

## **Guidance for staff on Mitigating Circumstances, Self-Certification of Absence, Academic Appeals and Automatic Extensions relating to Covid-19 (Coronavirus), 2020/21**

**(Updated May 2021)**

### **Background**

Arrangements were put in place in spring 2020 to manage the impact of the Covid-19 virus on the volume of students submitting claims for mitigating circumstances by temporarily removing the requirement to provide evidence for illness and introducing a step prior to mitigating circumstances submission which allows students to self-certify for illness for a period up to and including seven days.

In January 2021, the [Assessment Pledge](#) was introduced to ensure that students are supported to succeed despite the extraordinary events of this academic year, which we understand has been especially challenging. The aim of the Assessment Pledge is to reduce the burden on both students and the NHS, for example, with regards to removing the requirement for students to have to submit medical evidence with any requests for consideration of mitigating circumstances, and by introducing automatic extensions.

The following guidance is provided for staff members to help them understand the arrangements that are now in place in relation to the use of mitigating circumstances, self-certification of absence from learning, and automatic extensions for the remainder of the 2020/21 academic year. Faculties may have their own more detailed guidance available to support the implementation of the Assessment Pledge, so staff members are advised to check for any Faculty-specific arrangements.

### **Students who receive a positive Covid-19 test result**

- Any student who receives a positive Covid-19 test must inform the University immediately following the guidance they have received advising them of the process depending on their individual circumstances (<https://www.welcome.manchester.ac.uk/welcome-and-induction/arriving-on-campus/staying-safe/>).
- If a student is required to self-isolate for a period of 14 days they will be expected to move to the remote study option<sup>1</sup> and this will not be accepted as a reason for mitigating circumstances.
- Guidance for staff members on the steps they should follow to report that a student has disclosed that they have tested positive for COVID-19 or have started to self-isolate is available at: <http://documents.manchester.ac.uk/display.aspx?DocID=50638>.

### **Self-certification of Absence from Learning**

Self-Certification of Absence from Learning covers teaching and learning activities, and allows students to notify the University of occasions where they will be, or are, absent or unable to engage from such activities for up to seven days. *It does not extend to summative assessment or exams; absence from these activities would be considered under the University's [Policy on Mitigating Circumstances](#).*

As set out on the [TLSD website](#), a new 'Procedure for Student Self-Certification of Absence from Learning' was introduced in 2019/20 which sets out arrangements for students to notify the University if they are ill or unable to study for a period up to and including seven days. Originally, this process was set up to cover absence due to short-term illness of students; however, it has now been expanded to cover *not just student illness but also absences for other reasons*. For example, cases where *students*

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<sup>1</sup> Students should check with their programme team to ensure that the remote study option is available.

*miss learning opportunities due to situations such as loss of IT connection and care duties can also be included.* Evidence is not required to be submitted to support any Self-Certification of Absence form.

Self-certification is part of the process of a student reporting to the University that they are struggling to engage with learning opportunities. This self-reporting of difficulty with study should fit with engagement monitoring data gathering (formerly called attendance monitoring or class registers but now could include data on VLE access and PC cluster login).

### **Self-certification process 2020/21**

- Students should submit to their School a [Student Self-certification of absence form](#) if they are ill or are unable to engage with study for a period *up to and including seven days*, in relation to teaching and learning activities; the form relates to attendance and engagement and is not part of the mitigating circumstances procedure. (For absences of more than seven days, or where students' summative assessments may be affected, they are advised to use the process for consideration of mitigating circumstances.)
- *Self-certification should be used to help the Academic Advisor to spot early signs of a student starting to struggle with their study. The Academic Advisor should guide the student to engage in the relevant support systems to catch up and recover.*
- For further details, please see the full procedure at: <https://www.staffnet.manchester.ac.uk/tlso/policy-guidance/assessment/reaching-decisions-from-assessment/self-certification/>

### **Mitigating circumstances**

*Mitigating circumstances are 'unforeseeable or unpreventable circumstances that could have, or did have, a significant adverse effect on the **academic performance** of a student'.*

Mitigating circumstances are part of the process for informing Examination Boards about adverse circumstances impacting students' **summative assessment**.

Mitigating circumstances in most instances require independent verifiable evidence to support the claims made by the student. **The [Assessment Pledge](#) introduced on 19<sup>th</sup> January removed the requirement to provide evidence to support applications relating to illness/medical issues.** (Please see further details below under Mitigating Circumstances Process 2020/21.)

Further details for students about the Assessment Pledge can be found in the [Assessment Pledge FAQs](#).

Schools should consider referring students onto any appropriate areas of support across the University if the reasons for the application highlight an ongoing support need.

### **Mitigating circumstances process 2020/21**

- *Students who are affected by illness or circumstances which they believe impact on their ability to study and could have an adverse effect on their summative assessments are advised to submit a claim for mitigating circumstances. (If their adverse situation/circumstances only lasts for a short time, i.e. up to and including seven days, and only affects their attendance at, or engagement with, teaching and learning activities, then that would come under the Self-Certification of Absence procedures; it is only when the circumstances may adversely affect their summative assessments that students are advised to submit a claim for mitigating circumstances).*
- Students should submit as much information as possible with their claim for mitigating circumstances, in order that the Panel can make an informed decision. It is advisable that

students provide a detailed description of both a) the circumstances and b) the impact of those circumstances on their performance/attainment.

