



RCSI

Postgraduate Students Exceptional Circumstances Policy*

RCSI DEVELOPING HEALTHCARE LEADERS WHO MAKE A DIFFERENCE WORLDWIDE

Policy / Regulation History

Document Title	RCSI Postgraduate Students Exceptional Circumstances Policy*					
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*This Guide refers to all postgraduate students with the exception of those registered to the MSc Physician Associates programme.

1. Definition

Exceptional Circumstances are defined as serious and extraordinary circumstances outside a student's control, normally unforeseeable and unpreventable which cause a student to:

- 1.1 Perform less well in coursework or examinations than might have been expected on the basis of other work
- OR
- 1.2 Fail to meet submission/extension deadlines
- OR
- 1.3 Fail to attend an examination/viva
- OR
- 1.4 Become ill during an exam/viva

In general, Exceptional Circumstances will be of a medical or personal nature affecting a student and must be corroborated by independent evidence.

2. Key points to note:

- 2.1 The circumstances have to be exceptional. Time management is an important skill which students are expected to develop during their time at RCSI and includes being able to manage or compensate for the minor illnesses and disruptions that may occur in everyone's life from time to time. Listed below, in Section 4, are some circumstances which might be viewed as meeting the definition of Exceptional Circumstances. Section 5 outlines some circumstances which are unlikely to be accepted as being exceptional.
- 2.2 The definition makes it clear that Exceptional Circumstances concern reasons why a student might not have performed as well as expected. They do not relate to reasons why a student may not have been able to study. If there are factors affecting a student's ability to study or to submit assignments/research on time, then the student should discuss these with an RCSI member of staff in their School, so that appropriate arrangements can be put in place.
- 2.3 The definition of Exceptional Circumstances refers to actual performance in relation to expected performance based on other work. If a student has chronic circumstances (such as anxiety, asthma) which affect carrying out research or completing assessments in general, the student should talk to their School/Department to find a possible resolution. Their circumstances may require the student to register with the RCSI learning support service.
- 2.4 Applications for Exceptional Circumstances in relation to examinations/vivas must be made within 3 working days of the examination/viva (linked to Exam Board dates). For Exceptional Circumstances in relation to assignments or thesis submissions which exceed agreed submission/extension dates, applications must be made as soon as the circumstances are known and an agreed late submission deadline must be set. Students may be asked to submit their unfinished work at the original assignment date and their completed work at the late submission date. If the exceptional circumstances are accepted, the latter submission will be graded. In certain extraordinary cases, at the discretion of the Programme Director/Head of School, a student may be granted a maximum of two further weeks to submit an assignment/thesis. If the final submission is not received within the two weeks, an Exceptional Circumstances application must be made. Retrospective applications for Exceptional Circumstances will only be considered where there are valid reasons for non-submission in the usual timeframe.

- 2.5 Where a student becomes unwell during an examination/viva and opts to leave the examination conditions without completing the assessment, the student must notify the Invigilator/Examiner. The application for Exceptional Circumstances must be made within three working days of the examination/viva. An Exceptional Circumstances Committee is not obliged to consider any documentation submitted more than three working days after the examination/viva.
- 2.6 RCSI reserves the right to verify all and any evidence provided in support of an Exceptional Circumstances Application. In cases where a fraudulent Exceptional Circumstances Application is reasonably suspected, a student will be dealt with in accordance with RCSI's Disciplinary Regulations.¹

3. Processes

3.1 What can I do if I experience difficulty with studying or completing coursework or examinations?

There may be occasions when a student's ability to study and complete assessments or examinations is affected by circumstances beyond normal control. These circumstances may include health problems, personal/family issues or financial constraints. There are a number of first points of contact for help, guidance and support available to students. Part-time postgraduate students should talk to their Programme Director, Head of School or Research Supervisor. It is important that a student discusses any issues of difficulty with the appropriate person, as soon as possible, to ensure that they are aware of the sources of support and guidance available to them and of the various options open to them.

For instance, if personal circumstances prevent a student from meeting the academic or professional requirements of their programme of studies, it may be advisable for a student to take a Leave of Absence returning to studies when the issue has been resolved or become manageable.² A Leave of Absence is normally granted within term time, allowing a student time away from the teaching programme.

If a student has long term health issues, he/she may be directed to the CoMPPAS team to discuss the support that may be available.

3.2 What can I do if I have a long term health problem/disability/specific learning disability?

If a student has a condition which is unlikely to improve during the course of his/her studies and which affects his/her ability to study and/or complete assessments or research, he/she should confidentially contact the CoMPPAS team, so that possible support mechanisms can be explored.

For instance, subject to confidential registration and the provision of documentary evidence of a student's condition, a student may be required to participate in a confidential learning support needs analysis. It may then be possible for RCSI to explore provision of a Reasonable Accommodation for the student. Such accommodations may include making special arrangements with regards to sitting exams, or completing assignments or research. There may also be additional academic support or equipment available that could be of assistance. It should also be noted, however, that applications for Reasonable Accommodation may not always be successful; particularly in cases where the accommodation sought is deemed disproportionate, impractical, or could create an unfair advantage over other students, or potentially compromise a student's ability to demonstrate required academic and/or professional competencies of their programme. Applications for Reasonable Accommodation

¹ Disciplinary Regulations are available on the SARA Moodle page.

