

## **GUIDELINES ON TREATMENT OF EXTENUATING CIRCUMSTANCES**

*(Note: in this document, unless there is an indication to the contrary, the term Course Director should be taken to include Subject Director, and the term Board of Examiners, or Examiners, should be taken as covering pre-Examination Boards and Campus Progress and Award Boards)*

### **1. Definition**

Extenuating circumstances are defined as circumstances that could not reasonably be foreseen and that either (a) prevent a student from submitting work for assessment (whether by coursework or examination) or else (b) prevent the student from demonstrating / achieving their full potential in the assessment in question. *Extenuating circumstances are normally health-related, or of a sensitive/personal nature, or relate to some unforeseen emergency or crisis affecting the student's situation.*

### **2. Current Practice and Regulations**

The University requires extenuating evidence to be presented by students on an EC1 form, accompanied by documentary evidence where appropriate. EC1 forms should be submitted to Course Directors, except in the Faculty of Computing and Engineering where forms should be submitted to School Offices and a receipt obtained, and considered then by Boards of Examiners. In practice, the Board usually accepts the Course Director's recommendation on the acceptability of the evidence, but this can place considerable pressure on Course Directors and can lead to inconsistencies in approach. The following guidelines have therefore been drawn up with a view to standardising procedures for handling EC1 Forms and achieving consistency in decision-making across courses and across Schools.

Students wishing to have extenuating circumstances taken into account must complete and submit an EC1 form to their Course Director, except in the Faculty of Computing and Engineering where forms should be submitted to School Offices and a receipt obtained, as soon as possible, but no later than five working days after the examination in question, or else no later than five working days following the submission date for the coursework in question. *Exceptionally, a late submission may be accepted e.g. if the student has been incapacitated by serious illness or injury.*

### **3. Corroboration**

In most cases, the EC1 form must normally be accompanied by authentic and persuasive corroborative evidence in the form of a medical certificate or other documentary evidence from *a reputable source* e.g. the PSNI, a solicitor, counsellor or *elected* representative. Academic staff are not medically trained, and so, other than in exceptional circumstances, a medical certificate must be submitted if a medical reason is claimed. *If the student anticipates a delay in obtaining corroboration, it is important that (s)he submits an EC1 form before the deadline, with an indication that a further letter is to follow. The*

*nurses in the University Health Centre may be able to confirm a student's symptoms, if a GP appointment cannot be arranged soon enough.*

#### **4. Impact of Extenuating Circumstances**

It is important to recognise that all students have to cope with the ups and downs of everyday life – e.g. domestic disputes, money pressures, relationship difficulties, the work-life balance – and so the routine distractions, obstacles and frustrations encountered in the normal course of events will not normally be accepted as valid extenuating circumstances.

The EC1 form requires students to comment on the impact of their extenuating circumstances. It is not enough simply to demonstrate that the student suffered illness, anxiety or inconvenience in the run-up to the assessment in question. For example, a migraine suffered on the day of an examination will probably have a more detrimental impact on ultimate performance than a week spent in bed with 'flu' at the start of the semester. Both the medical certificate and the EC1 form will have to establish a clear and timely connection between the extenuating circumstances and the alleged impaired performance. The EC1 should also specify precisely which modules or elements of modules were affected.

#### **5. Anxiety and Stress / Student Support Services**

A certain degree of stress, anxiety and pre-examination nerves, and associated psychosomatic symptoms, are very common in the run-up to examinations. Coping with this pressure is part and parcel of the student experience. Presented with evidence of pre-examination stress, a Board of Examiners will be entitled to take into account:

- the extent to which this stress prevented the student from performing to his/her full potential (and NB some students perform better when under pressure);
- the extent to which this stress is of a different nature to that experienced by all students at examination time;
- the extent to which this stress was self-inflicted, i.e. a consequence of the student's failure to work steadily throughout the year;
- the extent to which this stress is likely to recur.

Students who experience pre-examination stress, or who have a disability that might impair their performance, are encouraged to consult Student Support Services. The counselling service offers confidential professional advice which can be accessed on each campus. This service is flexible and students can be seen individually, or if preferred, workshops can be organised on topics such as Exam Preparation or Stress Management. Students can also attend the weekly Drop-in sessions, without an appointment, or arrange a longer appointment (see [www.studentsupport.ulster.ac.uk](http://www.studentsupport.ulster.ac.uk)).

