

Guide to Exceptional Circumstances

AU-RSC-22-5452-A

Applicable to all students and learners enrolled or re-enrolled from 1st August 2023

2023-24

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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 assessments, including:

- Guidance on when students should apply for a leave of absence or exceptional circumstances, and when the Student Welfare and Academic Support 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.

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 [Student Welfare 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
AU-RSC-19-2822	B	Adam Hewitt	ULTC	Jun 2020	Sep 2020
AU-RSC-20-3973	A	Adam Hewitt	ULTC	Jun 2021	Sep 2021
AU-RSC-21-4840	A	Adam Hewitt	ULTC	Jul 2022	Sep 2022
AU-RSC-22-5452	A	Adam Hewitt	ULTC	Jun 2023	Aug 2023
New for 2023/24: Addition of further examples of grounds for ECs – particularly around remote and online assessment, and the evidence required. General reordering and updating of support contact information.					

Student Advice and Representation

Aston Student's Union can provide advice on a variety of study issues, exceptional circumstances, and academic appeals. Assistance is available from the Student Union's Advice Centre by emailing advice@aston.ac.uk or by phoning 0121 204 4848.

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 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 College, e.g. your Personal Tutor or advisor, Year Tutor, Programme Director, Programme or College Offices, 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 becomes manageable. If you have long term health issues, you may be directed to the Student Welfare Team to discuss the support that may be available to you. Alternatively, you may be advised to submit an exceptional circumstances application, within which you can explain your situation to your Board of Examiners.

It is essential that you discuss any issues with your College 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 College will limit the options available to support you.

When should I go on Leave of Absence?

Leave of Absence is a temporary suspension of your studies, normally for a period of up to one academic year. Reasons for taking Leave of Absence could include pregnancy, family responsibilities, physical or mental 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 College. If it is decided that Leave of Absence is the best way forward you can make this request via the MAP ([My Aston Portal](#)) link. Your College 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 leave to be officially granted. It is possible to extend Leave of Absence for up to a further year in some circumstances. However, you should check with your College as this is not always possible for all programmes.

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) from the Advice Centre. Further information can be found [here](#).

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.

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 Student Welfare 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).

Student Welfare Team

The Student Welfare Team is contactable via The Hub ground floor Main Building, via the web-based [Student Welfare](#) form

Tel: (0121) 204 4007 or email studentwelfare@aston.ac.uk

Types of assessment

- **Coursework:** A coursework assessment is one where students are given an extended period of time in which to complete the assessment, but when they undertake the activity within that period is not specified. Assessments should be submitted by the deadline, but late submissions will be accepted, and marks reduced as detailed within the [Assessment Regulations](#).
- **Fixed-time Assessment:** A fixed-time assessment is one where students are required to complete an assessment within a fixed period of time, where all the time is allocated for the completion and submission of the assessment. Fixed-time assessments may be on-campus¹ (written or online), or remotely online. Fixed-time assessments include written examinations and practical assessments such as Objective Structured Clinical Examinations (OSCEs). Assessments must be completed/submitted by the deadline; work submitted after the deadline will be recorded with a mark of zero.
- **Fixed-window Assessment:** A fixed-window assessment is one where students are given a defined time period (for example, twenty-four hours) which is greater than the time required for the completion and submission of the assessment. Students decide when within the time period they complete and submit the assessment. Assessments must be completed/submitted by the deadline; work submitted after the deadline will be recorded with a mark of zero.

¹ 'On-campus' assessments includes assessments in other premises used by the University for the purpose of assessment.

For all types of assessment, if you submit the assessment you are declaring yourself Fit to Sit/Submit and therefore, students cannot submit an exceptional circumstances application. Any exceptional circumstances applications received will not be accepted.

What are exceptional circumstances?

Exceptional circumstances are circumstances which cause the student to:

- (a) Fail to meet submission deadlines, and/or
- (b) Fail to attend a fixed-time assessment or engage with a fixed window assessment, and/or
- (c) Be adversely affected by an incident or issue occurring during a fixed-time or fixed-window assessment.

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

Key exceptional circumstances points:

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 were unable to complete or attend an assessment. 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 your College so that alternative arrangements can be put in place.

3. If you have chronic circumstances which affect assessments in general, you should talk to your College to find a possible resolution. You should also speak to the Student Welfare Team.

What happens if I can't attend a fixed-time assessment or engage with a fixed-window assessment?

If you are unable to attend a fixed-time assessment or engage with a fixed-window assessment you should inform your College as soon as possible. You may submit exceptional circumstances once the assessment date has passed. Please check the University's exceptional circumstances webpage which lists your College/programme area's deadlines for submissions. To claim exceptional circumstances, see sections below for the procedures on how to claim and what is acceptable.

Please note, however, that if you attend a fixed-time assessment or engage with a fixed-window assessment, the University considers that you have declared yourself 'Fit to Sit' the

assessment. If you submit a coursework assessment, you have declared yourself 'Fit to Submit'. In both of these cases, you have made a valid attempt at the assessment, and cannot claim exceptional circumstances, except in the case of illness during a fixed-time or fixed-window assessment.