² Leave of Absence Regulations and application forms are available on the SARA Moodle page.

should be submitted by the published deadlines in order to allow time for an appropriate assessment and needs analysis to be undertaken. Applications outside of these deadlines will be considered in certain limited circumstances, such as the diagnosis of a previously unknown condition or the sudden onset or worsening of a medical/health condition of such seriousness as to warrant consideration outside the normal application process.

RCSI is committed to supporting students as much as is reasonably practicable. However, please note that long term problems, including those supported through the Reasonable Accommodation process, do not constitute Exceptional Circumstances (unless there has been a sudden and temporary flare-up, or the condition has considerably deteriorated). A Board of Examiners must judge a student's ability on the basis of his/her actual performance.

3.3 What should I do if I feel I will not perform well in an examination/viva?

There may be occasions when a student will wish he/she was better prepared for an exam/viva, especially if events occur which interrupt their revision programme. The dates of exams are published well in advance and students should organise their revision time to allow for minor events which may disrupt their revision. Adequate revision planning and exam preparation is the key to exam success. Exam anxiety is a natural occurrence experienced by most students and as such it is equally important that students have personal strategies to assure their well-being and health as they manage the demands of their programme. If a student needs help and advice in relation to exam preparation, they should ask for it. Advance revision planning is a very effective strategy to reduce anxiety associated with exams, as is asking for help at the right time. If a student is experiencing chronic anxiety, they should access the RCSI resources available to them to assist in managing this (see Section 5).

If a student suffers from a condition, such as migraine or hay fever, they should build allowance into their revision timetable for these conditions; as such circumstances will not be accepted as valid reasons for loss of revision time. However, Exceptional Circumstances may affect a student's performance on the day of an examination/viva and in such cases a student may ask the Board of Examiners to consider his/her situation through the Exceptional Circumstances process.

3.4 What should I do if I feel I cannot meet an extension deadline for an assignment/thesis?

Submission deadlines for all coursework are published well in advance and students are expected to manage their time accordingly. If Exceptional Circumstances arise that prevent a student meeting the submission deadline then the student may apply for an extension. Extensions to submission deadlines are solely at the discretion of their Programme Director/Head of School. Where an extension is granted students may be given a maximum of two further weeks to submit. If the submission is still not received within the two weeks, the student must complete an Exceptional Circumstances Application and submit it to their Programme Director/Head of School or nominee. The student must also agree a late submission deadline. Students may be asked to submit their unfinished work at the original assignment due date and their completed work at the late submission date. If the exceptional circumstances are accepted, the latter submission will be graded. The Marks and Standards documentation of individual programmes outlines any penalties applied to assignments which are submitted late. If a student feels he/she has been unfairly penalised for a late submission, they may be able to appeal the mark in accordance with RCSI Appeal Procedures.³

Where the expiration of the deadline relates to the submission of a thesis for a Research degree, the candidate will have to re-register for another academic year and pay the relevant fees.

³ Appeal Procedures are available on the SARA Moodle page.

3.5 What happens if I cannot attend an exam/clinical placement/viva?

If a student is unable to attend on the day of an examination/clinical placement/viva he/she should inform their School as soon as possible. A student who absents himself or herself from any assessment without prior permission and without applying for Exceptional Circumstances renders himself or herself liable to disciplinary action which may include discontinuation or expulsion from the College. At the very least, this absence will be counted as an actual sitting of the relevant examination/assessment.⁴

PLEASE NOTE THAT IF YOU PRESENT YOURSELF FOR AN EXAMINATION AT THE TIME OF THE EXAMINATION YOU HAVE DECLARED YOURSELF FIT.

4. What counts as Exceptional Circumstances?

Some examples of circumstances that might be upheld as exceptional are given below, together with examples of documentation to support a submission. Students are advised to discuss any circumstance which affects his/her ability to study, carry out research and/or undertake assessments with an RCSI member of staff who, as well as offering advice on how RCSI may offer support, could also be willing to provide a supporting letter for an Exceptional Circumstances Application.

Circumstance	Supporting Documentation
Illness which prevented the student from attending an assessment	Letter/certificate from a health professional or counsellor Hospital appointment card or letter
Illness which prevented the student from completing an assessment (coursework/thesis) on time.	Letter/certificate from a health professional or counsellor, hospital appointment card, prescription or medicine labelling
Unforeseen major travel disruption which caused the student to be late/miss an exam	Letter from transport company
Legal matters	Letter/documents from court/solicitor.
Personal/domestic/work problems which occurred in the period leading up to an examination or assessment deadline	Letter from someone who has direct knowledge of the problems and/or has been involved in supporting the student e.g. Priest, Pastor, Minister, Imam, Granthi, Maha Pursh, Employer, Chaplain, Student Support and Development Officer.
Bereavement	Supporting evidence of bereavement, e.g. Death Certificate, or letter from Parent, Guardian, Spouse, Doctor or Counsellor.