- ***The Assessment Pledge introduced on 19th January 2021 removed the requirement for students to submit supporting evidence with any claim for illness/medical issues for mitigating circumstances.***
- Schools/Mitigating Circumstances Panels should **not** request medical evidence from any students who have not submitted such evidence with applications for mitigating circumstances that cite medical issues/illness, during the remainder of the 2020/21 academic year. Panels should also **not** give greater merit to applications from students that do include medical evidence. They should treat cases the same as they would do normally, in terms of the seriousness/strength of the case; for example, a case citing a student having a cold may be viewed by the Panel as being a more robust case than a student who has a more substantial or longer lasting illness or medical issue. Panels should still use their judgement to assess the severity of cases, whether or not they are accompanied by evidence, but should be flexible and empathetic in the circumstances.
- Students who are studying remotely will be responsible for ensuring that they have access to the appropriate IT equipment and reliable internet access for their particular programme of study and they would need to cover any costs associated with these; if students are studying remotely, they are advised to check with their programme team regarding any specific IT equipment/internet access that is required to enable them to fully engage with their programme of study.
- Students are reminded that if they are struggling to access appropriate equipment they can contact [helpmegetonline@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:helpmegetonline@manchester.ac.uk) who will be able to provide appropriate levels of support depending on individual circumstances.
- Normally, the Policy on Mitigating Circumstances does not allow IT failures as grounds for mitigation; however, due to the move to blended learning, certain IT-related circumstances will be accepted. If students are claiming mitigating circumstances due to IT failure or equipment or connectivity, evidence of this failure would be required to support any claim. Examples of evidence include copies of correspondence from an internet service provider or utility company, as appropriate; or if students experience a network or hardware fault at the point of submission, they should take a screenshot or photograph of any error message. Further guidance on IT issues being considered a grounds for mitigation, can be found at: <http://documents.manchester.ac.uk/display.aspx?DocID=51373>.
- Academic colleagues and students should do what they can to avoid these issues arising in the first place, e.g. staff not setting deadlines or exams during known Blackboard downtime, no deadlines or the setting of online exams out of working hours or when IT support is not available and advising students to plan well so they are not submitting work at the last minute.
- If students are submitting requests for mitigating circumstances in relation to new caring responsibilities (if their child has to stay at home from school to self-isolate, for example), evidence should be provided such as copies of emails/letters from their child's school/childcare facility confirming that the child is unable to attend their usual facilities, including relevant dates.
- Schools/Panels are advised to consult with the Disability Advisory and Support Service (DASS) regarding any requests for mitigating circumstances that cite, or may be connected to, a student's disability.

### **Academic Appeals**

Although not specifically stated in the Assessment Pledge, the requirement for students to provide medical evidence to support Academic Appeals has also been revised for the rest of the 2020/21

academic year, to reflect the fact that students may find it difficult to obtain GP appointments during the current situation. Any cases presented as an Academic Appeal relating to medical issues/illness are **not** required to provide supplementary medical evidence to support the student's medical circumstances, and these should not be requested, if students have not previously made these available. However, if students *are* able to provide supplementary medical evidence to support the appeal, they are encouraged to do so as it may assist the retrospective consideration of such cases.

If students are appealing on the grounds of there being circumstances affecting their performance which the Examination Board or equivalent body may not have been aware of when a decision was made, they are still required to provide credible and compelling reasons, supported by appropriate documentary evidence, to explain why they did not bring the mitigating circumstances to the University's attention at an earlier stage.

### **Automatic Extensions (academic year 2020/21 only)**

The Assessment Pledge introduced on 19th January 2021 allows students to choose to have an automatic extension of up to seven days, for up to two individual assignments or pieces of coursework from 19<sup>th</sup> January 2021 until the end of the academic year. This will allow them to choose how best to resolve any challenges arising from deadlines "bunching up".

Students have to advise their School or Programme Team in advance of the original deadline if they wish to do this by completing a form available online. The automatic extensions are available in addition to any extension that a student may be granted separately via mitigating circumstances or through DASS.

Faculties may implement this new automatic extension process in slightly different ways, so staff are advised to check for any Faculty-specific arrangements.

### **Further information and resources**

Further information can be found at the following locations:

#### **Self-certification**

<https://www.staffnet.manchester.ac.uk/tlso/policy-guidance/assessment/reaching-decisions-from-assessment/self-certification/>

#### **Mitigating Circumstances**

<https://www.staffnet.manchester.ac.uk/tlso/policy-guidance/assessment/reaching-decisions-from-assessment/mitigating-circumstances/>

#### **Guidance for students**

<https://www.welcome.manchester.ac.uk/welcome-and-induction/arriving-on-campus/staying-safe/coronavirus-faqs/>

<https://www.studentsupport.manchester.ac.uk/study-support/mitigating-circumstances/>

<https://www.studentsupport.manchester.ac.uk/study-support/academic-support/accessing-online-teaching-and-learning/assessments-and-exams/help-with-assessment-issues/>

<https://manchesterstudentsunion.com/advice/academic-advice/mitigating-circumstances>

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