

## XII. Guidelines

### Guidelines for Schools on Exceptional Circumstances

#### 1. Introduction

These Guidelines, which apply to both undergraduate and postgraduate taught students, are intended to provide advice on good practice to staff involved in the School Exceptional Circumstances Committees (SECCs). They should be read in conjunction with the relevant Study Regulations.

Guidelines for students on Exceptional Circumstances are available from <https://www.qub.ac.uk/sgc/ec>.

#### 2. Definition

Exceptional circumstances, for the purposes of assessment decisions, are defined as unforeseeable or unpreventable events or circumstances beyond a student's control, which have a negative impact on their academic performance.

Ongoing chronic conditions for which students have received or could have requested support and reasonable adjustments do not constitute exceptional circumstances.

#### 3. General Principles

**3.1** From time to time, circumstances arise which are outside a student's control and which may prevent them from performing to full potential. Examples of such circumstances include:

- i. Significant illness or injury (but not an on-going illness or condition).
- ii. Serious illness affecting a close family member.
- iii. Bereavement.
- iv. Unforeseeable or unpreventable events including family crisis, or major financial problems leading to acute stress.
- v. Further examples of acceptable exceptional circumstances are attached as Appendix 1.

**3.2** When exceptional circumstances occur close to a student's examination or an assessment deadline, the University will ensure that the student will not be disadvantaged, providing that their need is genuine, and that the correct procedures are followed. It is the student's responsibility to submit the necessary evidence to support an application for exceptional circumstances, e.g. a medical certificate or a letter from their GP; such letters should not simply report what the student told their doctor but should verify the impact that the student's circumstances had on their physical or mental health, and/or provide a medical opinion. Students may also submit an application for exceptional circumstances on the basis of self-certification for a short-term illness, for which they are unable, or it is not appropriate, to obtain contemporaneous medical advice or evidence. In such circumstances, a self-certification statement is required as part of the exceptional circumstances application, which statement will form the evidence to support the application.

**3.3** Although evidence will be required of the exceptional circumstances which the student claims have affected their academic performance (e.g. the death or serious illness of a family member), it is evidence of the impact that the exceptional circumstances have had on the student's ability to study or perform academically (rather than the exceptional circumstances themselves) that the SECC should consider, except where a student is self-certifying their absence due to a short-term illness. In certain circumstances, it may not be possible or appropriate for the student to provide detailed evidence (e.g. confidentiality surrounding the serious illness of a family member). In such circumstances, the student should provide confirmation of the relative's illness from a GP (without details) and medical evidence of the impact this has had on the student. Where a student is self-certifying their absence due to a short-term illness, and provides a self-certification statement with details of the illness including symptoms or self-diagnosis, no further evidence is required and no evaluation of the reason for absence is to be made, save for cases of multiple self-certified absences, which may result in referral to the Occupational Health Service or the Fitness to Study Procedure.

**3.4** Extra marks will not be awarded to compensate for exceptional circumstances.

**3.5** Exceptional circumstances will normally only influence the consequences of assessment decisions, e.g. whether a student is permitted a further opportunity to retake a failed module and/or whether the mark of the retake is for full marks or is capped at the pass mark. Students will not be permitted to re-sit or re-take passed modules (see Regulations for Undergraduate Programmes, regulation 1.3.5 and Study Regulations for Postgraduate Taught Programmes, regulation 1.2.6).

#### 4. Fabricated or Falsified Evidence

Schools should take steps to ensure that any documentation submitted by a student in support of an exceptional circumstance application is genuine (e.g. where a suspicion is raised about the authenticity of a medical note, the School should contact the author of the note to verify its authenticity).

Where a student is suspected of submitting evidence which is not authentic, the matter should be referred to the Head of School, who should take the appropriate steps under the Conduct Regulations.

#### 5. Procedure

**5.1** Applications for exceptional circumstances, together with the necessary supporting documentation, must be submitted to the School Office on the appropriate form (available online or from the School Office), normally within three working days of returning to study or, in the case of emergencies which arose during the Assessment Period, by the published deadline. Any application for exceptional circumstances should be supported by relevant documentation e.g. a medical certificate, self-certification statement.

**5.2** Where students are studying in more than one School, the Exceptional Circumstances form must be submitted to the student's 'home' School for consideration. Once a decision has been made by the 'home' School's Exceptional Circumstances Committee, the decision should be communicated promptly by the 'home' School to the School where the relevant module or piece of work has been undertaken in order that it may be considered by that School's Board of Examiners.

**5.3** Students must clearly state the module(s) or piece (s) of course work to which the exceptional circumstances apply.

**5.4** If a student believes they are going to miss an assignment deadline or an examination because of exceptional circumstances, they should inform the relevant School office as soon as they realise that the deadline or examination will be missed by telephone, email or letter. If this is not possible, a third party should inform their School. It is expected that this requirement will be satisfied particularly in the case of self-certification.

**5.5** Evidence of exceptional circumstances and, where required, their impact on academic performance presented during the Assessment Period, will be considered by the SECC which meets prior to the Board of Examiners and makes recommendations to the Board regarding concessions on the basis of exceptional circumstances.

