Guidance on the reporting, certification and consideration of student circumstances during the Examination Period

1. Introduction

1.1 The purpose of this document is to offer guidance on the process by which circumstances that affect students during the examination period should be reported, certified and considered. This guidance is aimed at staff such that they can appropriately advise students, but may be read by students also. A student guide to extenuating circumstances is additionally available from the Bristol SU website.

1.2 This guidance relates to circumstances that occur during or immediately prior to the University’s standard examination periods where a circumstance directly impacts upon a student’s performance in a ‘summative’ examination(s) (except section 2, which also relates to any form of assessment). Circumstances may relate to a student’s physical health, mental wellbeing and/or be of a personal or circumstantial nature.

1.3 The University has a set of regulations that governs student absence and the consideration of ‘extenuating circumstances’, which enables it to apply discretion in making decisions that are appropriate to each individual case and circumstance. This guidance complements the regulations provided in the University's Regulations and Code of Practice for Taught programmes; however, the regulations take precedent over the guidance in this document, where there is any uncertainty.

2. Responsibilities in the reporting of circumstances (in relation to study and any form of assessment)

2.1 Students are responsible for managing their personal circumstances and informing the university of them, as they see fit, within the timescales that allow the university to take any according action. They should therefore alert their school as soon as possible if they wish to bring its attention to any circumstances that they feel will affect or is affecting their studies. It is normally possible to mitigate the potential impact of a circumstance beforehand, particularly those of a chronic nature – for example by making a reasonable adjustment to the assessment through a recommendation in a Disability Support Summary and/or an approved alternative examination arrangement – and sometimes for those of an acute nature – for example, by allowing an extension to a deadline for submission of a piece of coursework. By raising issues in advance, students will be able to access advice on the options open to them and the consequences of each such that they can make an informed, positive decisions. It is important therefore that students are aware of the names and roles of the relevant people in their school and faculty whom they should contact.

2.2 In disclosing or notifying the University of any circumstance that will affect or is affecting their studies, students should be advised to not use the extenuating circumstances (ECs) process as the primary mechanism to signal a disability or any inherent difficulties they are experiencing; they should instead speak to the relevant designated person in their school (e.g. Wellbeing Adviser or Senior Tutor) or one of the specialist student support services (e.g. Disability Services). Where students still use the ECs process to disclose a particular issue (e.g. a disability)
however, it is important for the school (e.g. through the relevant Senior Tutor) to follow the issue up with the student, providing advice and sign-posting them to support as necessary.

2.3 Additionally, if an adjustment to an assessment has already been made, as described in 2.1, students should only submit extenuating circumstances if the effect of the situation has worsened and/or the reasonable adjustment to study or the assessment was not sufficient.

2.4 Students are also responsible for deciding: (i) whether they are sufficiently well to study or undertake assessment, subject to the proviso described at 4.1 iii, and (ii) the route for reporting and certifying any illness or other circumstance that has affected their performance in assessment (see section 4), within the University’s regulations and on the basis of guidance provided by a GP or other health professional, University members of staff and/or Bristol SU.

2.5 If a student does not attend an examination, they must inform the school of their non-attendance as soon as possible and prior to the start of the examination.

2.6 Students should inform the University of any circumstance that has affected their studies and performance in assessment in the appropriate timescales if they wish for it to be taken into consideration and ensure that any according action can be undertaken in a timely manner. There, however, may be cases where a student, for good reason, does not or is unable to present this information in time for it to be considered by the relevant board at which the student’s performance in assessment is considered. In such cases the student should raise this as part of the appeals process (see sections 10 and 11 of the University Examination Regulations) detailing why the circumstance was not raised initially.

2.7 There may be times where a circumstance is personally sensitive and distressing to a student and they may not want to disclose the details of the circumstance by way of a form and/or seek evidence. In such cases students should be advised to contact their school or faculty office who will arrange for them to talk to an appropriate staff member (e.g. Wellbeing Adviser, Senior Tutor or Faculty Education Director), who can raise their situation on their behalf, confidentially, and without revealing the details.

3. Routes for reporting and certifying circumstances

3.1 There are two routes for students to report a circumstance that has affected their performance in an examination (including absence), as follows:

Self-certification

**Purpose:** to certify absence from examinations due to any form of illness, but normally covers acute/short-term instances of common physical ‘day-to-day’ illnesses, that do not normally require medical attention.

