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. We realise that we didn’t fully explain 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 over an extended period of time towards their final degree classification and GPA and would not want one outlying mark to affect this, so the purpose of this grace period is to offer an occasion of one-off support. The grace period would be used for occasions that would not necessarily meet the new extenuating circumstances criteria, for example, a one-off IT failure 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.

You supported our proposal that all claims of extenuating circumstances (including use of the 48-hour grace period) would be closely monitored. You agreed that when we identify that a student is not making the progress we would expect in their academic studies, we would discuss this with the student in order to identify at an early stage what the most appropriate course of action might be. This might range from seeking support from a range of sources within the University to taking a break from their studies in order to get well or deal with difficult personal circumstances.
To reiterate, the extenuating circumstances policy is in place to deal with unforeseen and unpreventable events that significantly impact on a student’s ability to engage with their studies. We think that if a student is regularly requiring extensions to deal with their assessment requirements, it is not in the best interest of the student to continue without a discussion around any issues they facing. This is because extended deadlines can impact on future assessments and study and the student may require more appropriate forms of support.

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.

You also raised the issue that many of the examples given for what does or doesn’t constitute an extenuating circumstance referred to medical reasons, and not the wide range of other circumstances that can affect students during their time at university such as bereavement, mental health issues, the demands of caring responsibilities and work responsibilities (for part-time students who rely on their work for income). 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 policy 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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