The full Fit to Sit Policy for your programmes can be found in the General Regulations for your programme on the [General Regulations](#) webpage.

If you experience illness or other difficulties during a fixed-time or fixed-window assessment, this may be considered an exceptional circumstance and an exceptional circumstances application should be made via MAP. Illness during on-campus fixed-time assessments must be reported to the Chief Invigilator.

Where you have declared yourself 'Fit to Sit', the Board of Examiners 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 a fixed-time or fixed-window 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' and cannot claim exceptional circumstances.

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 working day the coursework is late. A piece of work which is marked at 60% but submitted 2 working days late will be awarded a final mark of 48% (12 mark penalty).

Please note, however, that if you submit any coursework, the University considers that you have declared yourself 'Fit to Submit' the assessment. Where you have declared yourself 'Fit to Submit', the Board of Examiners will normally consider you to have made a valid attempt at the coursework. Factors affecting ability to submit coursework on time may constitute exceptional circumstances, providing appropriate grounds to remove any lateness penalty. However, if a student submits the coursework in question, they will have deemed themselves 'Fit to Submit' and cannot claim exceptional circumstances.

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 a fixed-time or engaging with a fixed window assessment, whilst not requiring that you seek the kind of medical advice for which the supporting documentation listed below 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 below, 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 Exceptional Circumstances or Absence Panel (ECAP) to consider accepting a lower evidential standard of supporting documentation. All exceptional circumstances 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, clearly stating the start date and duration, 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 College as to the kind of evidence it would be appropriate to collect in support of your application. All supporting evidence should be provided in legible English, and should be translated into English where necessary.

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 Officer. 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. If third party evidence is suspected to be fraudulent the University may contact the provider to validate the evidence.

What counts as exceptional circumstances and what evidence is needed?

Some examples of circumstances that might be upheld as exceptional are given below, together with examples of documentation to support your application. You are advised to discuss any circumstance which affects your ability to study and/or undertake assessments with an appropriate member of staff in your College 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 application.

In all cases, evidence should clearly relate to you (your name and date prescribed should be visible on any prescription or medicine labelling, for example) and the date/time of the assessment.

Circumstance	Supporting documentation
<p>Physical or mental illness (including pregnancy-related illness) which prevented you from attending a fixed-time assessment, engaging with a fixed window assessment, or occurred after the start of a fixed-time or fixed window assessment, or which prevented you from completing coursework on time – see section on late submission</p>	<p>Letter/certificate from a health professional/counsellor, hospital appointment letter, a copy of prescription or medicine labelling.</p> <p>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. If such an illness affects your attendance at a fixed-time assessment, engagement with a fixed-window assessment, or prevents you from completing coursework on time, you should inform your College as soon as possible and seek their guidance on how best to provide the necessary evidence. Please also see the paragraph on weighting of evidence above.</p> <p>Chronic ill health does not count as exceptional circumstances, as reasonable adjustments should already be in place. However, sudden, acute flare-ups of a chronic condition that are not effectively mitigated by existing adjustments are a valid reason for submitting exceptional circumstances.</p>
<p>Physical or mental illness (including pregnancy-related illness) that occurs during a fixed-time or fixed-window assessment that prevents you from completing the assessment</p>	<p>For invigilated fixed-time assessments, a statement from the Chief Invigilator in the Chief Invigilators report.</p> <p>For remote fixed-time assessments, medical evidence such as letter from a healthcare professional.</p> <p>If you experience illness during a fixed-time assessment but subsequently submit the assessment, you will be deemed to have declared yourself Fit to Sit, and cannot claim exceptional circumstances, and any exceptional circumstances application will not be accepted.</p>
<p>Failure to submit a fixed-time or fixed-window assessment by the deadline because of a technical issue</p>	<p>Evidence of service outage from your internet provider, aligning with the relevant assessment period/submission time. Evidence from Digital Services regarding the technical issue.</p> <p>In the case of stolen equipment, a police incident statement or crime log number may be submitted as evidence.</p> <p>It is important that students allow sufficient time within the time period allocated for assessments to enable submission of any assessment material by the deadline.</p> <p>For fixed-time and fixed-window assessments, assessments must be completed/submitted by the deadline; work submitted after the deadline will be recorded with a mark of zero. Submissions after the deadline will not normally be</p>

