AAWG Special Circumstances – Proposals for Revised Policy and Practices for Undergraduate Studies

The proposals below are written as guidance. They will be supplemented by further details and perhaps a Code of Practice

Overall Principles:

The University should have a common, equitable, clear and practical Special Circumstances Policy.

Examination Boards (EB) which have responsibility for the specific Course to which a student’s Special Circumstance (SC) apply have the responsibility for making any decisions related to the individual Course outcome in respect of those circumstances.

EB which have responsibility for a specific Programme have the responsibility for incorporating SC Course outcomes into Degree awards and classification decisions.

EB are ultimately responsible for making SC decisions. In most cases it is strongly recommended that a dedicated SC sub-committee of the EB meet in advance of EB meetings to consider SC cases. Recommendations from SC Committees are used by EB to make informed decisions but need not be binding on them. If there are few SC cases to be considered by an EB, SC business can be considered as a first and separate item at a meeting of the whole Board.

Special Circumstances applying to specific courses.

These guidelines apply to any situation where the student’s ability to perform on a specific course has been affected by a Special Circumstance. An overall principle is that a determination of a course grade should not be made unless the EB is satisfied that there is sufficient information to provide a reliable assessment of performance in relation to the course Learning Outcomes.

Four situations may apply:

1) A mark may be present, and regarded as a reliable indicator of attainment, but it is recognised that compensation (e.g. a coursework deadline extension) has already been applied to the work in respect of a Special Circumstance.
2) A mark is missing because the student has been unable to complete an assessment because of a Special Circumstance.
3) A mark is available for an assessment but it is regarded as an unreliable indicator of the student’s attainment of Learning Outcomes because Special Circumstances have affected their performance in that particular assessment.
4) A mark may be regarded as a reliable indicator of the student’s attainment of Learning Outcomes, but this attainment is thought have been marred (in whole or part) beyond what might normally have been anticipated for that student because of Special Circumstances.
It is possible for 4) to apply simultaneously with 1), 2) or 3). 4) presents the most problematic treatment.

Resolution of the above available within EB (or SC sub-cttes):

1) (Reliable mark and SC compensation already applied)
Needs no specific resolution but the action taken in respect of the SC should be recorded within the SC/EB meeting.

2) (Missing mark because of SC)
   a) The Exam Board may decide that sufficient evidence is available for an estimate of overall Course performance to be made reliably, even when the mark for a specific element of the assessment is missing. It should be specified in advance for any course the situations for which this could legitimately apply. Thus for a given course it may be:
      - Not possible to arrive reliably at a mark unless all elements are present
      - That a mark can be generated only if particular, specified elements are completed
      - That a mark can be generated only if adequate amount of the assessment has been completed
   
   b) The EB may decide that the candidate can appropriately be given a further opportunity to complete the missing assessment. This may be because there is insufficient evidence as outlined in a), or because the Board feel that it would not be onerous for the student to complete a Further Replacement Assessment as a better indicator of the attainment of Learning Outcomes. In the case of missing coursework, further assessment may be gained simply by agreeing a further period in which to complete an existing assignment, or an equivalent alternative piece of coursework may be set. In the case of exam assessment, an additional equivalent examination can be required, or, coursework or other alternatives can be set provided it is felt that these adequately assess attainment of Learning Outcomes and that the student has not gained undue advantage. In all cases, the approval of the External Examiner should be sought concerning the nature and appropriateness of the Further Replacement Assessment.

   c: The EB may decide that neither a) nor b) is possible and that the course outcome be recorded as ‘not assessed’. Such a result would not appear on the final transcript. Where necessary (see under degree classification), or at the student’s request, the student may be given the opportunity to be assessed again at a future time, to resit the course in full, or to take an alternative available course.

3 (Mark available but thought unreliable)
   a: The EB may adjust the final course mark in light of the special circumstances by up to 5 marks upwards. Guidance for the basis on which this can be done will be produced. The EB will need to ensure that
the candidate has achieved the learning outcomes for the course in order to allow the candidate to pass the course. In some cases it may not be reasonable to make adjustment because of statutory or professional requirements, or the nature or spread of marks of the assessment.

b: The EB may choose to disregard the mark as one sufficiently poor or unreliable so as to be treated identically to cases of missing marks as in 2).

c: The Board may regard the mark as a reliable reflection of attainment of LOs, irrespective of the Special Circumstance. The evidence and reasoning for this must be recorded.

d: In either of case a) or b), the Board may offer the candidate an opportunity for Further Replacement Assessment comparable to that outlined in 2b, such that the student might produce a mark that was not affected by a Special Circumstance. Should this route be used, the student should be allowed to record the better of the two performances as the correct indicator of attainment. As in 2b, this route should not be used if it is felt that such action would disadvantage the student, or exacerbate an existing problem. In this case either 3b should apply or, the treatment would need to be as in 2a(mark based on other work) or 2c(recording as ‘not-assessed’).

4: (Learning Outcomes insufficiently met as consequence of SC)

a: The EB may record the course as ‘not attempted’ because the SC was sufficiently serious that the course participation cannot be regarded as a proper attempt. The course will not appear on the transcript. The student may be offered the opportunity to re-attempt the course or take an alternative suitable course. If criteria for b,c and d below cannot be met, then this is the default action.

b: The EB may regard the mark as a reliable indicator of unaffected attainment of LOs, irrespective of the Special Circumstance. The evidence and reasoning for this must be recorded.

c: The student may be offered an opportunity for Further Replacement Assessment as in 3d/ 2b, but after an agreed period of further private study.

d: In cases where only part of the course engagement is affected, there may be assessment pertaining to sufficient unaffected areas that can be used as a reliable estimate of overall attainment of Learning Outcomes. Treatment is parallel to that in 2a; in other words it should be specified in advance for a given course whether assessments reflecting specific areas, or overall percentages can be discounted in determining an overall grade.

Once the EB has agreed individual course marks, these cannot be adjusted further at the progression and award stages.

Note:

1. It is hoped that cases of 4) are avoided by appropriate intervention and support during the period of study as for disability cases. If the SC are
severe, such that a student cannot be supported sufficiently and such that course performance is significantly affected, then a period of withdrawal is appropriate. Should cases under 4) be ‘undisclosed’, the student still has fair recourse to the actions under 4a, b, c and d

Consideration of Programme outcomes in which courses have been affected by Special Circumstances:

If the procedures above are followed, situations in which unreliable course marks are recorded are avoided. However, the coding of the nature and treatment of the SC for each course should be recorded internally and brought to the Board considering Programme outcomes. The possible outcomes are

1) **A full profile of marks is presented:**
   The board may consider the fact that some SCs have occurred in part consideration of borderline degree classifications

2) **A number of course credit points are missing from the mark profile:**
   a: EB may award a classification without all items of assessment complete, but must ensure that the Board has sufficient information to ensure that the candidate has reach the required level in all learning outcomes. Further guidance on the required amount of credits will be provided.
   b: Alternatively, or additionally, the student may be offered a period of further study so as to gain the necessary courses for a complete profile of marks.

3) **Insufficient credit points are available to classify the degree under 2):**
   a: An unclassified degree (or pass for non-Honours) may still be awarded but the Board must still be satisfied that the overall learning outcomes have been meet.
   b: Alternatively, or additionally, the student may be offered a period of further study so as to gain the necessary courses for a complete profile of marks or for a sufficient profile to enable classification under 2).

**Notes.** In both 2 and 3, a student should be allowed to graduate without further study being required. Option b should only be offered in each case if it is felt it would not exacerbate or precipitate further SCs.