College of Science and Engineering

Special Circumstances

A common sense guide to college policy for students

At its best, University life is rich and rewarding. But all of us go through difficult times. We must all must work under pressure. We ask a lot of ourselves. If you find yourself struggling due to illness, an accident or bereavement, your Personal Tutor/Student Support Team (is available for help and support). Your Personal Tutor/Student Support Team is able primarily to offer academic advice and is only part of a network of student support, including the counselling service, the University Health Centre and the Edinburgh University Students’ Union (EUSA) Advice Place. Part of our commitment to you – as a member of our University community – is that we will go to lengths to help you if you are unfortunate enough to be troubled by circumstances beyond your own control. However we also must treat our students as adults and we expect you to take full responsibility for your own education at the University.

Special circumstances denotes a formal process whereby students request (via their Personal Tutor/Student Support Team) exceptional concessions related to specific pieces of course assessment on the basis of a verifiable medical problem, bereavement, or accident (or equivalent; see indicative list below). Considerable time and effort are involved in any Special Circumstances submission: for the student, their Personal Tutor/Student Support Team, administrative staff (who must log and process forms), and members of a Special Circumstances Committee who must consider requests for concessions prior to Examination Boards. A flowchart showing the procedure is shown on page 3.

The decision to apply for Special Circumstances should not be taken lightly. If you apply, your case must be truly ‘special’ and exceptional. Concessions are usually granted only if there is clear evidence of underperformance on a specific piece of assessment. You must write up a statement of your own case for Special Circumstances, or help your Personal Tutor/Student Support Team to write it, and take responsibility for gathering unambiguous evidence to support it. All of this takes time and effort to compile. Your time, especially in the run-up to exams, is extremely precious. It is best-invested – all else being equal – in revising.

Special Circumstances evidence to will not lead to a change in a course mark. The College guidance is that where marks are not available or not robust, a further opportunity for assessment may be given in cases where Special Circumstances is accepted.

There is, for good reason, increasing concern nationally about the tendency for Special Circumstances to be claimed as a sort of ‘insurance policy’ against poor assessment results. A task force at the University of Manchester was convened after it was found that more than 25% of all students in some Faculties had claimed Special Circumstances. The task force found that students interpreted repeated notices of deadlines for the submission of Special Circumstances as encouragement to report ‘every

If your Personal Tutor is away from Edinburgh, they will let you know when they’ll be back and what you should do in their absence. If you are in any doubt, contact your School Teaching Organisation or Graduate School.

Information on Student Support Services:  [http://www.ed.ac.uk/staff-students/students/student-services](http://www.ed.ac.uk/staff-students/students/student-services)
small setback’. It recommended ‘a change in approach whereby students understand it is normal to experience problems of one sort or another as part of life and the university is not here to provide the ‘solution’.

We are committed to the principle of equity in the treatment of all of our students. We consider all Special Circumstances submissions individually and with great care. We treat all Special Circumstances that come without clear or sufficient evidence equally: that is, as insufficient to grant concessions.

To be clear: we will do all we can to help students who are unfortunate and find themselves in legitimate difficulty. However we do expect students to fully consider whether the circumstances are truly exceptional and significant. We will grant no concessions unless Special Circumstances are adequately documented and truly SPECIAL.

**Legitimate** grounds for Special Circumstances are:

- Serious physical illness or injury\(^3\) for which there is contemporaneous medical evidence\(^4\).
- Mental ill health or similar illness.
- Bereavement or serious illness of a person with whom the student has a close relationship.
- A long-term relationship breakdown, such as a marriage.

Generally, inappropriate grounds for Special Circumstances include:

- Pressure of academic work.
- Employment commitments.
- A short-term, self-certificated illness such as a common cold.

In addition, it is likely that the Sub-committee would regard the following as inappropriate:

- Late arrival for start of programme due to difficulties with visas or travel arrangements.
- Occasional low mood, stress or anxiety not diagnosed as illness.
- Failure, loss or theft of data, a computer or other equipment.
- Commitment to voluntary work or vacation work.
- Death of a pet.

