

Extract from the 'A-Z of the University of Hertfordshire September 2015', pages 98-104, available at <http://www.herts.ac.uk/university-life/student-support>

Guidelines to Students, Staff and Module Boards on Serious Adverse Circumstances

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1 What are 'serious adverse circumstances'?

'Serious adverse circumstances' are significant circumstances beyond a student's control that would affect the student's ability to perform to their full potential if they were to submit or attend assessments at the appointed time. The table on pages 5-9 sets out the guidance to be followed by Assessment Panels and Module Boards. It provides as many examples as possible of the types of circumstance that the University considers to be sufficiently serious, along with some examples of what would not be sufficient.

2 Principles

- i The University allows students to draw to its attention any significant circumstances beyond the student's control that mean their performance would be prejudiced if they were to submit or sit an assessment at the appointed time in the academic session. However, **if a student, despite such circumstances, decides to sit/submit an assessment, the University will not accept a claim that the student has serious adverse circumstances in respect of the assessment.** This principle is in line with the University's aim of making its students fit for the world of employment; one such skill involves taking responsibility for one's own decision making. This principle operates subject to two **highly exceptional** circumstances set out in paragraph 7 below.
- ii Programme staff will advise students on what an Assessment Panel/Module Board is

likely to regard as a serious adverse circumstance, but the decision whether to sit/submit or not to sit/submit will lie with the student alone.

- iii Where a claim of serious adverse circumstances is submitted by a student, the following principles will be adhered to by the Assessment Panels and Module Boards:
 - a Where a student has proven serious adverse circumstances, the University does not award grades on the basis of what the student may have achieved had the circumstances not existed/occurred. Instead, the University grants more time or repeated opportunities in order for the student to demonstrate their knowledge and abilities.
 - b The University will treat information about a student's serious adverse circumstances with sensitivity and respect, regardless of the level of perceived severity; and
 - c The University will treat a student's reported circumstances with as much confidentiality as is practically possible. In very sensitive circumstances, a student may request that the circumstances are only disclosed to the Chair of the Assessment Panel, the Chair of the Module Board and the external examiners (**UPR AS 14 C2.8.7**).

3 Process for submission of serious adverse circumstances in relation to assessed work

If there is a serious adverse circumstance that has affected an assessment (or assessments) of a student, the student must communicate details to the University using the form provided by the School, with appropriate evidence. All Schools have a system of recording the receipt of such forms and evidence and acknowledging receipt to the student. The details must be submitted to the Module Board, normally through the designated programme administrative office or programme administrator, prior to any meeting of the Board as described in the University's Policies and Regulations (**UPR AS14 paragraph C2.7; AS12 Appendix 1 paragraph 5.4.2**). Students are informed that submission should be no later than **ten** working days before the meeting of the Board, but where the relevant assessment is within **twelve** working days of the Module Board, any serious adverse circumstances must be notified no later than **two** working days after the assessment.

4 Serious adverse circumstances and attendance at lectures/seminars, etc

If students are required to attend a lecture, seminar, practical or other type of timetabled class and they are unable to do so due to illness, they must self-certify to this effect. If, however, the illness extends beyond seven successive working days and attendance is required, students should obtain a medical certificate verifying that they are not fit to attend.

5 Serious adverse circumstances and non-attendance at an examination/in-class test

If a student is not sufficiently fit to attend an examination/in-class test they should notify the appropriate staff in their School before the scheduled start time, and their doctor or other registered medical professional/counsellor (where appropriate) as soon as possible. **It is important to note that the University Medical Practice is not prepared to give retrospective certification after the date of the examination/in-class test. Certification can only be provided if a doctor or nurse has been actively consulted by a student during their illness.**

6 Serious adverse circumstances and failure to submit coursework by the due date

If a student is unable to submit coursework by the due date, in the first instance they should apply to the designated member of staff of the programme for an extension (if available). Once the period for extensions has expired, students must complete a serious adverse circumstances form following the procedure set out in paragraph 3 above.

7 Serious adverse circumstances and attendance at an examination/in-class test or the submission of coursework

Except in the two circumstances outlined below, students who sit/submit an assessment deem themselves to be sufficiently able to undertake the assessment and cannot later claim to have suffered 'serious adverse circumstances' to explain poor performance.

Exceptions:

- i Where at the time of sitting/submitting the relevant assessment, it is established that the student was not capable of understanding that their performance was likely to be affected seriously by ill health and/or its treatment and this view is supported by a doctor/psychiatric practitioner or the University's Disability Services.

This ground will be a very rare occurrence as in most circumstances students will be in a position to decide whether their serious adverse circumstances are likely to affect their performance in assessments. Examples may include the death of a close family member within a day or so of the examination/in-class test; being involved in a serious car accident on the way to an examination and suffering post-traumatic stress; or being unaware of the likely effect of a serious mental illness on assessment performance.