**5.6** Evidence of exceptional circumstances and, where required, their impact on academic performance presented during the Teaching Period, in relation to continuous assessment, will be considered by the SECC, where consideration by the SECC will result in a timely decision being made.

**5.7** Where a decision is required before the next scheduled meeting of the SECC, and to wait until the next SECC meeting would mean a delay in the decision such that it would not be made in a timely manner, in such cases, evidence of exceptional circumstances, and where required, their impact on academic performance will be considered by the Chair of the SECC plus one other appropriately qualified person within the School and reported to the next meeting of the SECC.

**5.8** Students' circumstances should remain confidential to members of the SECC and only the recommendations of the SECC should be made to the Board of Examiners. In exceptional situations the Chair of the Board of Examiners may be told in confidence of the nature of the student's circumstances where there may be doubts over the reasonableness of the concession being recommended.

**5.9** SECCs are not obliged to consider any medical certificate or evidence of exceptional circumstances presented after the published deadline. However, where a student submits an exceptional circumstances application before the published deadline and is not self-certifying their absence, but, due to circumstances beyond their control, was unable to provide the necessary supporting evidence, the Chair of the Board of Examiners and another senior colleague (preferably the Chair of the SECC, if available) may, outside the meeting, consider such an application and evidence, if submitted before the meeting of the Board of Examiners.

## General Guidelines for School Exceptional Circumstances Committees

### 6. School Exceptional Circumstances Committee

The primary role of the SECC is to consider the cases of students on taught courses who have presented evidence of exceptional circumstances which may have affected their academic progress and to make recommendations to the relevant Board of Examiners for each student considered by the Committee. Students are required to submit evidence of circumstances they believe may have affected their performance before the published deadline.

### 7. Membership

Membership may vary according to School but may include Directors of Education, Examination Liaison Officers, School Disability Officers and School Managers as well as those External Examiners who may be in attendance at the particular Examination Board session. The SECC may take advice from appropriate support services within the University, e.g., Disability Services, University Counselling Service. A member of staff from the School should take minutes as a formal record of the meeting, which should include recommendations to the Board of Examiners based on the evidence provided. These minutes should be appended to the Board of Examiners minutes.

### 8. Frequency of Meetings

The SECC will convene prior to the Board of Examiners meeting and after the published deadline for applications to consider exceptional circumstances applications. Schools may decide to have separate SECCs for undergraduate and postgraduate taught students.

### 9. Evidence for Consideration by SECC

Appendix 1 outlines evidence acceptable to the University but the list is not exhaustive.

### 10. Reaching a Decision

The SECC should ensure that the following criteria are met:

- i. That the exceptional circumstances are true. It is essential that the student submits as much supporting evidence as possible, including medical evidence or written confirmation of circumstances.
- ii. Schools may contact the relevant medical practitioner to verify the authenticity of any medical certificate or GP note/letter submitted in support of an exceptional circumstances application. Where considered necessary, the authenticity of death certificates or other documentary evidence should also be verified. Where a student is self-certifying their absence, no supporting medical evidence

is required, and students can simply provide details of their short-term illness, its symptoms and / or a self-diagnosis.

- iii. That, in cases where the student is not self-certifying their absence, the evidence is sufficient to demonstrate the impact that the exceptional circumstances had on the student's ability to study or to sit the examination in respect of which the student has submitted an application. Letters or emails from counselling services may provide confirmation that a student has attended counselling but, due to the limited information provided, are not by themselves deemed to provide sufficient evidence of the impact of the exceptional circumstances on the student's academic performance.
- iv. That the exceptional circumstances constitute 'good cause', that the circumstances were outside the student's control, and constitute a good reason for not taking the examination or submitting the assessment.
- v. That the exceptional circumstances would prevent the student from taking the examination or completing the assessment by the deadline, or that the exceptional circumstances would have a significant adverse impact on the student's performance in the examination or assessment.

The Director of Education is responsible for ensuring that the practice in relation to granting concessions is consistent throughout the School.

In cases where exceptional circumstances will not be considered by an SECC or a Board of Examiners, for example, where the student has requested an extension to an assessment deadline during the academic year, the School should ensure the above criteria are met.

## 11. Possible Recommendations by SECC

**11.1** Taking the available evidence into account, the SECC may make recommendations to the Board of Examiners as it considers appropriate and in the context of the relevant programme regulations as well as the relevant Study Regulations.

**11.2** In cases where the student has attempted the assessed components but failed the module:

- i. Require the student to resubmit failed coursework within a set time limit as a first attempt.
- ii. Permit the student to repeat a failed examination as a first attempt.
- iii. Permit the student to retake the failed module as a first attempt.

**11.3** In cases where a student is prevented by illness or other sufficient cause from taking or completing any assessed component of a module:

- i. Require the student to take the assessment at the next available opportunity or to take a special assessment (see Study Regulations for Undergraduate Programmes, regulations 1.4.48 and 1.4.50 or Study Regulations for Postgraduate Taught Programmes, regulation 1.3.45 and 1.3.47) for full marks.
- ii. Recommend that the Board of Examiners reviews the student's overall academic profile and considers awarding

a pass for the module, or, if the Board of Examiners so decides, require the student to undertake a further special assessment (see Study Regulation for Undergraduate Programmes 1.4.48 and 1.4.50) for Honours classification purposes.

