Mitigating circumstances consultation feedback

Thank you to everyone who submitted a response to the mitigating circumstances consultation, either directly or through a student representative. We are pleased to tell you that we received 274 responses from academic colleagues, professional services colleagues in faculties and directorates, ACP colleagues, Brookes Union and student representatives.

Broadly speaking, you agreed with the proposals being put forward. You agreed that the University needed a simpler, more straightforward process that could be completed online and administered by a dedicated team of staff. You agreed that we should offer more guidance on what claims were likely to be accepted in order to manage expectations and you agreed that the University should adopt a ‘fit to sit’ policy, in which students are automatically considered well enough to sit or submit an assessment unless they declare themselves otherwise. You agreed that claims for extenuating circumstances should be supported by evidence, except for self-limiting conditions affecting attendance at event assessments such as exams for which a medical note would not be possible (eg vomiting and diarrhoea).

We recognise that a significant proportion of you had some reservations about the proposal to offer a 48-hour grace period with access to the full range of marks and we will be giving this proposal further consideration. We realise that we didn’t fully explain our intention with this proposal and offer some further explanation here. This 48-hour grace period is not an extension to every assessment deadline. We do not expect students to routinely use this grace period; indeed most will never use it and we anticipate that those who do use it would only use it once for a one-off incidence such as IT failure or a last-minute childcare emergency, situations which would not meet the criteria for an extenuating circumstance. We recognise that the proposed changes to the current mitigating circumstances arrangements make the new policy more stringent than the current system, and this is a deliberate move to align the University’s approach to that of an employer’s. However, we recognise how hard students work towards their final degree classification and GPA and would not want one outlying mark to affect this. The purpose of this grace period is to offer an occasion of one-off support in an emergency situation which would not necessarily meet the new extenuating circumstances criteria rather than simply extra time to finish an essay. Similarly, we would not expect to see students repeatedly self-certifying for illnesses which occur on the day of an event assessment; such situations are expected to be extremely rare. We recognise that we will need to give careful thought to how we present these elements of the new policy to students in order to ensure that they are only used in truly exceptional circumstances.

You supported our proposal that all claims of extenuating circumstances (including use of the 48-hour grace period) should be closely monitored. You agreed that when we identify that a student is not making the progress we would expect in their academic studies, it is our responsibility as a university to initiate an early conversation with that student to see how they can best be supported. We intend to use the move to the new Student Record System as an opportunity to set up systems that allow us to identify students making multiple applications for extenuating circumstances quickly and easily. We will need to think carefully about who is best placed to initiate early conversations with students, bearing in mind the
confidential nature of the information provided within a request. To reiterate, we think early intervention is vital because multiple extended deadlines and deferred assessments can have a significant and detrimental impact on future study and assessment. Where we identify issues we can refer students to more appropriate forms of support or where necessary, a period of temporary approved withdrawal.

In your open comments regarding what you thought was the most important issue regarding a new extenuating circumstances policy, the issues of simplicity and clarity surrounding the policy and what, and what doesn’t, constitute an extenuating circumstance were raised frequently. The need for students to receive timely responses that are consistent and comparable to similar claims, was also considered to be a priority. A number of you said that students sometimes find the language we use difficult to understand, so we are considering calling the new policy Exceptional Circumstances rather than Extenuating Circumstances.

You also pointed out that many of the examples given for what does or doesn’t constitute an extenuating circumstance referred to medical issues, and not the wide range of other circumstances that can affect students during their time at university such as bereavement, mental health issues and the demands of caring responsibilities. You also asked that we consider cultural differences as these can profoundly affect a student’s response to a situation and we plan to do more work to understand how we can recognise this to ensure that the extenuating circumstances policy reflects the diverse community of Brookes students.

Our colleagues from Accredited College Partners rightly pointed out that they currently administer claims for mitigating circumstances locally and the proposals appeared to infer that claims from ACP students will be considered within Brookes under the new regulations. We need to explore the pros and cons of each approach with our ACPs to find the best solution for this group of students.

After feedback has been reviewed, the new policy and a draft of how it will work in practice will be taken to the Teaching and Learning Infrastructure Committee in February and Academic Board in April ready for implementation in September 2019.

Ali Blair
Associate Director of ASA

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