#### **6. Disclosure of all Relevant Information**

It is vital that students do not withhold evidence. EC1 forms are normally discussed at a pre-examination board meeting, in advance of the formal Board of Examiners. Meetings are conducted under conditions of absolute confidentiality, and members have wide experience of the full range of

problems that students can encounter. The minutes of the Board of Examiners will only record whether or not extenuating circumstances were considered and accepted/rejected – the nature of the circumstances will not be minuted.

While there may be some factors which the student prefers not to commit to paper, (s)he should reveal these by means of a private meeting with his/her Adviser of Studies or Course Director. If satisfied, the Adviser of Studies or Course Director may then report (without full disclosure) that in their professional opinion the student has legitimate extenuating circumstances. However, the onus is always on the student to specify the degree of detail that (s)he wishes to have disclosed, *and this will need to be sufficient to satisfy the Board of Examiners.*

## 7. Examples of Extenuating Circumstances

The term *extenuating circumstances* will have a restrictive interpretation. While an element of discretion will always have to remain with Boards of Examiners, some examples should serve to differentiate between valid and non-valid extenuating circumstances:

Examples of extenuating circumstances that may be accepted by an Exam Board:

- (a) Illness in the run-up to an examination or coursework deadline, or during an examination
- (b) Bereavement in the run-up to an examination or coursework deadline (*normally a close relative i.e. parent, child, partner or sibling*)
- (c) Sudden illness or emergency in connection with a family member or dependent
- (d) Civil disturbance (rioting, intimidation, bomb-scares, bus and rail disruption)
- (e) Traumatic event (e.g. being assaulted, or witnessing an accident or assault)
- (f) Extreme weather conditions preventing either study or travel
- (g) Domestic upheaval (fire, burglary, eviction)

Examples of extenuating circumstances that would not normally be accepted:

- (h) Employment commitments limiting time available for study (*although greater flexibility may be applicable to part-time students in full-time employment*)
- (i) Pressure of other academic work e.g. other coursework due around the same time
- (j) Having to take a pre-arranged holiday
- (k) Wedding preparations
- (l) Sporting commitments (*although exceptions might sometimes be made, e.g. if the student were representing his/her country, or the University*)
- (m) Missing a bus
- (n) Moving house
- (o) Failure of IT systems, or inability to gain access to IT systems, when the student has not taken adequate precautionary measures – e.g. failure to keep copies or save back-up versions, or ill-judged reliance

on friends' or classmates' equipment or help, or leaving it to the last minute to seek access to University facilities. In all such cases, these difficulties could have been foreseen and avoided at an earlier stage.

*NB These examples are not definitive, and are intended only as a guide. In all cases, the Board of Examiners has ultimate authority to use its discretion, taking into account the full circumstances of a particular case.*

## **8. Student's Desired Outcome**

In their EC1 submissions, students should always make clear what outcome they are hoping for, in the knowledge that marks will never be awarded to compensate for extenuating circumstances. The most common outcome, when the Examiners accept an EC1 form, is that the student is allowed another attempt at the assessment, with no penalty (a "first sit"). Students should be prepared to discuss the financial options open to them (e.g. fees, loans, bursaries) with the Students' Union, or staff from Finance/Student Support, as a particular course of action may prove to be unrealistic without the necessary financial support. For example, if a student's performance suffered because of financial problems, and (s)he hopes to repeat the year without financial support, then the problems are likely to recur.

## **9. Role of Course Directors and Advisers of Studies**

Course Directors and Studies Advisers should emphasise to students that they are precluded from predicting or guaranteeing that a student's extenuating circumstances will be accepted - this is solely at the discretion of the Board of Examiners, except in the single case of extensions to coursework submission deadlines (below). Staff are nevertheless encouraged to point out when the student appears to have a very weak case, or to have submitted insufficient corroborative evidence, but at all times the onus is on the student to present a sufficiently persuasive case, with reference to the principles set out in these guidelines.

## **10. Extension to the Deadline for Coursework Submission**

Boards of Examiners have delegated to Course Directors responsibility for granting extensions to the deadline for submitting coursework, but only in cases where a compelling case has clearly been made. If the Course Director has any reservations, e.g. if insufficient corroboration is presented, then (s)he should warn the student that the EC1 form might not be accepted and the student should be advised to submit the coursework. Should the Board of Examiners subsequently accept the student's extenuating circumstances as valid, then EITHER the coursework will not be marked OR, if it has been marked, that mark will not be divulged and the student will have another opportunity to undergo the assessment in question.

