

EXTENUATING CIRCUMSTANCES – Guidelines to Extenuating Circumstances Officers

The Regulations relating to Extenuating Circumstances and the Criteria by which they will be judged are reproduced in the “Examinations and Assessment Regulations”.

The University of Portsmouth operates a “fit to sit” policy. If a student attends an examination or hands a piece of coursework in on time, they are claiming that they were fit to do so and can not submit an extenuating circumstances form – all claims where they have attended or submitted the assessment on time will be rejected.

Students cannot submit extenuating circumstances for deferred First Attempt Assessments or Second Attempt Assessments. They can only submit extenuating circumstances for the first attempt in an academic year. There should be no cases of extenuating circumstances to consider for the Boards to consider Second Attempt Assessment Unit Assessment and Deferred First Attempt Assessments.

Each Head of Department will appoint a minimum of three Extenuating Circumstances Officers and students shall be informed who they are at the start of the academic year.

The University defines Extenuating Circumstances as circumstances relating to a student’s health and /or personal life which are of a sufficiently serious nature to result in her or his being unable to attend, complete, or submit an assessment on time. The role of an Extenuating Circumstances Officer is to determine whether extenuating circumstances presented to it about a student are of a sufficiently serious nature, and are credibly evidenced.

Problems with course management that have affected student performance, either individually as part of a group, should be remedied by the Head of Department as a result of students following the student complaints procedure.

Normally, the claim is made by means of an Extenuating Circumstances Form completed by the student but an Officer may consider a written intervention on a student’s behalf at their discretion.

A separate form should be submitted for each circumstance.

Students will have been advised to take care when completing the Extenuating Circumstances Form to record exactly which assessment artefacts have been affected and to link them to the particular unit(s) they have been set for. Students will be expected to construct an argument that explains why the circumstances were serious and how they affected her or his ability to attend, complete on time, or submit the assessment artefact. This argument should relate the dates of the circumstance(s) and the assessment(s) carefully to the reasons given. Students will also be advised she or he need to provide evidence to back up her or his case.

The published criteria explain what types of evidence are acceptable. In relation to illnesses or medical conditions the following evidence is acceptable:

Medical Certificate signed while the illness or incident was affecting the student, or other medical evidence such as copies of prescriptions, or certificates of attendance at surgery or hospital, or a doctor’s opinion given after receiving the student’s permission to release information.

The student’s self-certification of illness or incapacity. This type of evidence may be provided on Self-Certification stationery or may take the form of a signed and dated statement by the student. It must be submitted as soon as possible after the affected assessment date. Repeat use of self-certification will mean the Extenuating Circumstances Officer should ask for the student’s permission to speak to the student’s doctor and seek more information about their health. This further information and may lead the Extenuating Circumstances Officer to conclude that the self-certification is not found to be acceptable.

Acceptable evidence may also be supplied by counsellors, provided students give permission for them to provide evidence on her or his behalf, or from personal tutors, or

from any other professional person with whom the student has a professional and not a personal relationship.

□ The form of evidence supplied in these cases is not prescribed but Extenuating Circumstances Officers should be willing to accept a brief written statement that

- a. identifies the student
- b. is signed by, and clearly identifies the person supplying the evidence
- c. clearly states the professional capacity in which the person supplying the evidence had cause to know the student
- d. gives the dates on which the circumstance might reasonably have been thought to have had an effect upon the student
- e. does not have to be specific about the nature of the problem or how it might have affected the student but should provide an opinion that there was a circumstance which on a specified date or during a specified period of time could, in the opinion of the professional concerned, have resulted in either the student being unable to attend, complete, or submit an assessment on time or her or his performance in an assessment being significantly affected.

Please note the above means that it is not necessary to require a medical certificate signed by a doctor for illnesses and episodes that last less than week.

Where there are particularly serious extenuating circumstances that the student will wish to keep confidential (perhaps in relation to rape or life threatening illness), a procedure exists whereby the student may contact the Head of Department or an Extenuating Circumstances Officer directly to discuss them. The student may prefer to contact another member of staff to intervene on their behalf in such circumstances. That person should contact the Head of Department directly. The responsibility will remain with the Head of Department to satisfy themselves of the validity of the claim.

The key words in relation to any claim are serious and significant. Students will have been advised that minor difficulties, ailments, irritations, and worries will not be expected to have had a significant effect on her or his performance or to have prevented them from attending, completing, or submitting on time an assessment. So circumstances such as a cold, feeling under the weather, a few sleepless nights, the illness of a distant relative, the death of non immediate family members, financial worries, difficulties with a computer, the pressures of sitting exams or meeting deadlines will not be considered to be valid reasons for failing to attend, complete on time, or submit assessments.

Generally speaking, serious long-term circumstances that might reasonably be expected to have had a significant effect on a student's ability to study should result in a request for a suspension of studies or in a withdrawal rather than a claim of extenuating circumstances. In line with University policy, students with a disability or learning difficulty should have declared these and secured an agreement as to what additional help the University can reasonably provide as part of the admissions process. The disability or learning difficulty cannot be regarded as an extenuating circumstance.

Extenuating Circumstances Officers must decide, in respect of each assessment artefact on the form, whether the claim is valid or invalid. Different decisions may be made for different assessment artefacts. The Officer is only required to decide whether an assessment artefact may have been affected. It is not required to consider the remedy to the student's claim, or the consequences of its decision. Nor is it required to analyse the student's overall performance in a unit or across units. Once the Extenuating circumstances Officer has made their decision, the decision must be checked by another Extenuating Circumstances Officer to confirm that it is reasonable and the student must be informed of the outcome within ten working days of submitting the form.

The normal remedy offered by Unit Assessment Boards in affected examination type assessments is to allow the student a Deferred First Attempt Assessment. Where a student has had an assessment penalty imposed in relation to an assessment artefact by virtue of late, submission and also has a valid extenuating circumstance in relation to that assessment artefact, then the penalty must be cancelled and the assessment artefact must be given the full mark it justifies on its merits alone provided the work was submitted within twenty working days of the due date of submission. Students cannot submit a further extenuating circumstances claim within this period to extend the time further. The Officer shall ensure that such penalties are lifted and that this is recorded on the Corporate Student Record System. Extenuating Circumstances Officers should therefore be prepared to give the benefit of doubt to students.

Students may ask for reasons for a decision and all requests must be addressed to the Extenuating Circumstances Officer.

Students can appeal against the decision of the Extenuating Circumstance Officer. This is now done through the appeals process of the University of Portsmouth.

George Allison, Assistant Registrar, September 2013

FURTHER INFORMATION

<http://www.port.ac.uk/accesstoinformation/policies/academicregistry/filetodownload,10379,en.pdf>