**Key characteristics:**

- Enables students to ‘self-certify’ (i.e. not provide evidence for) illness where they decide they are not well enough to take an exam.
- May only be submitted due to an absence from an exam (i.e. it is not available where a student has commenced an exam).
- Covers a single day in the examination period in which a student will miss an exam. A school may request evidence to be submitted via the extenuating circumstances process in multiple and sustained cases of self-certification.
• Will lead to an automatic sitting of the examination at a subsequent exam period, without penalty (i.e. marks are not capped). This also applies for students in their final year of undergraduate study, whereby their graduation (in the Summer) may be delayed as a consequence.
• Students should complete the relevant ‘Self-certification for absence’ form available from the students forms web page and submit it to their school office within two working days of the end of the absence. Schools should advise students how such forms should be submitted and how they will be stored.

**Extenuating circumstances:**

**Purpose:** to certify circumstances external to study that has affected performance in assessment, which are usually either unforeseen or unpreventable and outside of the student’s immediate control, such as:

• A circumstance not related to illness (i.e. of a circumstantial or personal nature) (e.g. bereavement, jury service, unexpected caring responsibilities);
• A circumstance relating to a student’s physical health that is acute but the impact of which is sufficiently severe and/or where medical attention is needed (e.g. bacterial infection);
• A circumstance relating to a student’s physical health and/or mental wellbeing that is an acute manifestation of a known, chronic difficulty where the impact is sufficiently severe and/or where medical attention is needed (e.g. glandular fever or a managed anxiety disorder);
• A circumstance relating to a student’s physical health and/or mental wellbeing that is chronic in nature and may lead to an extended absence (e.g. recovery from a major operation or depression). Note: in such cases, it may be appropriate to consider applying a reasonable adjustment to the student’s study and assessment or for the student to suspend studies, in which case the circumstance will not be considered under the ECs process, unless there are further adverse developments

**Key characteristics:**

• Enables students to notify the University of any circumstances that has affected their ability to attend or perform in an exam, substantiated by evidence (see section 5).
• May cover a period of time in the teaching and/or examination periods.
• A range of options is available to the University to account for the circumstance depending upon its impact upon the student’s studies. Where a student still successfully passes the unit, the circumstance will be considered by a board of examiners in its decision-making at a future point (i.e. when progression or the award of a qualification is being considered).
• Students should complete the ‘Extenuating circumstances’ form available from the students forms web page and submit it as soon as possible but before the meeting of the Board of Examiners at which their performance will be considered. Students should be informed of the date of this meeting, how the form should be submitted and how it will be stored.

4. **Courses of action for students who experience circumstances during the examination period**
4.1 Students may seek advice from others, but ultimately it is their decision as to whether they feel they are well enough or in a position to take an examination. Depending on this decision and the timing of the occurrence of the circumstance, students should do one of the following in the situations described:
i. **Student does not feel they are well enough or in a position to take the examination and decides not to attend.**

Students may either:

- self-certify their absence from an examination due to illness
- submit evidence to explain their absence under the extenuating circumstances process

Students may self-certify their absence from an exam due to any form of illness, but will normally be expected to self-certify for **short-term acute illnesses**, which, on their own, do not require medical attention (for example: migraine, diarrhoea, nausea, flu). By self-certifying absence, students will be able to sit the examination at a subsequent exam period, without penalty.

If a student requires medical attention (e.g. for tonsillitis, urinary infection, appendicitis) and/or wishes to be considered under the extenuating circumstances process for any reason, they must provide evidence of the circumstance*. The evidence should be presented to the University such that it can determine the impact of the circumstance and any action that is required to account for the circumstance.

* **Where an illness cannot be observed by a doctor, any subsequent note will not be deemed to constitute sufficient evidence by the University of the circumstance or its impact. In such cases, any further action to account for the circumstance, beyond permitting the student to repeat the exam without penalty, is unlikely to be taken.**

ii. **Student began but did not complete the examination due to illness.**

Students who start but are unable to complete a summative examination due to illness must inform the examination invigilator and may subsequently attend an appointment with a medical practitioner, if they require medical attention. Students are unable to self-certify illness in this situation and therefore an extenuating circumstances form, with evidence (see section 5), must be submitted.

