What to do if you think your studies are being affected by extenuating circumstances

The following Frequently Asked Questions are intended to help you in deciding what to do about any problems that you are having that may be affecting your studies. It is important that you understand the University’s process for supporting students with extenuating circumstances. This process may be very different from that which you have been used to at school or college and requires you to take some responsibility and to be proactive. It is also essential that you follow the guidance given. There have been a number of cases in recent years of students with very genuine problems who we have not been able to help because they did not, for example, submit an extenuating circumstances form before the appropriate deadline. The answers to the questions are given as guidance and are not intended to be definitive. Full details of how the University supports students with extenuating circumstances are given in the Regulations and Code of Practice for Taught Programmes.

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What is an extenuating circumstance?

It is difficult to provide an exact definition of an extenuating circumstance, because every student is different. However, examples of extenuating circumstances typically include everything from physical and mental illness to personal problems. The illness may be something like depression, that can affect your studies over a long period, or a migraine that just affects one exam. Personal problems might include a family bereavement, housing difficulties or being the victim of a crime. Extenuating circumstances may be on-going chronic conditions that have a long-term impact over a period of weeks or months throughout the teaching block and so affect all aspects of your study. Alternatively they may be acute circumstances, which last for a few days or hours and just affect preparation for exams or the assessment itself. If you wish a Board of Examiners to take into account such an extenuating circumstance, you must submit an Extenuating Circumstances form.

What isn't an extenuating circumstance?

There are, of course, some problems that have an impact your performance in an assessment that would not be classed as extenuating because they are within your control. These might include travel problems, such as booking travel tickets without checking the dates of an examination, a late bus or train, or the breakdown of a car. Problems with a computer, such as a virus or a corrupted file would also not usually be considered as extenuating, because you should keep a back up of everything that you do. Personal circumstances that might reasonably be expected to form part of normal life, such as the break up of a relationship with a boyfriend or girlfriend, or voluntarily moving accommodation would also not usually be classed as extenuating. It is also natural to want to help a friend who is having difficulties, but you should be careful to make sure that your support does not affect your own studies, because this is unlikely to be considered as an extenuating circumstance. Furthermore, the impact of taking on paid employment, whether full or part time, would also not usually be considered as an extenuating circumstance.

If you are ever in doubt as to whether your problems might be considered as extenuating, you should, of course, ask in advance for advice.

What is the difference between a known and a developing circumstance?

The University distinguishes between known and developing circumstances. Examples of known circumstances include conditions such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, Aspergers Syndrome or autism. The impact of a known circumstance would usually be accommodated in advance through the development of a Disability Support Summary or Learning Support Plan with Alternative Exam Arrangements such as extra time or rest breaks, put in place where appropriate. A Board of Examiners would not usually be expected to make any additional allowance as a result of a known circumstance. Only if the condition worsens or is exacerbated by another problem would we expect a student with a known circumstance to submit an Extenuating Circumstances Form.

Developing circumstances are those for which appropriate arrangements have not already been put in place. These might include everything from the onset of a long-term physical or mental-health problem, an accident, the death of a close relative during a revision period, or a migraine in an exam. For a developing circumstance, even if you have told someone informally about your problem, you must submit an Extenuating Circumstances Form.

How can I request Alternative Exam Arrangements?

You may request alternative exam arrangements by submitting an Alternative Exam Arrangements form. A link to a copy of the form, and details of the deadlines for submission, are given on the Academic Registry website. A validated assessment of your circumstances, such as a Disability Support Summary, will usually be required in order to ensure that we can accommodate your needs.
properly. Alternative exam arrangements will usually be granted provisionally for new students for one year only, pending a full up-to-date assessment. Students with known circumstances are therefore encouraged to make an appointment with Disability Services for a review of their condition as soon as possible.

**How are extenuating circumstances classified?**

Your Extenuating Circumstances Form will be considered by a School Special Circumstances Committee, which will decide whether your circumstances should be classified as either not extenuating, or as mild, moderate or severe and whether sufficient allowance has already been made. The classification will then be used by the Board of Examiners to help them to decide whether there has been an impact on your studies and what, if any, further accommodation should be made. The Board of Examiners do not, themselves, consider the details of your circumstances.

Mild extenuating circumstances might typically include a cold, headache or other common illness, symptoms of low mood, or perhaps the death of a distant relative. The Board of Examiners would not usually expect to make any additional allowance for a student whose circumstances were classified as mild. More significant problems would usually be classified as either moderate or severe, and in these cases, the Board of Examiners would expect some allowance to be made. Moderate circumstances might include the onset of depression sufficient to require treatment, or illnesses such as pneumonia or glandular fever, or the death of a close relative close to the exam time. Very few cases are classified as severe. Examples might include mental illness such that a student had to be sectioned, or the death of a parent in the examination period.

