

Embedding Mental Wellbeing: Methods and Benefits Collaborative Enhancement Project 2021

Establishing a Shared Values Base

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Rationale

It is recognised and understood that while at university, various issues and life events can have an impact on the ability to study and/or complete coursework/assessments by the set deadline. Therefore, students are encouraged to submit an Extenuating Circumstances (EC) request to let the University know about this and to request adjustments to deadlines and assessment submissions. Furthermore, it was appreciated that the pandemic has had a significant effect on the student experience during both academic years 2019-20 and 2020-21, and that this had taken a toll on student mental health and students feeling that they were not getting the most out of their degree and their learning. Therefore, following consultation with key stakeholders, the University implemented some additional temporary measures to support students' progress and continue with their studies.

Method

In accordance with the University's EC Policy, students can make a self-certified request, which extends their deadline by 3 working days. This needs to be submitted 5 working days before the original deadline, and there is no need to provide evidence. Students are able to make use of this request twice within a 12-month period.

Other adjustments that students can request include:

- for circumstances that affect them for longer than three days, they can ask for an **extension**
- for circumstances that affect an assessment that they are due to attend at a specific time, like an exam, they can ask for a **delayed assessment**
- for circumstances that impact their studies but do not affect their ability to submit to deadlines/take timed assignments, they can ask for **consideration by the Board of Examiners** – this means their ECs will be considered in relation to their progress and/or final classification
- for circumstances that are having a significant impact on their ability to participate in their studies, they can ask for an **interruption from studies**.

In response to the pandemic students were asked to submit evidence only if they had it, as it was realised that in pandemic circumstances evidence might not always be available, but this would not stop their request from being sympathetically considered. Instead, students were advised that if they were unable to provide evidence, they just needed to briefly tell us why evidence was not available as part of their online EC request process.

We were still keen to ensure that students received the support they required so, where ECs were approved without evidence that students were already seeking support, students were encouraged to seek support from University Support Services, for example:

- The University's student wellbeing service that can provide help in different ways, including workshops and group sessions, one-to-one appointments, self-help resources and online support, and help with accessing external support.
- UEA students have access to Health Assured's Assistance Programme that includes 24/7 telephone helpline (0800 028 0199) or via their online portal and provide support to deal with personal and professional issues.
- The University's Talking Therapies Service that provide online therapeutic support at the point of need rather than having to wait.

Also, during the academic year 2019/20, further temporary adjustments included the implementation of a delayed submission date of 10 working days beyond the published deadline without the need to provide any evidence (with 20 days being provided for placement reports, professional portfolios, projects and/or dissertations) during the period from January to March 2021. Thereafter, a student unable to submit by this extended date (X + 10) was eligible for a delayed first submission submitted by a deadline in August 2020.

We have also now explicitly acknowledged the nature of mental health challenges in the policy and how this may impact on help-seeking behaviour leading to a delay in making us aware of difficulties. A fictional example case study included in our regulation is as follows:

Ben has been feeling low for a while now. He had no motivation to go out with friends over the Christmas break or engage in his normal routine. He feels anxious about what might be wrong and doesn't know why he feels this way. He has missed lectures and two assessment deadlines from last semester and is now really worried about the impact on his studies. He finds the courage to speak to Student Services who provide assurances that they can support him and help him to get back on track with his studies. He is encouraged to make an appointment to see his GP who provides a doctor's note which explains that this is the first time that he has sought medical advice and advocates support for retrospective extensions for the assessments due 2 months ago. Ben is concerned that his request may not be approved as he didn't seek support at the time that the assessments were due.

The EC Panel approves the request on the basis of (a) self-testimony from the student as it is acknowledged that mental health circumstances described can preclude help-seeking behaviour or disclosure, and (b) a GP note. Although the GP note confirms it is a new appointment, and doesn't confirm the nature and duration of any impact on the student, it does support the requested extensions for the retrospective disclosure of a mental health condition.

Evaluation

At the time:

- Significant additional volumes of EC requests received as students utilised contingency measures.

On reflection:

- Feedback on experiences from university colleagues regularly dealing with student EC requests – LTS Managers and ECP chairs. Leading to enhancement of guidance to students about the support opportunities available to them (ECs being just one of).
- Feedback from Student Staff Liaison Committees and other student forums about how EC flexibility supported students.

Takeaway message

Flexibility, adaptability and recognising the need to amend processes/policies to meet changing needs enhances inclusion and positively influences student support and experience as well as continuation with learning.

This document was produced as part of the [Collaborative Enhancement Project - Embedding Mental Wellbeing](#).