



Queen Margaret University

EDINBURGH

EXTENUATING CIRCUMSTANCES

GUIDELINES FOR STUDENTS AND STAFF

This document provides guidance to students and staff on the definition and consideration of claims for 'extenuating circumstances', and on the procedures for submitting a claim under these guidelines.

This guidance should be read in conjunction with the QMU Academic Appeals Procedures and the section on 'Assessment' contained within the University Governance and Regulations Handbook. Copies of both are available at www.qmu.ac.uk/quality

1 INTRODUCTION – SOME IMPORTANT PRINCIPLES

The University's procedures for the consideration of extenuating circumstances seek to ensure that all students are treated fairly, are not disadvantaged by circumstances **beyond their control**, and that the standards of the University's awards are maintained.

It is accepted that, from time to time, circumstances **beyond a student's control** may affect her/his ability to undertake assessment on time, or may affect her/his performance in assessment. It is also recognised that assessment periods can be stressful. However, students need to be able to plan and manage their time and their workload, to meet deadlines, to cope with a certain level of stress, and to manage their University studies alongside other responsibilities in life.

All students have a responsibility to manage their learning, revision and assessment activities throughout each semester or assessment period. It is essential that students plan carefully and manage workloads throughout this time, and do not leave too much coursework, learning, revision or similar activities to be undertaken late in the semester or assessment period. Similarly, when examinations are to be taken at the end of a semester or assessment period, students should conduct revision throughout the semester, and not limit it to the period shortly before sitting examinations.

It is also essential to recognise that illnesses and difficult life events do occur, and that it is a normal part of life to have to manage these and continue with work or study.

2 WHAT WOULD BE ACCEPTED AS 'EXTENUATING CIRCUMSTANCES'?

Extenuating circumstances are defined as:

"circumstances beyond the student's control which either prevent the student from submitting a piece of course work or sitting an examination, or cause the student to perform less well in his or her course work or examinations than he or she might otherwise have been expected to do (on the basis of other work)."

The term is used to describe those circumstances that cause exceptional interference with academic performance, and which are over and above the normal difficulties experienced in life.

In general, though not exclusively, extenuating circumstances will be of a medical or personal nature affecting the student for a period of time and/or during the assessment period. These are normally circumstances that have prevented the student from demonstrating, or acquiring, the skills, knowledge or competencies associated with a particular module(s). This would include circumstances preventing attendance at an examination, or adversely affecting performance at an examination, or preventing work from being submitted by the deadline set. Examples would include, but would not be limited to, illness, accident, or bereavement.

The University does not normally consider medical certificates for long-standing controlled conditions, or self-limiting illness, as evidence in support of extenuating circumstances affecting performance. Students in this category would normally have had the benefit of experience, medical knowledge or help to control the condition or illness, and would normally have registered with the Disabled Student Coordinator, the Disability Adviser, and be working to an agreed Learning Plan. It follows that such students should contact the Disability Adviser at an early point so that these circumstances can be recorded and appropriate arrangements put in place, in line with QMU's disability policy statement. Further information may be found in the Student Handbook and on the University's website.

The University normally disregards circumstances which students are expected to cope with as part of a properly managed workload, or as part of the normal issues and difficulties that arise as part of life. Circumstances which would not be acceptable are those where a student could reasonably have avoided the situation, or acted to limit the impact of the circumstances.

The following are examples of circumstances which would NOT fall within the University's definition of "extenuating circumstances":

- completing coursework too late and missing deadlines because of computer; difficulties, or transport difficulties;
- general pressure of work;
- normal work commitments on behalf of an employer;
- having more than one examination on the same day or on consecutive days (unless the student was already suffering from illness or injury)
- missing an examination due to misreading the timetable or oversleeping;
- losing work not backed up on computer disk, or failure of a floppy disk/CD Rom;
- theft of home computer – students are expected to make a back up copy of all work on, which should be stored separately from the computer.
- failure to make alternative travel plans when disruptions were advised in advance;
- a short-term problem or illness which has occurred during the year and which is deemed not to have had an overall effect on the student's performance;
- where extenuating circumstances have affected the student throughout their time at QMU [on the basis that it would be difficult to determine what her/his marks might have been like otherwise];
- Insufficient computers/printers to do the work [a claim submitted upon this basis would not be supported on the grounds that it indicated lack of advance planning];

Failure of IT would be accepted only in limited circumstances. There may be occasions when, due to unforeseen circumstances, the University's own computer/IT equipment is

unavailable for use. If this happens students may request confirmation from Information Services of this, including the time period and the date(s) of its unavailability. However, it would be reasonable to expect a student to submit the latest draft of their work from a few days prior to the deadline to support their claim.

