Proposed review of Special Circumstances Policy

Brief description of the paper, including a statement of relevance to the University’s strategic plans and priorities

This paper seeks the Committee’s approval for the arrangements for a review of the University’s Special Circumstances Policy.

Action requested
For approval

Communication and Implementation

Academic Services will use the Senate Committees’ Newsletter to inform Schools and Colleges regarding the review. The task group would be responsible for designing a communication and implementation plan for taking forward its recommendations.

Resource implications

Does the paper have resource implications? Yes. The handling of special circumstances cases has significant resource implications for Schools and Colleges. As such, the review is likely to have implications if the task group recommends any changes in the Policy and associated working practices.

Risk Assessment

Does the paper include a risk analysis? No. The task group would be responsible for assessing the risks associated with possible changes to the University’s Policy and associated working practices.

Equality and Diversity

Has due consideration been given to the equality impact of this paper? The task group would be responsible for conducting an equality impact assessment regarding any recommendations that it may make.

Freedom of information

Can this paper be included in open business? Yes

Originator of the paper

Tom Ward, Director of Academic Services, 26 August 2015

Any other relevant information, including keywords

Special circumstances, mitigating circumstances, assessment, mental health.
Proposed review of Special Circumstances Policy

This paper seeks the Committee's approval for the arrangements for a review of the University's Special Circumstances Policy.

http://www.docs.sasg.ed.ac.uk/AcademicServices/Policies/Special_Circumstances.pdf

Background

The University introduced a revised Special Circumstances Policy in 2013-14. In addition, in consultation with the Colleges, in 2015-16 the University has introduced a new standard Special Circumstances form.

While the Policy is scheduled to be reviewed in 2016-17, it may be appropriate for the University to bring forward this review to 2015-16 for the following reasons:

• The University Health Centre (UHC) and the Student Counselling Service (SCS) have reported a considerable recent increase in the number of students seeking documentary evidence regarding mental ill-health to assist them in putting forward special circumstances cases. In many cases, students are asking the UHC and SCS to provide documentation in circumstances in which the practitioners in the services have not diagnosed a student’s condition and are not in a position to make a professional judgement. It would therefore be appropriate to provide further guidance regarding the format that medical / professional documentary evidence should take in order for it to be used for special circumstances purposes.

• In 2015, a group of local GP practices issued new guidance regarding the release of medical documentation to students for special circumstances purposes. Academic Services issued guidance to Schools regarding how to assist students in obtaining medical documentation from these practices, and it does not appear that the new guidance is causing difficulties for many students obtaining relevant documentation. However, in the light of the GP practices’ guidance, it may be helpful for the University to clarify its position regarding the necessity for students to obtain medical documentation and the potential for students to self-certify in certain circumstances (eg when they are unable to obtain medical documentation due to factors outside their control).

• The current phase of the EUCLID Assessment and Progression Tools (APT) project will consider how EUCLID can support the special circumstances process. Initial business process analysis suggests variations in Schools’ processes for handling special circumstances and understanding of the policy. Further clarification of the policy and associated processes is required before the development of any software to support the special circumstances process.

• CSPC plans to conduct a review in 2015-16 of the University policy on extensions to coursework deadlines, in the context of special circumstances. It would be sensible to consider this alongside a review of other special circumstances issues.
The Higher Education Academy is facilitating a sector-wide discussion regarding whether institutions should adopt Grade Point Averages (GPA) as an alternative, or complementary system, to Honours degree classification. The University has not yet decided whether to adopt GPA or not (the Senate Learning and Teaching Committee is responsible for leading this discussion). Were the University to decide to adopt GPA, the practical implementation of GPA is likely to raise issues regarding the consideration and recording of special circumstances cases.

**Proposed arrangements for review**

The Committee is invited to approve the remit and task group membership:

**Remit**

To review the University’s Special Circumstances Policy and associated guidance and form, with a view to where possible delivering a consistent approach to handling students’ cases across the University, giving particular attention to the following issues:

- The requirement for students to provide documentary evidence to support their cases, including:
  - The eligibility of particular types of medical / professional documentation;
  - The potential for students to self-certify in limited circumstances.

- Appropriate business processes for managing the Special Circumstances Policy and for recording special circumstances applications and / or Special Circumstances decisions in EUCLID.

- The University’s policy on extensions to coursework deadlines, in the context of special circumstances.

If the University decides to pursue the introduction of GPA, the task group will also advise regarding any implications this would have for the University’s Special Circumstances Policy.

**Membership**

- Convener – TBC
- One Dean / Associate Dean from each College
- Two other representatives from each College (ensuring a mixture of academic and administrative staff with experience of handling special circumstances cases at School level, including staff with experience at both undergraduate and postgraduate level)
- One EUSA representative
- One representative of the Student Counselling Service
- One representative of Student Systems
- Head of Governance and Regulatory Team, Academic Services
- Task Group administrator from Academic Services
Timescales

The task group would aim to submit an interim report to the Committee’s 21 January 2016 meeting, and a final report to its 14 April 2016 meeting.

Tom Ward
26 August 2015