

Education Zone December 2019 – Changes to the university’s policy for extenuating circumstances

What is the current situation at UCL related to this proposal?

When students experience “serious difficulties and personal problems which affect their ability to complete an assessment”, also known as Extenuating Circumstances (ECs) UCL can put in place alternative arrangements, such as an extension or a deferral of an assessment to a later date. In the academic manual, two overarching principles are established:¹

- » Students must notify UCL of any circumstances which are sudden, unexpected, significantly disruptive and beyond the student’s control and which may affect their performance at assessment, such as a serious illness or the death of a close relative.
- » UCL should ensure that alternative arrangements are put in place for such students, such as an extension or Deferral of assessment to a later date.

As the motion states, the system asks that students complete the Extenuating Circumstances Request Form within one week of the EC taking place. The form is 5 pages long, asking for student details, what assessments are affected, details of the EC and supporting evidence. This supporting evidence is required to be completed by a “verifiable, independent authority”, with examples given including a GMC-registered medical practitioner, police officer or a registrar of births, marriages and deaths. The information this person is required to submit includes the nature of the Extenuating Circumstance, how this affects the student’s ability to complete the assessments described and the dates this circumstance covers.²

The academic manual does also deal with the issue of late ECs, suggesting that if a student is unable to obtain the necessary evidence within the deadlines stated that they should still submit their EC form on time and indicate that their evidence is to follow. Those responsible for considering the request may use their discretion to consider the late requests where a decision regarding examination or assessment has not yet been made, and where the student is “physically or psychologically unable to submit their EC Form within the specified deadline because the EC is still ongoing”. In this circumstance but where a decision has already been made regarding examination or assessment, the student can request a review bearing in mind that the EC form could not be submitted on time.

What is the relevant national/ international context to this situation?

Unlike other institutions such as the LSE and Queen Mary UCL does not offer a ‘fit to sit’ policy, which means that if a student enters the exam room or submits an assessment they are declaring themselves well enough to do so.³ At UCL, extenuating circumstances can still be submitted after the assessment in question has taken place.

¹ <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/academic-manual/chapters/chapter-4-assessment-framework-taught-programmes/section-6-extenuating-circumstances#6.11>

² <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/academic-manual/chapters/chapter-4-assessment-framework-taught-programmes#annexes>

³ <https://www.welfare.qmul.ac.uk/guides/extenuating-circumstances/what-fit-sit-policy/>

The Office for Independent Adjudicator (OIA), the independent student complaints scheme for England and Wales, produces good practice guides on a number of areas, including for universities on handling student complaints and procedures. On the area of when a submission is required, the OIA leave this up to institutions, stating that extenuating circumstances should be taken into account “if those circumstances are made known to the provider in a timely manner” and that it is “for each provider to determine what mitigating or extenuating circumstances are acceptable”. However, when it comes to late submission, the OIA does advise that providers “will need to exercise discretion where there is good reason, supported by evidence, for late submission of a complaint or academic appeal”⁴

Are there any legal implications to this policy proposal?

No

Does this relate to any existing SU policy?

No

Are there any financial, resource or stakeholder/ public relations issues with this policy proposal?

No

What would the next steps be if the motion passed?

Meet with the motion proposer to gain more clarity on what type of campaigning would be possible, and how this could most effectively be done.

⁴ <https://www.oiahe.org.uk/resources-and-publications/good-practice-framework/>