3 WHEN SHOULD A CLAIM FOR EXTENUATING CIRCUMSTANCES BE SUBMITTED?

It is important that students report **in advance** any circumstances that they anticipate will affect their performance in assessment.

Students who know that they will be unable to meet the deadline for coursework, or attend an examination – due to circumstances beyond their control – should submit a completed Extenuating Circumstances Claim form, along with supporting evidence, to their Programme Leader in good time, so that the potential implications can be considered. The Extenuating Circumstances Claim Form may be collected from the School Office or from the Examinations Officer, Registry. Alternatively, arrangements will be made to post or email a copy of the form where a student is unable to travel to the University for valid reason [e.g. illness, residence at a distance, work commitments].

In the case of course work, a request for an extension should also be submitted if required, normally before and no later than the date the coursework assignment was due.

The claim for extenuating circumstances will be considered at this stage by the **Programme and Module Co-ordinator**. If the circumstances are deemed valid and there is time to redeem the situation (e.g. through an extension to deadline for submission of coursework), the authority to agree this rests with the Programme Leader.

*It follows therefore, that the only claims for extenuating circumstances which can normally be considered **after** the assessment date – either the date of the examination or the deadline date for submission of coursework – are those where it can be demonstrated that the student was affected by an accident or sudden illness, or other circumstances which occurred on or immediately before the day in question and which were entirely beyond the student's control.*

If it is not possible to redeem the situation [e.g. where the examination was part of a timetable diet of examinations], then the Programme Leader will advise the student concerned, and the claim for extenuating circumstances will be put forward to the relevant Board of Examiners [see section below].

It is the student's responsibility to ensure that their claim is submitted to the Programme leader in sufficient time for the appropriate Board of Examiners, normally no later than one week before the meeting of the Board of Examiners. The dates of the Boards of Examiners are available from the School Office, the Student Records section of the Registry and the Students' Union.

Failure to submit a form to the Programme Leader in advance of the Board of Examiners, without valid cause, will mean that the student may not subsequently appeal against their results on the grounds of extenuating circumstances. It is the student's responsibility to explain fully the impact of extenuating circumstances on their work/performance. If this is not explained sufficiently, then the student may not subsequently appeal and ask the Board to consider additional information.

4 WHAT EVIDENCE SHOULD BE SUBMITTED WITH THE CLAIM

A claim for extenuating circumstances must be submitted on the appropriate form. The form must be completed in full, and each module / mode of assessment affected must be recorded. The form should normally be submitted in person at the School Office, but may also be submitted by email or fax where the student is unable to travel to the University for valid reason [e.g. illness, residence at a distance, work commitments].

The claim form *should be accompanied by supporting evidence, in writing, from an appropriate authority*. A claim is unlikely to be upheld without appropriate supporting evidence. Individual circumstances will dictate the nature of the evidence required to support a claim.

Normally, students should seek corroborating information from an independent person, organisation or support service that could provide verification. Acceptable supporting evidence would normally be an original (not photocopy) document written and signed by an appropriate third party, giving details of the circumstance, its duration, and, where possible, its impact. An appropriate third party would be one who knows the student in a professional capacity or one who can verify the circumstance from a position of authority (e.g. police officer, solicitor, GP, University Counsellor) and who is in a position to provide objective and impartial evidence. Letters from family members and fellow students are not normally accepted. In some circumstances, it may be appropriate for a member of the academic staff to provide a supporting statement.

Dates of evidence must correspond with the extenuating circumstances detailed.

If a student has missed an assignment through ill health, then the illness must coincide with the preparation, writing or deadline of that assessment.

Students, who miss an examination or an invigilated test due to illness or are claiming to have been affected by medical problems during examination, should seek medical attention at the time of their illness where possible. In the case of an illness, which has directly affected the ability to attend or complete an assessment for a period between 1 and 5 days, the student should submit a self certification form. For periods of illness lasting more than 5 days, the student should submit a medical certificate [see below].

Self certification is a formal declaration to confirm that the student suffered a short illness lasting 1 - 5 consecutive days, and which was severe enough to prevent attendance at the University. Self certification may be accepted to support absence from lectures, classes and examinations. It is not normally accepted in respect of failure to complete coursework by its due date, as coursework schedules normally allow more than five days - often a period of weeks - for the coursework to be completed.

Self certification forms are available from Student Services and from the School Office.

In periods of illness lasting more than 5 days, a medical certificate must be provided. The certificate must relate specifically to the dates and duration of the illness, contain a clear medical diagnosis or opinion and not merely report a student's claim that they were unwell. Doctors are entitled to charge for any medical certificates or notes they provide, and may not always provide certificates for *short* periods of illness. A doctor's note must be on headed paper and/or stamped by the surgery.

Self certification and medical certification must normally be submitted within 7 days of the absence from an examination, lectures, classes or other learning activity.