The classification will, of course, depend upon both the nature and the timing of the circumstances. The impact of, for example, a bereavement, will differ significantly depending upon the closeness of the relationship and whether the death occurs close to the assessment period.

**What options are open to a Board of Examiners in considering extenuating circumstances?**

Boards of Examiners have a wide range of options available to them for making allowance for students with extenuating circumstances. The most common options for non-finalists include allowing a student to defer exams, or to take the exams again as if for the first time, during the August examination period. For a finalist, a Board of Examiners may disregard an affected mark in deciding upon a student’s degree classification if there is evidence that it is not characteristic of the rest of a student’s mark profile. We keep a note of extenuating circumstances from previous years against a student’s record, so would, for example, take into account a problem in your second year in deciding your final degree classification.

We do not, however, change marks for units because of extenuating circumstances. Thus, the mark that you achieve will be the mark that appears on your transcript, even if it was affected by validated extenuating circumstances.

**Where can I get an Extenuating Circumstances Form?**

A copy of the University’s Extenuating Circumstances form is available as a Word document as part of the online University Student Handbook. Once completed, it should be submitted through your School administration office, who will acknowledge receipt. You should submit your Extenuating Circumstances form within two days of the end of your assessment, even if you cannot provide the necessary supporting evidence immediately. Whatever happens, you must submit your form before the meeting of the Board of Examiners.
How should I complete my Extenuating Circumstances Form?

You should be specific in completing your Extenuating Circumstances Form and tell us exactly which units were affected and when. The allowance that we make may depend upon whether it was just your assessment that was affected, or whether there was an impact on your study through the year. We will use the information on your Extenuating Circumstances Form to make this judgement.

I have talked to my personal tutor about my problems. Do I still need to submit an Extenuating Circumstances Form?

Yes! We run our Boards of Examiners anonymously using candidate numbers rather than names. Thus, there is no way that your personal tutor, or indeed any other member of academic staff would be able to identify you. The only way that we can take your circumstances into account is if you complete an Extenuating Circumstances Form.

What evidence do I need to provide?

A School Special Circumstances Committee will usually expect your Extenuating Circumstances Form to be supported by appropriate evidence. Depending on the nature of the circumstances, this might be a medical note from a doctor, or a self certificate. There are, of course, some minor ailments for which a doctor will not provide a medical certificate, because the symptoms are transitory. However, in many of these cases, such circumstances would usually be classed as mild by the School Special Circumstances Committee and no allowance would be made by the Board of Examiners.

In other cases, it may not be possible to obtain the evidence that you require in time for the Board of Examiners, perhaps because you have not yet received the note from your doctor. In this case, you should still submit your Extenuating Circumstances form but indicate that the evidence will, eventually, be forthcoming. If, however, you do not provide the evidence required, then your extenuating circumstances may not be classified.

I think that I'll do well enough in my exams even though I have problems. Should I still submit an Extenuating Circumstances Form?

Yes! One of the most common forms of appeal comes from students who had genuine problems, but who did not submit an extenuating circumstance form because they thought that they would do well enough in their exams that special allowance would not be necessary. Unfortunately, there is often very little that we can do for such students because they did not follow the University’s regulations.

I suffer from exam stress. What should I do?

Taking exams is an inevitable part of being a University student. Employers will expect you as a Bristol graduate to be able to manage the reasonable levels of stress and anxiety that exams bring out in everyone. You can, of course, minimise exam stress by working steadily throughout the year and not trying to cram close to exam time.

Some students do, however, suffer from medical conditions that make them more susceptible to exam stress. If you suffer in this way, then we can help in minimising the impact of your condition on your performance. The Student Counselling Service offer excellent support sessions for students that will help you to learn how to manage exam stress. Furthermore, if your submit an Alternative Exam Arrangements form, we can arrange for you to sit your exams in a smaller room. Because of the support that we offer, we would not usually consider exam stress, in itself, to be an extenuating circumstance.
Should I suspend studies?

For some students, the impact of an on-going developing chronic circumstance can be such that their studies are affected over a prolonged period. In such cases, it is usually advisable for you to suspend studies rather than continue and submit an Extenuating Circumstances Form. Suspension gives time for you to recover completely, or for a Disability Support Summary to be put in place.

What happens if I attend an exam knowing that my performance may be affected by an extenuating circumstance?