The student will be required to lodge a claim of serious adverse circumstances using the normal procedures (see paragraph 3 above). In addition, they will be required to take a special letter to their doctor/psychiatric practitioner or the University's Disability Services in which the health professional is asked to certify to the effect that at the time the student took the assessment they were *not capable of understanding* that their performance was likely to be affected seriously by ill health and/or its treatment.

If the claim is upheld, **the original mark will be null and void**. If the claim is not upheld, the recorded mark will stand.

- ii Where a student suddenly becomes unwell during an examination or in-class test and they decide to leave without completing the assessment. In this event, they must notify the invigilator before leaving the examination room of the serious adverse circumstances which necessitate their leaving, unless it is impractical to do so (eg, the student is unconscious or being violently sick).

If, having left the examination room, the student decides to rely on serious adverse circumstances and they submit a form requesting a deferral and their circumstances are approved, **the original mark will be null and void**. If the claim is not upheld, the recorded mark will stand.

8 Serious adverse circumstances and students with a disability

- i Whilst it is acceptable for Schools to accept evidence of a medical disability from a doctor, it is not appropriate for Schools to accept a diagnosis of a specific learning difficulty without consulting Disability Services.
- ii Where a School Assessment Panel (SAP) considers that a serious adverse circumstance is linked to a disability and the School has received no information from Disability Services, the SAP should obtain the consent of the student in question to refer the evidence to Disability Services.
- iii Before accepting cases of serious adverse circumstances on the grounds of disability, Boards of Examiners should check with Disability Services whether the evidence of disability provided by the student to the Board is satisfactory. This includes cases where the student has alleged that they have not received appropriate support from Disability Services.
- iv Students submitting serious adverse circumstances for a reason related to disability support should ask a member of Disability Services for a written statement to support their claim.
- v Disability Services may submit evidence on behalf of a student under exception (i) in paragraph 7 above, where appropriate.

Table of serious adverse circumstances and actions

	Main types of serious adverse circumstance (SAC) reported	Evidence required	Action (levels 0,4,5)	Action (levels 6, 7) (if level 6 referral is allowed, the Board can use advice for levels 0,4 and 5)
1	<p>Medical (serious – not a recognised disability). Examples: broken limb, problem with eyesight, influenza, vomiting or migraine <u>at time of assessment</u>, infectious condition.</p> <p>Notes:</p> <p>a. Influenza ('flu') does not refer to the common cold or conditions with similar symptoms.</p> <p>b. Some conditions <u>may</u> be able to be accommodated by separate arrangements (eg, the use of an amanuensis for those with broken arms) if they are reported before the cut-off date for adjustments published on StudyNet.</p>	<p>Medical certificate (self-certification for the first seven days of illness is only permitted if the student provides evidence that it is the policy of their GP practice not to issue medical certificates), or evidence from the invigilator's log.</p> <p>For students registered with the University medical practice, please see paragraph 5 of the guidance.</p>	Deferral.	<p>Deferral.</p> <p>If, however, the student has acceptable serious adverse circumstances which prevent him/her from sitting the deferral until the same time in the following academic session, the Programme Board has discretion to offer Final Compensatory Credit with or without penalty (for a total of thirty credits) subject to the limitations set out in UPR AS14 D.4.1.</p>
2	<p>Medical (minor). The following conditions are considered to be minor (unless, in the case of an examination/in-class test, the symptoms are so bad on the relevant day that the student is too unwell to attend, in which case the condition will be treated as serious as in 1 above):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-limiting respiratory infections – eg, cold, sore throat, earache, cough, sinusitis 	Not applicable.	Not an acceptable SAC.	

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other short-term infections – eg, cystitis, gastroenteritis • Asthma • Mechanical pain such as lower back pain, sprains and tendonitis – eg, writer’s cramp/RSI • Tension-type headaches • Period pains • Irregular irritable bowel syndrome • Hay fever • Stress or anxiety when this is exclusively related to examinations 			

