



# GUIDE TO EXCEPTIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES

AU-RSC-18-1868-A

Applicable to students in all Stages/Years of programmes

**2019/20**

## Policy Summary

This guidance sets out the University's approach to the submission and recognition of exceptional circumstances beyond a student's control that affect their ability to study and complete examinations and/or assessments, including:

- Guidance on when students should apply for a leave of absence or exceptional circumstances, and when the Enabling Team should be contacted in regards to long term or reoccurring issues or learning disabilities.
- A list of example situations that may be appropriate reasons for the submission of exceptional circumstances, and the types of evidence that may be accepted in each case.
- Information on the weighting of evidence against the specific circumstances of each case.
- Information on how the Board of Examiners considers spent and unspent exceptional circumstances.

## Related Regulations, Policies, and Guidance

Supplementary information on exceptional circumstances can be found within the [General Regulations](#) relevant to the programme. The [General Regulations for the Conduct of Boards of Examiners](#) provides further information on the consideration of exceptional circumstances by the Board.

The University's webpages for the [Enabling Team](#) and [Leave of Absence](#) provide further information on these subjects for students and staff.

## Version Control

Ref No	Version	Responsible Officer	Approved by	Approval Date	Effective Date
AU-RSC-18-1868	A	Adam Hewitt	OLTC	Jun 2019	Sep 2019

**Problems with studying or completing coursework or exams**

There may be occasions during your time at Aston when your ability to study and complete assessments/examinations is affected by circumstances beyond your normal control. These circumstances may include health problems, personal/family issues or financial constraints. It is important that you discuss these issues with the appropriate person in your School, e.g. your personal tutor or advisor, year tutor, programme director, to ensure that you are aware of the sources of support and guidance available to you. For instance, it may be advisable for you to take a Leave of Absence, returning to your studies when the issue has been resolved or become manageable. If you have long term health issues, you may be directed to the Enabling Team to discuss the support that may be available to you. Alternatively, you may be advised to submit an exceptional circumstances form, on which you can explain your situation to your Exam Board.

It is essential that you discuss any issues with your School as soon as possible so that the appropriate support mechanisms can be put in place. Waiting until the end of the year before approaching your School will limit the options available.

**When should I go on Leave of Absence?**

Leave of Absence is a temporary suspension of your studies, usually for a period of one academic year. Reasons for taking Leave of Absence include pregnancy, family responsibilities, illness or financial difficulties. You should consider taking Leave of Absence if your circumstances are long term and affect your ability to study.

Before requesting Leave of Absence you should discuss your circumstances with your School. If it is decided that Leave of Absence is the best way forward you request this via the MAP ([My Aston Portal](#)) link. Your School Office or the [HUB](#) will be able to assist with processing your request on your behalf. This request should include dates of the Leave of Absence; when you want it to start and when you would like to return. If possible, try and link your leave with a logical academic date such as the end of a term or the end of a teaching period. In most cases verbal permission may be given quite quickly even if it takes time for it to become official. It is possible to extend Leave of Absence for a further year in some circumstances. However, you should check with your School as this is not always possible for all courses.

Taking Leave of Absence may have financial implications (for your student support and your tuition fees) and you are encouraged to talk to a Student Support advisor (based in the Hub)/your School/ the Advice and Representation Centre. Further information can be found on <http://www1.aston.ac.uk/current-students/hub/>

If you are an international student, taking Leave of Absence will result in the University informing the UK Visas and Immigration (the Home Office). Your student visa will cease to be valid and you will have to leave the UK. You will need to apply for a new visa in order to come back to the UK and continue with your studies.

For advice on visas you should contact one of the qualified visa advisors at Aston in the International Student Support Unit. Contact details are: International Student Support Unit (ISSU) within The [Hub](#) off the Upper Foyer of the Main Building. Tel: (0121) 204 4007 or email: [issu@aston.ac.uk](mailto:issu@aston.ac.uk).

**What can I do if I have a long term health problem/disability/specific learning disability?**

If you have a condition which is unlikely to improve during the course of your studies and which affects your ability to study and/or complete assessments, you should contact the Enabling Team so that possible support mechanisms can be explored. For instance, it may be possible to make special arrangements for sitting exams or provide additional academic support or equipment that could help you. The University is committed to supporting students. However, you should note that long term problems do not constitute exceptional circumstances (unless there has been a sudden and temporary flare-up) and Exam Boards must judge your ability on the basis of your actual or expected performance. If your performance has been affected overall, then there is no evidence of your expected performance.

