

Disability Services – Quick Guide to:

Extenuating circumstances and students with disabilities

The University defines extenuating circumstances (ECs) as “...any relevant matters, for example personal matters such as illness or bereavement, that may have affected a student’s performance in an assessment” (see the University’s Code of Practice for the Assessment of Students on Taught Programmes for further information).

This guide focusses on the application of the University’s EC process to disabled students.

Generally, ECs are circumstances which are unforeseen, unpreventable, and have a serious impact on a student’s academic performance. Two examples commonly regarded as extenuating circumstances are serious personal illness and bereavement.

The University’s ECs process is available to disabled students – just as it is to other students. This means that disabled students who are seriously ill or bereaved such that their academic performance may have been affected should be signposted to the ECs process as per any other student.

Confusion sometimes arises, however, when a student (or member of staff) believes that performance in assessment may have been affected by the student’s disability. **In such cases, the key question to ask is: were the circumstances believed to have affected the student’s performance unforeseen and unpreventable?**

- In cases where the student’s disability is known (disclosed), the answer is almost certainly ‘no’, provided that reasonable adjustments have been put in place;
- In cases where the student’s disability has only recently been identified (diagnosed), or where there has been a significant change (e.g., a significant worsening, or ‘flare-up’ of a known condition), the answer may be ‘yes’.

The following are examples of appropriate and inappropriate applications of the University’s ECs process.

Example A: a student has a diagnosis of a fatigue condition, CFS/ ME. She has a DSS detailing her support needs, which include 25% extra time in exams and receiving lecture materials in advance via Blackboard. During an exams period, she has a flare-up in her condition, which significantly worsens the effects of her fatigue. Her flare-up is evidenced by

GP. As a result of her flare-up, the student feels that she may not have done as well in her exams as she might have otherwise. **It would be appropriate in this case for the student to submit ECs, because there was a significant worsening of her known condition.**

Example B: another student also has a diagnosis of a fatigue condition, CFS/ ME. Following an exams period, the student feels that he may not have done as well in his exams due to the effects of his fatigue condition. However, the effects of his condition were not different during the exams period than they are normally and appropriate reasonable adjustments were in place. **It would not be appropriate in this case for the student to submit ECs, because his disability is known and there was no unforeseen, significant worsening of his condition.** It would be appropriate, however, to signpost the student to Disability Services to review his support.

Example C: a student has a recent diagnosis of dyslexia, received just one day before an exams period is about to begin. She sits her exams without extra time because it is too late in practical terms to organise AEAs for this student. **It would be appropriate in this case for the student to submit ECs, because her disability was not known in time to make reasonable adjustments (her diagnosis was unforeseen).**

Example D: a student has dyslexia (disclosed) and is supported with appropriate reasonable adjustments. He requests a coursework extension but is told instead to submit his unfinished work to meet the deadline and then to submit ECs indicating that the effects of his dyslexia were the root cause of the unfinished work. **It would not be appropriate in this case for the student to submit ECs because his disability is known.** Faculties/ Schools should consider requests for extensions on a case-by-case basis, taking into account the best interests of the student and the practical circumstances surrounding the request. ECs must not be used in place of coursework extensions, which should be considered as a reasonable adjustment in response to a student's disability.

In summary, students with disclosed disabilities, where there is no change (e.g., worsening or 'flare-up') must be supported at the University via reasonable adjustments to teaching and assessment. Reasonable adjustments include: receiving lecture materials in advance via Blackboard, recording teaching sessions, using a sign language interpreter, being allowed coursework extensions (where sensible), and being offered extra working time in exams. This list is not exhaustive. **ECs must not be used in place of reasonable adjustments to support students with disclosed disabilities.**

For further advice and guidance regarding the application of the University's ECs process to disabled students, or to discuss appropriate reasonable adjustments for a student with disabilities, please contact Disability Services and ask to speak to a Disability Adviser.

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