Main types of serious adverse circumstance (SAC) reported	Evidence required	Action (levels 0,4,5)	Action (levels 6, 7) <small>(if level 6 referral is allowed, the Board can use advice for levels 0,4 and 5)</small>
<p>3 Disabled students A diagnosis of a disability (as opposed to a reason related to a diagnosed disability) is not valid grounds for a SAC.</p> <p>i A reasonable adjustment, agreed through a Study Needs Agreement (SNA), more than four weeks prior to the exam period is not an acceptable SAC.</p> <p>ii Late disclosure of a disability with a valid reason/request for disability adjustment (after the cut-off date for agreeing adjustments published on StudyNet). Adjustments will only be made if failure to do so would disturb other candidates and/or endanger the candidate themselves if left in the main exam room. Extra time will not be given. The student has the choice of whether or not to sit/submit, but if they decide to sit/submit they cannot claim to have serious adverse circumstances.</p> <p>iii Unforeseen effect of a disability-related occurrence – eg, (a) when the effect of a disability is not anticipated, such as an epileptic seizure or unexpected episode of mental ill health; (b) when a reasonable adjustment agreed through an SNA has not been implemented.</p>	<p>Not applicable.</p> <p>i Not applicable.</p> <p>ii Confirmation in writing from a member of Disability Services that the SAC is valid.</p> <p>iii Confirmation in writing from a member of Disability Services that the SAC is valid.</p>	<p>Not an acceptable SAC.</p> <p>i Not an acceptable SAC.</p> <p>ii Deferral.</p> <p>iii Deferral.</p>	<p>Not an acceptable SAC.</p> <p>i Not an acceptable SAC.</p> <p>ii As circumstance 1; the Module/Programme Board will consider the seriousness of the condition and the extent of the student's control.</p> <p>iii As circumstance 1; the Module/Programme Board will consider the seriousness of the condition and the extent of the student's control.</p>
<p>4 Death in immediate family (grandparent, parent, sibling, child, grandchild, first cousin, aunt, uncle, spouse, partner, parent-in-law)</p>	<p>Death certificate, additional information (location of funeral,</p>	<p>Deferral.</p>	<p>As circumstance 1; the Module/Programme Board will consider the timing of the death, the responsibilities of the student and the closeness</p>

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	or close friend within the semester (or for an extended time period in exceptional circumstances).	any religious observance requirements for mourning, etc).		of the relationship.
5	Attendance at a funeral at the time of the assessment.	Death certificate, additional information (location of funeral, any religious observance requirements for mourning, etc).	Deferral.	As circumstance 1; the Module/Programme Board will consider the timing of the death, the responsibilities of the student and the closeness of the relationship.
6	Death of a relative or friend outside the semester, or the funeral is not at same time as assessment.	Not applicable.	Not an acceptable SAC.	
7	Serious illness in family (particularly where the student has duty of care; 'family' defined as in circumstance 4).	Medical certificate.	Deferral.	As circumstance 1; the Module/Programme Board will consider the timing of the illness, the responsibilities of the student and the closeness of the relationship.
8	Commitment outside of the student's control (eg, emergencies, including unexpected loss of childcare) on the date when the student is required to attend for an assessment.	As appropriate (eg, letter from employer or nursery).	Deferral.	As circumstance 1; the Module/Programme Board will consider the seriousness of the event and the extent of the student's control.
9	Work commitments (part-time students only) (eg, heavy workload at the time an assessment is due).	As appropriate (eg, letter from employer).	Deferral.	
10	Serious transport problem (ie, exceptional circumstance such as a serious rail delay or road traffic accident, snow causing serious delays to traffic).	As appropriate (eg, copy of ticket, compensation slip from rail company, traffic report).	Deferral.	As circumstance 1; the Module/Programme Board will consider the severity of the transport incident and the extent of the student's control.
11	Routine type, predictable or partly predictable transport problem (eg, traffic jams, late train or bus, tyre puncture, etc).	Not applicable.	Not an acceptable SAC.	
12	Misunderstood examination timetable.	Not applicable.	Not an acceptable SAC.	
13	Overslept.	Not applicable.	Not an acceptable SAC.	

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14	Religious reasons, where not working is a requirement	Requests must be notified to the University at least two weeks in advance, with appropriate evidence, or by the deadline published by the Examinations Office in the case of examinations.	The University will make reasonable attempts to make adjustments to the assessment timetable. Deferral is an option where work is prescribed on a particular day for a particular faith group. If there is doubt as to whether work is prescribed then the University will be guided by the advice of the University Chaplain who will consult with appropriate sources. In all cases the University's decision is final. Boards of Examiners should consult the University Chaplaincy for guidance on acceptable religious circumstances (chaplain@herts.ac.uk). For the 2014/2015 academic session, a calendar of recognised prescribed days has been issued.	
15	Serious personal problem not medical (eg, separation from spouse/partner, victim of crime) within the semester.	As appropriate (letter from counsellor, landlord, crime reference number, etc).	Deferral.	Deferral. If, however, the student has further acceptable serious adverse circumstances that prevent him/her from sitting the deferral until the same time in the following academic session, the Programme Board has discretion to offer Final Compensatory Credit without or without penalty (for a total of thirty credits).
16	Financial.	Not applicable.	Not an acceptable SAC.	
17	Holidays.	Booking information.	Deferral. Only acceptable if the booking is made prior to acceptance of the University of Hertfordshire offer.	
18	Computer problems.	As appropriate (eg, memo from IH explaining the nature of the problem).	Not acceptable, unless experienced by a sufficiently large group of students.	As circumstance 1; the Module/Programme Board will consider the seriousness of the event and the extent of the student's control.
19	Complaints about University of Hertfordshire staff (eg, supervision).	Various (diary of missed meetings or classes, etc).	To be dealt with through Module Board.	