We do expect students to take some personal responsibility for managing their extenuating circumstances. You will usually be the best person to decide whether you are well enough to sit an exam. Indeed, a Board of Examiners may decide that because you chose to sit an exam, your condition cannot have been sufficiently serious to require any additional accommodation to be made. Thus, whatever a well-meaning friend or parent might advise, it is rarely a good idea to sit an exam if you know that you have problems on the expectation that a Board of Examiners will definitely take your circumstances into account.

What happens if I am ill on the day of an exam?

If, on the day of an exam, you consider that your illness or other circumstances are sufficient that they will have a significant impact on your performance, you should contact your School immediately. This is especially important if you are unable to sit the exam. Equally, if your symptoms develop during an exam, then you should alert an invigilator so that there is a record of your illness. In each case, you should also complete an Extenuating Circumstances Form.

I am worried that I am not going to do very well in my exams. Can I ask to defer them?

If you have genuine problems outside your control that mean that your performance in forthcoming exams is likely to be significantly affected, then the Board of Examiners may well agree to your deferring your exams until the August/September examination period. However, deferring exams is not without consequences, as it will mean that you will have to spend your summer preparing. Furthermore, if you are not able to complete your assessment in August/September either because you do not achieve the required standard to pass, or because of other circumstances, you may not be permitted to progress until the following academic year. Nevertheless, most students with genuine extenuating circumstances welcome such allowance because it allows them to demonstrate their true potential.

If, instead, you are worried about your performance because you have not engaged fully with your studies, or for other reasons that we would not consider extenuating, then you should talk to your Personal Academic Tutor or Senior Tutor immediately. They may well be able to help you to get back on track, or at least to minimise the impact of your problems. They may even advise suspending studies, but deferring exams would not usually be an option.

Should I submit an Extenuating Circumstances Form as an insurance policy, just in case something goes wrong?

No! Our extenuating circumstances process is intended to help students with genuine problems. If your problems are not genuine, it will neither be helpful to you, or to your School, if you submit an Extenuating Circumstances Form. You will be required to substantiate any submission by providing appropriate evidence and this can be time consuming and embarrassing if your problems are trivial. If you are in any doubt about whether your circumstances might be considered as extenuating, you should seek advice.
I find it difficult to talk about my circumstances. What should I do?

We appreciate that some students find it very difficult to talk about their problems, especially if they are of a personal or sensitive nature. Equally, we are aware that in some cultures, it is considered inappropriate to talk to outsiders about family problems. Nevertheless, you must inform us by submitting an extenuating circumstances form if you wish a problem to be taken into account. Your circumstances will be treated confidentially and be made known only to a very small number of members of staff. We hold our Boards of Examiners anonymously, using only candidate numbers to identify students; there is therefore no way that you could be identified from any discussion at a Board of Examiners.

Very often, in the long run, fewer people will know about your personal circumstances if you try to sort things out as soon as possible rather than having to pick up the pieces if your studies go badly as a result. Some students appeal against a decision of the Faculty Board of Examiners, claiming that they did not submit an Extenuating Circumstances Form because they found it difficult, or did not want to talk about their problems. Unfortunately, the nature of the appeal process means that the student does then have to reveal their circumstances in full to quite a few people. Furthermore, an appeal on these grounds is very unlikely to be successful.

Who should I ask for advice?

Your Personal Academic Tutor should be able to help and offer you advice on dealing with simple problems. However, if your problems become sufficient that they might have an impact on your performance in an exam, or a significant piece of coursework then you should talk, in the first instance, to either the Student Administration Manager or Senior Tutor in your School. You may also want to consult the JustAsk Service at the Student Union.

I didn’t tell anyone about my problems. Can I appeal?

If you appeal, the Board of Examiners would only retrospectively take into account any extenuating circumstances if there was a good reason for your not having disclosed them at the time. For example, an appeal panel may accept that a student who was suffering from significant mental illness or whose illness had not be diagnosed at the time of the Board of Examiners was not in a position to submit an Extenuating Circumstances Form. However, ignorance of the procedures, exam stress, cultural differences or reluctance to discuss personal problems would not usually be considered as being good reasons for not submitting an Extenuating Circumstances Form.

Useful links

University Regulations and Code of Practice for Taught Programmes: [http://www.bristol.ac.uk/esu/assessment/codeonline.html](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/esu/assessment/codeonline.html)

Alternative Exam Arrangements Form: [http://www.bristol.ac.uk/exams/alternative/](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/exams/alternative/)

Extenuating Circumstances Form: [http://www.bristol.ac.uk/currentstudents/forms/](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/currentstudents/forms/)


Disability Services: [http://www.bristol.ac.uk/disability-services/](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/disability-services/)

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