**Enabling Team**

The Enabling Team is contactable via The Hub ground floor Main Building. Tel: (0121) 204 4007 or email [enablingteam@aston.ac.uk](mailto:enablingteam@aston.ac.uk)

**What should I do if I feel I won't perform well in an exam?**

There may be occasions when you wish you were better prepared for an exam, especially if events have occurred which have interrupted your revision programme. The dates of exam periods are published well in advance and you should organise your revision time to allow for minor events which disrupt your revision. If you suffer from conditions, such as migraines or hay fever, you should build allowance into your revision timetable as such circumstances will not be accepted as valid reason for loss of revision time.

However, [exceptional circumstances](#) may prevent you from attending an examination and in such cases you should ask the Exam Board to consider your situation through the exceptional circumstances process. See 'What counts as exceptional circumstances?' and the section on 'How to submit exceptional circumstances' below.

Please note, however, that if you attend an examination or other fixed time assessment, the University considers that you have declared yourself 'Fit to Sit' the assessment. Where you have declared yourself 'Fit to Sit', the Examination Board will normally consider you to have made a valid attempt at the assessment, subject to consideration of factors affecting performance which may arise subsequent to beginning the assessment. Factors affecting performance that arise at such a time as to affect preparation for an examination or other fixed-time assessment may constitute exceptional circumstances, providing appropriate grounds not to undertake the assessment at that time. However, if a student sits the assessment in question, they will have deemed themselves 'Fit to Sit'.

**What happens if I can't attend an exam?**

If you are unable to attend an examination you should inform your School as soon as possible. You must inform the University of any absence before the examination. To claim exceptional circumstances, see sections below for the procedures on how to claim and what is acceptable.

**What happens if I can't meet the deadline for my coursework?**

The deadline for submission of all work will be clearly stated. Submission dates for all coursework are issued at the beginning of each module and you are expected to manage your time accordingly.

Students incur a penalty by losing 10% of the marks awarded for each day or part of a day the coursework is late. A piece of work which is marked at 60% but submitted 2 days late will be awarded a final mark of 48% (12 mark penalty).

**What are exceptional circumstances?**

Exceptional circumstances are circumstances which cause the student to:

- (a) Perform less well in coursework than might have been expected on the basis of other work,
- (b) Fail to meet submission deadlines,
- (c) Fail to attend a timed assessment or examination, and/or
- (d) Be adversely affected by an incident or issue occurring during an examination.

In general, **exceptional circumstances**, will be of a medical or personal nature **significantly** affecting the student **at or during a relevant** period of time and/or during the examination period and which can normally be corroborated by independent evidence.

There are three points in this definition worth noting:

1. The circumstances have to be exceptional. Unfortunately, all of us can expect to experience some unwanted events and we have to manage our lives around them. Time management is an important skill which you are expected to develop during your time at Aston and includes being able to manage or compensate for the minor illnesses and disruptions that, in the normal way of things, may occur in everyone's life from time to time. Listed below are some circumstances which might be viewed as exceptional, and some which are unlikely to be accepted as being exceptional.
2. The definition makes it clear that exceptional circumstances concern reasons why you might not have performed as well as expected. They do not relate to reasons why you might not have been able to study. If there are factors affecting your ability to study, then you should discuss these with the appropriate person in your School so that alternative arrangements can be put in place.
3. The definition refers to *actual* performance in relation to *expected* performance based on other work. If you have chronic circumstances which affect assessments in general, you should talk to your School to find a possible resolution. You should also speak to the Enabling Team.

**What counts as exceptional circumstances?**

Some examples of circumstances that might be upheld as exceptional are given below, together with examples of documentation to support your submission. You are advised to discuss any circumstance which affects your ability to study and/or undertake assessments with a member of staff who, as well as offering advice on how the university may support

you, may be willing to provide a supporting letter for your exceptional circumstances submission.