5. What does not count as Exceptional Circumstances?

Long term issues, such as ongoing health, anxiety, personal or financial issues, which affect a student's ability to study or to perform generally, do not count as Exceptional Circumstances. If a student is affected in this way, he/she should discuss the situation with their Head of School, Programme Director, or Research Supervisor.

The following are examples of circumstances which are not likely to be upheld:

- completing and submitting coursework late and missing deadlines without due cause;
- late submission due to a printing/binding/copying backlog;

⁴ Examinations and Assessment Regulations are available on the SARA Moodle page.

- losing coursework not backed up;
- work (paid or voluntary) or religious commitments reducing time available for study or coursework;
- a minor ailment such as a cold;
- a minor domestic upset;
- a long-standing condition, such as susceptibility to hay fever;
- misreading the timetable;
- over sleeping/alarm clock not going off causing a student to be late for or to miss an exam or assessment;
- attending family weddings;
- holidays or travel;
- chronic ill health (unless there has been a sudden and temporary flare-up, or a condition has considerably deteriorated);
- prolonged personal difficulties which have affected a student's capacity to learn;
- certain cultural commitments;
- sporting events.

6. How and when do I submit an Exceptional Circumstances Application?

Exceptional Circumstances Application Forms are available on Moodle.⁵ Where the Exceptional Circumstances relate to examinations/vivas, the deadline for submission is **within 3 working days of the examination/viva date**. Where the Exceptional Circumstances relate to assignment/thesis submissions, applications must be submitted as soon as the Exceptional Circumstances are known, and an agreed late submission deadline must be set. Students may be asked to submit their unfinished work at the original assignment due date and their completed work at the late submission date. If the exceptional circumstances are accepted, the latter submission will be graded.

Applications for Exceptional Circumstances cannot be accepted after this deadline unless a student can provide a good reason why he/she was not able to submit them earlier. A student who wishes to submit a claim of Exceptional Circumstances should submit an Application even if he/she is still awaiting supporting documentary evidence.

If a student misses an examination/viva due to illness, he/she **MUST** submit medical certificates with the accompanying Exceptional Circumstances Application to their Programme Director/Head of School or nominee. Please note that a medical certificate that does not have enough detail may be rejected. All supporting documentation must be submitted.

7. What happens when I submit an Exceptional Circumstances Application?

7.1 An Exceptional Circumstances Committee, which is a sub group of the Board of Examiners, will be convened to confidentially review an anonymised copy of the written submission. The Committee will decide whether the claim of Exceptional Circumstances is upheld or not. In making this decision it will consider the contents of the Exceptional Circumstances Application and the evidence submitted, following which it will:

- a. Determine if the circumstances are, in its opinion, exceptional;
- b. Decide whether they are likely to have affected the student's performance in the way described;

⁵ See SARA Policies, Procedures and Regulations Moodle page.

- c. Consider the weight of supporting evidence;
- d. Consider the impact of the Exceptional Circumstances on the student's performance. This is a matter of academic judgement on the part of the Board of the Examiners.

7.2 Where appropriate, the Committee will inform the Board of Examiners if the claim has been recommended for consideration, and the Board may:

- a. In the case of a late submission, lift or reduce any penalties which have been automatically applied;
- b. In the case of a missed in-term assessment, consider compensation in line with relevant Marks & Standards
- c. In the case of a failed module:
 - i. in extraordinary cases, where a student's actual performance is close to the pass mark and expected performance can be clearly estimated, a pass may be awarded

OR

 - ii. in cases where a student's actual performance is close to the compensatable mark and expected performance can be clearly estimated, a compensatable mark may be awarded (where individual Marks and Standards allow)

OR

 - iii. where applicable to exams, decide to allow the student to sit the examination at the next available sitting where the mark will be uncapped. Where applicable to assignments, marks for the resubmitted assignment may be permitted.

7.3 In making such decisions, the Board of Examiners will consider the impact of the Exceptional Circumstances in the light of non-affected work, i.e. it will make a judgement about the potential of the student to have gained a higher mark.

7.4 After the Board of Examiners has considered the Application, the student will receive an acknowledgement that his/her claim of Exceptional Circumstances has been considered and he/she will be informed of the outcome. The student will not be given details of the deliberations as the discussions of the Board of Examiners are confidential.

7.5 Any submission to the Exceptional Circumstances Committee that may be considered to affect a student's ability to engage with their programme under health grounds may be referred to the Programme Director for follow up.

7.6 All Exceptional Circumstances Committees and Examination Boards are completely confidential. All copies of Applications are retained by the Programme Office of the course the student is enrolled on. By submitting an Application, the student consents to allow summarised information to be considered at the Exceptional Circumstances Committee and Board of Examiners; and for this information to be retained by the Programme Office and recorded on the student's file.



8. Can I Appeal?

A student can appeal against a final decision of the Board of Examiners in accordance with the Appeals Regulations.⁶

Please note that appeals against academic judgement cannot be made.

9. Discretionary Submissions

In extreme cases, a Head of School/Programme Director may submit an Exceptional Circumstances Application on a student's behalf.

⁶ Appeal Regulations are available on the SARA Moodle page.