Note: the above list is indicative. University guidelines may be found at: [http://www.docs.sasg.ed.ac.uk/AcademicServices/Guidance/Special_Circumstances_Students.pdf](http://www.docs.sasg.ed.ac.uk/AcademicServices/Guidance/Special_Circumstances_Students.pdf)

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\(^3\) Disabilities are dealt with via procedures that are distinct from Special Circumstances. The University’s Student Disability Service can provide guidance [http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/student-disability-service/home](http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/student-disability-service/home) Special Circumstances excludes conditions for which formal adjustment has already been made.

\(^4\) It is the student’s responsibility to notify the Personal Tutor/Student Support Team (or Teaching Organisation) in writing of any Special Circumstances and submit any required contemporaneous medical certificates or supporting documentation as early as possible. Submission date is no later than two working days after your last assessment.
If you feel that you have Special Circumstances

1. Inform your Personal Tutor/Student Support Team (Personal Tutor/Student Support Team) as soon as possible and discuss it with him/her.

2. You and your Personal Tutor/Student Support Team complete the College Special Circumstances form, describing the nature of the Special Circumstances, the course assessments affected, and attach evidence to support your case. [https://www.wiki.ed.ac.uk/display/CSETSA/Assessment](https://www.wiki.ed.ac.uk/display/CSETSA/Assessment)

3. Your Personal Tutor/Student Support Team submits a copy of the form to the Special Circumstances Committees for each of the courses affected.

   **Note:** It is important that the Special Circumstances form is submitted before the Special Circumstances Committee meets, otherwise they might not be able to consider your case.

   Dates of meetings of Special Circumstances Committee and Board of Examiners are available from the College web page.

4. The Special Circumstances Committee considers the severity of the Special Circumstances and to what extent they may have impacted upon your assessment. It makes a recommendation to the Board of Examiners.

5. The Board of Examiners decides your final course mark or degree classification, taking into account the Special Circumstances recommendation. This may include the following outcomes:

   a. If the Board of Examiners feels that you have completed sufficient coursework or examination for it to come to a robust judgment on to what extent you have met the learning outcomes for the course, without taking into account the bits affected by Special Circumstances, it can come to a final mark.

   b. If the Board of Examiners does not feel it can come to a final mark, it may permit you to take the assessment again. (It may specify that this will not count towards the maximum number of resits permitted.)

   c. If the Board of Examiners can come to a final mark and also refer the Special Circumstances to a later Board of Examiners that decides on progression from one year to the next, or on degree classification. Such factors may be taken into consideration when the later Board of Examiners is considering borderline cases.

   e. The Board of Examiners may consider that the extent or impact of the Special Circumstances

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5. Such evidence may include (e.g.) medical certification, a police, hospital or dentist report. Your Personal Tutor/Student Support Team will treat this information sensitively and will only share it with your permission and only to those people who are required to know (e.g. Special Circumstances Committee or designated College Officers).

6. The outcome may be different for different courses, even for the same set of special circumstances. This is because the outcome may depend on the pattern of assessment for each course. For example, in one course there may be several components of assessment and the Board of Examiners may come to a final mark for the course by not counting the missed or affected mark, so a resit is not required. But in another course there may only be one assessment so a resit may be offered.

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was not significant and may note the submission but take no further action.

**Glossary**

**Special circumstances**: Any personal circumstances which are clearly beyond the student’s control and for which there is sufficient documentary evidence to show that these circumstances may have adversely affected a student’s performance in an assessment.

**Special Circumstances Committee**: A Sub-Committee of the Board of Examiners, usually a small number of experienced members of the Board, including the Convener, who review the Special Circumstances forms submitted by Personal Tutor/Student Support Teams.

**Board of Examiners**: A Board of Examiners is a board of academic staff teaching on your courses, together with an External Examiner, who make the final course mark or degree classification decision.

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**Related Policies, Procedures Guidelines & Regulations**

- Special Circumstances Policy and Procedure
- Special Circumstances Form https://www.wiki.ed.ac.uk/display/CSETSA/Assessment
- University Special Circumstances Policy http://www.docs.sasg.ed.ac.uk/AcademicServices/Policies/Special_Circumstances.pdf

**Policies superseded by this Policy**

University’s Special Circumstances policy updated September 2013.