Circumstance	Supporting documentation
Illness which prevented you from attending an exam/assessment or occurred after the start of an examination or assessment	Letter/certificate from a health professional/counsellor, hospital appointment letter, a copy of prescription or medicine labelling.  <b>If your illness is a self-limited, common ailment not requiring medical attention, you should be aware that this will not normally qualify as an Exceptional Circumstance warranting an extension for written assignments.</b> If such an illness affects your attendance at an examination, oral assessment or other form of test, you should inform your School as soon as possible and seek their guidance on how best to provide the necessary evidence. Please also see the paragraph on <a href="#">weighting of evidence</a> below.
Illness which prevented you from completing an assessment (coursework) on time – see section on late submission	Letter/certificate from a health professional/counsellor, hospital appointment letter, a copy of prescription or medicine labelling.
Unforeseen major travel disruption which caused you to be late/miss an exam	Letter from transport company.
Legal matters	Letter/documents from court/solicitor.
Personal/domestic problems which occurred in the period leading up to an examination/assessment deadline	Letter from someone who has direct knowledge of the problems and/or has been involved in supporting you (e.g., pastor/minister/imam/granthi/maha pursh, student finance, employer, chaplaincy, Student Services Adviser, an adviser from the Union's Advice & Representation Centre).
Unforeseen significant change in existing care-giving responsibilities	Letter/certificate from a health professional/counsellor, hospital appointment letter, a copy of prescription or medicine labelling, relating to the individual under the student's care.
Bereavement	Death certificates; supporting evidence of effect of bereavement from parent/guardian, doctor or counsellor.
Jury Service	Official letter from the court requesting your attendance.

**NB:** The [University Counselling Service](#) will always be happy to see you, but will not be able to certify conditions retrospectively. If you are experiencing difficulties you should seek

help straight away at the time you are experiencing them and not wait until evidence is needed in support of an exceptional circumstances claim.

### **Weighting of evidence**

Occasionally, a short term self-limited illness (such as a stomach bug) or an acute flare-up of a chronic condition may prevent you from attending an assessment event (such as an exam or a presentation), whilst not requiring that you seek the kind of medical advice for which the supporting documentation listed above can be obtained at the time. A student with care-giving responsibilities may also experience an unforeseen significant change in their responsibilities that may affect their preparation or attendance at an assessment event, that may be difficult to fully evidence. The normal requirement, and the common factor in all the examples given above, is that the evidence submitted in support of an exceptional circumstances claim should be relevant, independent and objective. Retrospective doctor's notes and letters from, for example, family members or housemates clearly carry less weight in these respects than the examples in the table. Nevertheless, the University recognises that on occasions when a doctor's appointment is clearly not appropriate, it may exceptionally then become appropriate for the ECA Panel to consider accepting a lower evidential standard of supporting documentation. All ECAP applications are considered on an individual basis and the judgement as to whether the evidence provided is sufficiently relevant, independent and objective forms part of this consideration. It is therefore not possible to list exhaustively and definitively here all possible types of exceptional circumstances and the precise nature of the supporting evidence that must be provided in each case. Nevertheless, the following list gives some examples of the kinds of alternative supporting documentation that may be acceptable on such occasions:

- a copy of the packaging or labelling of medication specifically recommended by a pharmacist for your condition
- a note/record of any medical advice you received, e.g. a phone call to your GP or a consultation with a pharmacist
- a letter from an employer, confirming that you needed time off work
- a letter from a tutor
- a letter from a family member or other individual who can confirm your illness.

The golden rule for ALL exceptional circumstances applications is that you should ensure the documentation you submit in support of your case is as objective as possible. Evidence from an independent, third party source is thus the weightiest. If you need to submit an application for which you cannot supply evidence which clearly meets these criteria, you should consult your School as to the kind of evidence it would be appropriate to collect in support of your submission.

If a student is suspected of submitting either a fraudulent claim for exceptional circumstances, or falsifying evidence to support a claim for exceptional circumstances, the case will be referred to the University Discipline Board. If the case is found to be proven, an agreed penalty will be applied by the Disciplinary Board and the claim for exceptional circumstances will not be accepted.

**What doesn't count as exceptional circumstances?**

Long term issues, such as on-going health/personal/financial issues, which affect your ability to study or your ability to perform generally, do not count as exceptional circumstances. If you are affected in this way, you should discuss the situation with your School.