## **11. Misuse of EC1 Forms as "Insurance Policy"**

When extenuating circumstances are submitted in advance of an assessment, this is tantamount to asking to defer the examination or coursework assessment, and the student should make this clear by specifying their desired outcome. Thereafter, if the student submits an EC1 form and fails to attempt an examination or submit coursework, there is an element of risk in

that the student cannot guarantee that the examiners will accept the case presented. However, this same set of guidelines is available to both staff and students, and the guidelines indicate what cases will or will not be accepted.

Attempting an examination or submitting coursework is normally seen as a clear indication on the student's part that (s)he is fit to undergo assessment. If the student is taken ill during the examination, or concludes afterwards that their decision to undergo assessment was mistaken in light of their circumstances, then (s)he should submit an EC1 form within five working days.

This EC1 submission amounts to a request that the examination script or coursework should be discounted, and should not be marked. In such an event, the Course Director *may* instruct the appropriate module co-ordinator not to mark the work until after the Board of Examiners has ruled on its acceptability. If the work has been marked by the time the EC1 form is submitted, then the mark *may* be cancelled and the student given another opportunity to undergo the assessment in question.

## 12. Withdrawal of Extenuating Circumstances

As explained above, a student will not normally be able to withdraw an EC1 form after receiving a mark for the work in question. However, a student who submits an EC1 form in advance of an assessment, and who then changes his/her mind (e.g. because of a rapid improvement in their circumstances) may withdraw the EC1 form before it is too late, i.e. in the following circumstances:

- by submitting the coursework within the deadline, along with an accompanying statement that (s)he wishes to withdraw the EC1 form, and/or;
- by attempting the examination after submitting a statement to the effect that they wish to withdraw the EC1 form. This statement can only be submitted to the Course Director, Adviser of Studies or School office before the start of the examination, and must be witnessed and signed off to this effect, with the precise time recorded.

## 13. Records of Decisions – Guidelines for Staff

Cases of extenuating circumstances should be discussed initially at the pre-board meeting of examiners, and a confidential note kept of why any cases were not accepted. An annual report on EC1 submissions will be prepared for each Faculty Teaching & Learning Committee, but individual student names will not be recorded on any reports.

A list of names of students whose extenuating circumstances were considered should be attached as an appendix to the formal minutes of the Board of Examiners, indicating only whether they were accepted or not i.e. no indication of the nature of the circumstances should be recorded. *Faculties/Schools* will retain a file of EC1 forms in a secure and confidential location, but this file will be periodically reviewed and normally individual EC1 forms will be shredded within one year of the student's leaving the University (by graduating or otherwise).

#### **14. Communication of Decisions to Students**

The Examinations Office will communicate the formal decision of the Board of Examiners, but Course Directors and the relevant module coordinators are encouraged separately to communicate these decisions to students in a timely manner.

#### **15. Leave of Absence / Notification of Absence (NA1 Forms)**

If a student's difficulties are insurmountable, and/or likely to take a considerable period before they are resolved, then (s)he should consider applying for Leave of Absence (LOA) until the situation has been resolved. Students can apply for LOA by completing section B of a *Student Record Amendment Form*, available from School and Faculty Offices. LOA should normally only be invoked for an interruption of studies which will mean that the student will not be attending for the rest of the semester/year, and will not be undergoing assessment.

LOA is normally granted for a maximum of one year at a time, so that circumstances are reviewed, and for a cumulative maximum of two years. If the difficulties seem likely to extend beyond this period, the student should consider withdrawing from the University and reapplying for entry when fit, or when circumstances allow. In such an event, appropriate exemptions may be granted but students are urged to consult their Adviser of Studies about all such issues.

Other shorter periods of absence, which are unlikely to affect overall academic progress, should be notified using the Notification of Absence system (NA1 forms).

#### **16. SA1 Appeals and Retrospective Extenuating Circumstances**

Students can appeal Examination Board decisions only on grounds of alleged procedural irregularity, or else because they had extenuating circumstances which, for a very good reason, were not made known to the Examination Board at the time (SA1 appeals). An appeals panel cannot change marks, but it can make decisions affecting a student's progress status. In reaching its decision, the appeals panel will have to be satisfied that there was a compelling reason why the new evidence could not have been communicated to the Examination Board within the deadline; otherwise the appeal will normally be rejected.

Students cannot challenge academic judgment, and they cannot appeal on the grounds of e.g. alleged bad teaching if they have not raised this issue beforehand. Appeals along the lines of "*I didn't realise the extent to which I had been affected until I received my marks*" will normally be rejected. Full details of the SA1 appeals procedure are available at <http://www.ulster.ac.uk/academicservices/student/appeals.html>.