Invigilators will record the incident on the exam incident report form if a student becomes unwell and leaves during the course of the exam. They will only report on what they have observed, not make any diagnoses. This report should be considered by the home school of the student, which will consider any other submitted evidence and whether the impact of the circumstance merits any change, in the normal manner.

iii. **Student was affected by a circumstance (e.g. illness) but completed the examination anyway.**

Students are unable to self-certify illness in this situation.

If a student completes an examination but has a known **chronic** condition, from which an acute episode manifests, or is experiencing a developing chronic condition, then the circumstance may be taken into consideration (the presentation of evidence will depend upon the context of the chronic condition), under the ECs process. This is particularly relevant for conditions relating to a student’s mental health. Students should be advised to contact their school (e.g. Senior Tutor) where this is the case to discuss a submission under the ECs process and any evidence requirements (see 5.1).

If a student has experienced an **acute** circumstance or short-term illness but chooses to sit and complete an examination, then the awarded mark will normally stand. Students are not prevented from submitting ECs in these cases, with evidence (subject to the previous guidance point under i). Such circumstances, however, can be difficult to evidence (particularly illnesses
which may have passed by the time a student sees their GP) and often are not deemed to be sufficiently severe for action to be taken given that the student has decided to complete the exam.

Alternatively, students may raise a matter and present information for consideration by the University at a later stage (i.e. after the meeting of the Board of Examiners), via the appeals process, where is good reason that they could not do so at the time.

5. **Certification and evidence**

5.1 Circumstances should be evidenced in an appropriate way and may take a range of forms. It should, however, be independent and sufficiently detailed to support the narrative provided by the student. Evidence should also be contemporaneous to the affected examination/s, wherever possible; however, students may refer to previously submitted evidence of chronic conditions or persistent circumstances and/or submit ‘non-contemporaneous’ evidence where it is still relevant and supports the narrative that the student provides in the ECs form.

5.2 A medical note from a GP is a common form of certification, but other forms such as a copy of a medical prescription, an exam incident report form, a copy of the email correspondence that a student has had with the Student Counselling Service or a copy of a police incident report form may also constitute suitable forms of evidence.

5.3 Students should normally only visit a GP, the Student Counselling Service or professional support service if they require help or medical attention. If a student, however, wishes for their circumstance to be considered under the ECs process, evidence (such as that outlined in 5.2) must be provided such that the impact of the circumstance can be determined.

6. **Considering reported circumstances**

6.1 All reported circumstances are considered by an ‘Extenuating Circumstances Committee’ (ECC) in each school, whose role is to evaluate whether extenuating circumstances may have affected a student’s capacity to perform in assessment. It subsequently provides a report to the school board of examiners, including a classification on the impact of each reported circumstance. Cases where a student has self-certified their absence from an exam are also recorded. Further information on the purpose and role of the ECC is provided in the Regulations and Code of Practice for Taught Programmes.

6.2 The school board of examiners will use the information provided by the ECC to determine the effect on the student’s results (in making decisions about their progression and the award of a qualification) and consider what allowance is fair and reasonable to account for each reported circumstance. The different courses of action that will normally be considered by a board are listed in the Regulations and Code of Practice for Taught Programmes.

6.3 Each recommended allowance made by a school board of examiners is presented to the faculty board of examiners for approval.

6.4 The information that is submitted by students is confidential to the Extenuating Circumstances Committee and should not be shared or reported elsewhere.
7. **Outcomes**

7.1 Boards of Examiners should keep a written record of the decisions made with respect to extenuating circumstances and the basis on which they are made. The relevant record will be made available to the student to whom it applies, on request.

7.2 Students should routinely be reminded (particularly following assessment periods) that they are able to request to see the decision reached regarding their ECs and describe how they should go about making such a request.

8. **Additional resources**

- University regulations and policy on:
  - [Student absence due to illness or other cause](#)
  - [Extenuating circumstances](#)
- [Guidance for faculties on classifying extenuating circumstances](#)
- [Student guide to extenuating circumstances](#)
- [Student forms:](#)
  - Self-certification for absence
  - Extenuating circumstances

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