The following are examples of circumstances which are not likely to be judged to meet [University Regulations](#):

- completing and submitting coursework too late and missing deadlines
- late submission due to a printing/binding/copying backlog
- not following submission instructions, leading to incorrect, incomplete or non-submission i.e. uploading an assessment to the wrong link
- losing coursework by not backing up effectively
- work (paid or voluntary) or religious commitments reducing time available for study or coursework
- a minor ailment such as a cold, or a domestic upset
- a long-standing condition, such as susceptibility to hay fever or migraine
- misreading the examination timetable
- over sleeping/alarm clock not going off causing you to be late for or miss an exam or assessment
- holidays or travel, for example for a family wedding
- chronic ill health (unless there has been a sudden and temporary flare-up)
- prolonged personal difficulties which have affected capacity to learn
- death of a pet (not including assistance animals)

**How and when do I submit exceptional circumstances?**

Exceptional circumstances forms are available on the University's exceptional circumstances web page <https://www2.aston.ac.uk/clipp/quality/a-z/exceptional-circumstances/index>

The page also lists your School/programme area's deadlines for submission of completed forms to the Exceptional Circumstances or Absence Panel (ECAP), which makes recommendations to the Board of Examiners. This deadline will be before examinations. If you wish to submit exceptional circumstances you should submit a form even if you are still awaiting supporting documentary evidence.

Claims/evidence for exceptional circumstances cannot be accepted after the published deadlines unless you can provide good reason why you were not able to submit them earlier. You should note that this is not a basis for making an appeal – see section below on ['Can I appeal?'](#).

**How does the Exam Board deal with your exceptional circumstances?**

The Exam Board, or more often, the Exceptional Circumstances or Absence Panel (ECAP), will recommend whether your claim of exceptional circumstances meets University regulations or not. In making this decision it will consider what you write on your exceptional circumstances form and the evidence you submit and

- i) determine if the circumstances are, in its opinion, exceptional,

- ii) decide whether they are likely to have affected your performance in the way you have described,
- iii) consider the weight of supporting evidence.

If your claim meets [University Regulations](#) the Exam Board has a number of options open to it. **These do not include raising the marks for an assessment or module.** It may, in the case of a late submission, lift or reduce any penalties which have been automatically applied. In the case of a failed module, the Board may decide to allow you to resit the module without penalty, i.e. the module would be *deferred* rather than referred or condoned. If your Exceptional Circumstances were such that your performance was affected, but you achieved a pass mark for the module overall without the need for any specific remedial measures to be taken, your mark will still not be adjusted upwards. However, depending on the severity and impact of the circumstances, the Board may wish to take them into account when awarding your degree class at the Final Stage Examination Board. In making such decisions, the Board will consider the impact of the exceptional circumstances in the light of non-affected work, i.e. it will make a judgement about your potential to have gained a higher mark. It cannot do this if there is no evidence in the rest of your performance or if the exceptional circumstances apply to all the assessments which contribute to your degree classification.

After the ECAP you will receive an acknowledgement that your exceptional circumstances have been considered and whether the ECAP's recommendation to the Exam Board is that your claim meets University Regulations or does not meet University Regulations. You will also receive an acknowledgement that your exceptional circumstances have been considered when you receive the decision of the Exam Board on your results.

Any submission to the EC board that may be considered to affect your [Fitness to Practise](#) (relevant to health-related programmes only) will be referred to the Fitness to Practise Officer for investigation.

### Can I appeal?

You are allowed to appeal against a final decision of an Exam Board using the Academic Appeals procedure. You find details of the process on <https://www2.aston.ac.uk/academic-services/for-staff/a-to-z-of-academic-services/academic-appeals-procedure>

You must submit your appeal within 14 days of the publication of your results and must be able to prove you have one or more of the following three grounds for appeal:

1. that your performance was adversely affected by illness or other specific factors which you were unable for valid reasons to submit to the Board of Examiners before it reached its decision.
2. that there has been an administrative error or that some other material irregularity relevant to the assessments has occurred.
3. that the assessment procedure and/or examinations were not conducted in accordance with the approved regulations.

You should note that you cannot challenge academic judgement.

Assistance with academic appeals is available from the Union's Advice & Representation Centre by emailing [advice@aston.ac.uk](mailto:advice@aston.ac.uk) or by phoning 0121 204 4848