by a Special Circumstances Committee on these matters are binding on a Board of Examiners, and on other bodies (for example, Colleges) that may have to decide on appropriate action in relation to the student’s course outcome or progression / award decision.
8.4 The Special Circumstances Committee can also make recommendations to the Board of Examiners regarding the appropriate course outcome or progression / award decision to take, in the light of the reported special circumstances. The SCC could either make a specific recommendation or recommend a range of options to the Board of Examiners. These recommendations would not, however, be binding on the Board of Examiners.

8.5 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 the SCC has concluded that the Board of Examiners should consider taking action in the light of the student’s special circumstances, the relevant Board of Examiners decides on one of the options set out in the table below, taking into account the specific determinations of the SCC regarding the case, and any recommendations for action that the SCC may have made.

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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>College approval required?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) No action – for example, circumstances already addressed through actions already taken</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) No action at course level; flag for consideration in relation to progression or award decision</td>
<td>No</td>
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<td>c) Disregard penalties for late submission of coursework</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>d) Disregard missing component(s) and derive overall mark/grade from completed work (see 10.3)</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>e) Disregard unreliable component(s) and derive overall mark from completed work if to the student’s benefit (see 10.3)</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>f) For pre-Honours courses, if the student has failed the course, allow further re-assessment attempts in line with Taught Assessment Regulation 27</td>
<td>No</td>
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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 submit missing assessment and / or repeat some or all assessments, on a first sit basis

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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

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<td>No - If in current session (August resits count as the current session) Yes – College approval required if in next session</td>
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i) In exceptional cases, permit the student to resubmit a revised dissertation for a postgraduate Masters programme

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<td>Yes – College approval required</td>
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j) In exceptional cases, permit the student to take specially prepared alternative assessments, including oral assessment

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<td>Yes – College approval required</td>
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k) If course result is borderline (within 2 percentage points of the pass mark), award pass

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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 the SCC has concluded that the Board of Examiners should consider taking action in the light of the student’s special circumstances, the relevant Board of Examiners (including Progression Boards) decides on one of the options set out in the table below, taking into account the specific determinations of the SCC regarding the case, and any recommendations for action that the SCC may have made.

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 Curriculum and Student Progression Committee (CSPC).
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<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>College or CSPC approval required?</th>
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<tr>
<td>a) No further action – for example, adequate action already taken in relation to the outcome of individual course(s);</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>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</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>c) For postgraduate taught programmes, if the student has satisfied requirements in line with Taught Assessment Regulation 56, award credit on aggregate for relevant courses</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>d) Where a mark for a course is missing or deemed unreliable, exclude the affected course(s) from the classification calculation</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>e) Take account of special circumstances for progression, degree classification, award of merit/distinction, and/or award</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>f) Exceptionally, to allow a student to graduate without the required number and / or level of credits for the degree</td>
<td>Yes – College and CSPC approval required</td>
</tr>
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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 Within one week of the meeting of the relevant Board of Examiners decision, the School will notify students of the decision regarding their special circumstances request. The School will also inform the student’s Personal Tutor of the decision.

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

13.1 The School will minute SCC meetings (including meetings conducted by correspondence), recording all decisions in the minutes. Where the SCC decides not to support the request for consideration of special circumstances, the School will minute the reason for this decision.

13.2 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.
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13.3 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. http://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/support_and_advice/the_advice_place/academic/special_circumstances/

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.

22 March 2018