**11.4** In addition to any of the above recommendations, the SECC may request that the Board of Examiners refer the student for consideration under the Guidelines on Fitness to Continue in Study on the Grounds of Health and/or Safety.

In some programmes, discipline-specific or professional requirements may restrict the options available to the School. In such instances, these exceptions should be clearly outlined in the programme specification and Student Handbook.

**11.5** It should be noted that the SECC may make recommendations to the Board of Examiners but the power to make all progress decisions lies with the Board of Examiners as delegated by the Senate of the University.

**11.6** In addition, the SECC may also make the following recommendations to be followed up by the School:

- i. To seek the advice of the University Occupational Health Service, where the student's fitness to continue in study is in question (see Guidelines on Fitness to Continue in Study on the Grounds of Health and/or Safety).
- ii. To refer the case to the Director of Academic and Student Affairs, in cases where the student's fitness to practise is in question (see Fitness to Practise Procedure).
- iii. To refer the student to Disability Services or the University Counselling Service.
- iv. To recommend that the student should apply to the Student Support Fund.
- v. To require the student to attend the Learning Development Service for assistance and advice on time management, essay writing, presentation skills or examination preparation, as appropriate.

**11.7** Each Head of School will have responsibility for ensuring that students who fail to meet the assessment requirements for a module, who cannot progress or who are required to withdraw are called to a Student Support Meeting within two weeks of the publication of results (see Study Regulations for Undergraduate Programmes and Study Regulations for Postgraduate Taught Programmes).

## 12. Appeal of the Decision of the Board of Examiners

There is no appeal against a recommendation by SECC to the Board of Examiners. Any undergraduate or postgraduate student may appeal the decision of the Board of Examiners on grounds (see Academic Appeals Regulations (Taught Programmes) and Academic Appeal Regulations (Research Degree Programmes))

## Guidelines for Schools on Exceptional Circumstances

### Appendix 1: Exceptional Circumstances

The following table provides a few examples of exceptional circumstances. *It is a guide and is not meant to be prescriptive.* The SECC (and where appropriate, individual staff) should continue to use their own judgement and discretion when deciding if an extension or concession is warranted on the basis of the facts presented. If a student is unclear as to what evidence is acceptable to demonstrate the impact of their situation they should seek advice from the Students' Union or their School in the first instance.

	Exceptional Circumstances - Normally Acceptable	Notes
1	Death of a close relative or friend	'Close relative' means parent or guardian; partner or spouse; child or sibling. <i>Where there is a demonstrably close relationship between the student and the deceased, a death certificate or a letter confirming the death from an independent person should be submitted.</i>
2	Serious illness of student	An incapacitating illness or an on-going illness or medical condition. This includes breaks and serious sprains to the normal writing hand/arm. <i>Medical certification must be obtained, self-certification is not acceptable.</i>
3	Serious illness of a close relative	See notes at 1 above for definition of 'close'
4	Hospitalisation	A medical letter/certificate from the relevant hospital confirming the nature and severity of the student's circumstances and the likely impact it has on the student's ability to undertake formal assessment will be required.
5	Acute Personal/Emotional Circumstances	A medical certificate or letter from the appropriate medical professional will be required.
6	Victim of Crime	A written statement of events which is supported by written evidence from the police and/or appropriate medical professional will be required.
7	Financial Problems	Evidence of the impact of stress brought on by unforeseen financial difficulties. It is the student's responsibility to maintain a proper balance between work and study.
8	Serious personal disruption	Divorce; fire; burglary; serious assault; jury service, serious childcare difficulties. Corroborating evidence <b>must</b> be produced.
9	Pregnancy	A medical report from the student's doctor or midwife must be provided in support of such grounds. This also includes the stages following childbirth. Pregnancy of a wife/partner would be acceptable in appropriate circumstances.
10	Short-term illness	Self-certification is acceptable for a short-term illness, comparable to that which would result in absence from work, in circumstances where the student is unable to seek medical advice, or where it would not be appropriate to seek such advice e.g. gastroenteritis, flu.
	<b>Not normally acceptable</b>	
1	Social or sporting activities	Hectic social life; parties; visits to/from friends; sporting activities. It is the student's responsibility to maintain a proper balance between social/sporting activities and study (but see Elite, Academy and Sports Bursary Athletes: Guidelines for Academic Flexibility).
2	Temporary self-induced medical conditions	Hangover; drug taking (excluding prescribed medication).
3	Minor ailments	Coughs; colds; sprains (other than in the writing hand/arm).
4	Non serious personal and domestic disruptions which could have been anticipated or planned	Moving house; holiday; failed transport arrangements; attending a wedding (although consideration may be given if the student is playing an active role in the wedding (for example, best man or bridesmaid).
5	Work Commitments	Paid work regardless of whether the work is during the week or weekends. Students are expected to plan their work /study balance before embarking on a course and seek support at the earliest opportunity if unforeseen difficulties arise