	<p>accepted. Wherever possible, students experiencing technical issues in relation to assignment submission should contact the relevant member of staff by e-mail with details of the issue being experienced and include a copy (not a link) of the material for submission:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - BSS – BSS_support@aston.ac.uk - EPS – EPS_assessments@aston.ac.uk - HLS – HLS_support@aston.ac.uk <p>In most situations, this correspondence should take place before the submission deadline.</p> <p>In cases where a widespread technical issue with an assessment is recognised by the University, an exceptional circumstances application is not required.</p>
<p>Failure to submit a coursework assessment by the deadline because of a technical issue</p>	<p>Evidence of service outage from your internet provider, aligning with the relevant assessment submission time. Evidence from Digital Services regarding the technical issue at the point of attempted submission.</p> <p>It is important that students allow sufficient time within the time period allocated for assessments to enable submission of any assessment material by the deadline. Students are expected to backup their work; it is unlikely any exceptional circumstances applications will be accepted where work has not been backed up.</p> <p>Coursework assessments should be submitted by the deadline, but late submissions (up to 5 working days) will be accepted, and marks reduced as detailed within the Assessment Regulations. Students requesting the removal of any late submission penalties should complete an exceptional circumstances application. Wherever possible, students experiencing technical issues in relation to assignment submission should contact the relevant member of staff by e-mail with details of the issue being experienced and include a copy (not a link) of the material for submission:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - BSS – BSS_support@aston.ac.uk - EPS – EPS_assessments@aston.ac.uk - HLS – HLS_support@aston.ac.uk <p>This correspondence should take place before the submission deadline.</p> <p>In cases where a widespread technical issue with an assessment is recognised by the University, an exceptional circumstances application is not required.</p>

Unforeseen major travel disruption which caused you to be late/miss a fixed-time or fixed window assessment. Planned strikes and industrial action are not considered unforeseen	Evidence from transport company, such as a letter, dated and timed app screenshot showing evidence of disruption alongside a valid ticket for travel. For private travel, dated and timed information from the Highways Agency or other reputable source may be submitted.
Legal matters	Letter/documents from court/solicitor/citizens advice bureau.
Victim of domestic violence, harassment, stalking	Police report, Student Services support or external support agency evidence
Personal/domestic problems which occurred in the period leading up to a fixed-time or fixed window assessment or coursework deadline, including paternal/maternal health issues	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 Student Union's Advice Centre). Medical or appointment note.
Unforeseen significant change in existing or new 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; order of service, supporting evidence of effect of bereavement from parent/guardian, doctor or counsellor.
Mandatory National Service	Official national service documentation/notification.
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.

University Sanctions

If you are placed under sanctions due to significant debt to the University, your access to both learning materials and the submission of some online assessments may be limited. By sitting or submitting an assessment, you are declaring yourself fit and prepared to sit that assessment (i.e. it is a valid attempt), and therefore University sanctions (and the reasons behind them) would not be considered an appropriate reason for reduced performance or failure within an assessment, and so would not form suitable evidence for any subsequent appeal. However, if you feel unable to sit or submit an assessment due to the effect University sanctions for financial debt have had on your academic study, an exceptional circumstances application should be submitted, and will be considered through the standard process for exceptional circumstances.

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 College.

The following are examples of circumstances which are not likely to be assessed 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
- general study and workload pressures/anxiety/stress
- a minor ailment such as a cold, or a domestic upset
- a long-standing condition, such as susceptibility to hay fever or migraine
- planned support to family member or partner in hospital for a mild illness or minor surgery
- misreading the assessment timetable
- over sleeping/alarm clock not going off causing you to be late for or miss an assessment
- complaints against staff or in relation to programme delivery
- 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
- personal disruptions and events which could have been anticipated
- death of a pet (not including assistance animals)

How and when do I submit exceptional circumstances?

Exceptional circumstances can be submitted via your student MAP page.

The University's exceptional circumstances [webpage](#) lists your College/programme area's deadlines for submissions to the Exceptional Circumstances or Absence Panel (ECAP) which makes recommendations to the Board of Examiners. If you wish to submit exceptional circumstances you should make an application, providing relevant, dated evidence. If you are still awaiting supporting documentary evidence, only submit an application if waiting for your evidence would prevent you from applying before the published exceptional circumstances deadline.

Claims/evidence for exceptional circumstances should be made after the relevant assessment deadline, but cannot be accepted after the published exceptional circumstances 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.

How does the Board of Examiners deal with your exceptional circumstances?

The ECAP will make a recommendation to the Board of Examiners, on whether your claim for exceptional circumstances meets University Regulations or not. In making this

recommendation, it will consider what you include within your exceptional circumstances application and the evidence you provide, and:

- i) determine if the circumstances are, in its opinion, exceptional,
- ii) decide whether they are likely to have affected your ability to take an assessment in the way you have described,
- iii) consider the weight of supporting evidence.

If your claim meets [University Regulations](#) the Board of Examiners 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 late submission of assessments, lift or reduce any penalties which have been automatically applied. In the case of an unattempted module, the Board may decide to allow you to resit the module without your mark being capped at the minimum pass mark.

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

Any exceptional circumstances applications considered by the ECAP/Board of Examiners 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 not allowed to appeal the decision of the ECAP, as the ECAP is making a recommendation to the Board of Examiners only.

You are allowed to appeal against a final decision of the Board of Examiners using the Academic Appeals procedure. You may only do this once your results have been published, and within 14 days of the date of publication. You will find details of the process [here](#).

You should note that you cannot challenge academic judgement.

Assistance with academic appeals is available from the Student Union's Advice Centre by emailing advice@aston.ac.uk or by phoning 0121 204 4848