It is appreciated that there are occasions when it is not practically or emotionally possible to produce evidence at the time (e.g. close family bereavement, assault etc). Programme Leaders and Boards of Examiners are aware of this, and may accept such claims without third party evidence.

If a student has an extenuating circumstance of an unusually delicate or personal nature that they do not wish to document **in detail**, then the student may elect to discuss with his/her Personal Academic Tutor or Student Counsellor who will confirm to the Programme Leader that the student has submitted a valid claim. This will ensure that the Programme Leader can consider the claim without knowing all the details.

5 TO WHOM IS THE CLAIM SUBMITTED?

The claim must normally be submitted in an envelope clearly marked **Confidential** and addressed to the **Programme Leader**. This applies where a claim is being lodged in advance of an examination or assignment, or [where the claim is in respect of failure to attend an examination, or in respect of diminished performance during an examination or in completing an assignment.

While the Programme Leader will be responsible for assessing the student's claim, the Programme Leader may consult the student's Personal Academic Tutor, as it is recognised that students may approach their Personal Academic Tutor in the first instance for advice and support.

In either case, the form is normally submitted by the student in person to the School Office. Alternatively, a student may post or email a copy of the form where the student is unable to travel to the University for valid reason [e.g. illness, residence at a distance, work commitments]. Copies of the form are available for download at the following website addresses: <http://www.qmu.ac.uk/quality> or at http://www.qmu.ac.uk/current_students/a_to_z.htm#e

6 WHAT MIGHT THE OUTCOME BE?

A claim for extenuating circumstances submitted in advance of an assessment is not an alternative to undertaking the necessary assessment, but, if successful, will normally result in the student being provided with an opportunity to undertake the assessment at a future date. The option remains for students to submit coursework up to one week after the published deadline date, without a claim for extenuating circumstances, on the basis that the maximum mark which can then be awarded is 40% for undergraduate or 50% for postgraduate modules.

Where a claim has been submitted after an assessment deadline, or where an examination has been missed, and there is no opportunity to redeem the situation [e.g. by an extension to a deadline] or where a claim is submitted on the basis of diminished performance in an exam or assessment, the Board of Examiners will come to a judgement.

The Board of Examiners will try to ensure a fair result based on overall performance. It may take a number of actions.

For example, if a student has missed an examination, and the Board of Examiners considers the reasons to be valid, it can treat the absence in a number of ways.

Where the claim is in respect of diminished performance as a direct result of the extenuating circumstance, the Board will try to determine whether, and to what extent, extenuating circumstances have affected a student's academic performance, and determine what action, if any, can be taken. In assessing the significance of extenuating circumstances Boards will normally take into account:

- the severity of the problem and the length of time involved;
- any supporting documentary evidence;
- whether all work in the same period appears to have been equally affected;
- whether it is possible to gauge the effect of the extenuating circumstances upon academic performance;
- whether achievement is consistent with past performance;
- the type of assessment affected, and how the student had to complete the work (i.e date when work set and deadline for submission).

Boards of Examiners will not give extra marks because a student's work has been affected by extenuating circumstances, nor will they amend marks from previous years of study, or annotate the statement of results/transcripts with comments about the existence of extenuating circumstances.

The Board may decide that the student is given the opportunity to submit for further assessment in the module (or component of module) against which they have claimed extenuating circumstances. The Board may also decide not to uphold the claim on the basis that the student has not made a case, that the supporting evidence does not support the claim, or that the student had no good reason for not advising of the circumstances prior to the assessment or examination for which extenuating circumstances are sought.

7 ACADEMIC APPEALS

A student has the right to appeal against a decision of a Board of Examiners.

The grounds for appeal are as follows:

- **additional information** is available that was not, and could not, reasonably have been made available to the Board at the time it made its original decision and which had it been available could have led the Board to making a different decision;
- there was a **material irregularity** in the procedures of the Board of Examiners or in the conduct of the assessment.

A student may NOT appeal on grounds that:

- could have been considered by the Board of Examiners had notice been given prior to the meeting; and
- the student has no valid reason for having failed to give such notice.

A claim for extenuating circumstances, which has been considered by the Board, may not be submitted again under the academic appeals procedures. If a claim for extenuating circumstances forms the basis of an academic appeal, the student will need to demonstrate why they did not follow the procedures for submitting a claim for extenuating circumstances in advance of the board of examiner.

8 FALSE CLAIMS

The submission of a false claim may be regarded as an attempt to gain unfair advantage, which would be an academic offence and could be dealt with under the QMU Disciplinary Procedures.

9 DATA PROTECTION ACT 1998

In submitting an extenuating circumstances form, students agree to the University holding this personal data for the purposes of processing their claim. The University will hold this data in accordance with its notification under the 1998 Data Protection Act.