

Taught Student Education Board

The Student Counselling Centre (SCC)

Mitigating circumstances letters and letters of attendance

The following statement sets out the role of the SCC in relation to mitigating circumstances and writing letters of attendance for students taking University assessments.

The SCC Position

1. Mitigating Circumstances
2. Letters of Attendance
3. Mitigating Circumstances and Confidentiality
4. Fitness to Study

1. Mitigating Circumstances

"Mitigating circumstances are significantly disruptive or unexpected events which are beyond your control which might affect your academic performance.

Examples of disruptive events:

- i. suffering a serious illness or injury;
- ii. an unexpected change in, or impact of, a disability;
- iii. the death or critical illness of a close family member;
- iv. a significant family crisis leading to acute stress; or,
- v. absence arising from jury service, maternity, paternity or adoption leave."

(Codes of Practice on Assessment: 2013/14)

"If illness or personal difficulties have intervened during a candidature and prevented a student from progressing their research, the student may be granted a suspension of registration for a period necessary to overcome the difficulties. Where such circumstances have had a significant and adverse effect on the progress of the research and extension of study may be granted." (Research Student Handbook)

Where appropriate, counsellors will provide letters/emails in support of mitigating circumstances where those circumstances interfered with the students' ability to focus on academic work and where the students clearly endeavoured to manage with our help.

The following points contain information and guidelines about when we will provide this kind of letter/email:

- The counsellor needs to be confident that s/he is in a position to make a judgement that the issues that the client has brought to the counselling have seriously affected his or her ability to meet course requirements.
- In order to make this kind of a judgement, the counsellor needs to have a clear awareness and understanding of the client's difficulties.
- Generally, this means that the student has attended a therapeutic consultation process or a counselling contract.
- Letters/emails will only ever be provided at the student's request and with the student's permission.
- The counsellor will provide a standard letter/email which does not go into any specific details. Any mitigating circumstances letter sent by the SCC, will, however, state the number of sessions attended and the time period.
- Even if a counsellor has seen a student for a therapeutic consultation and several counselling sessions, s/he may not feel that providing this kind of evidence is appropriate.
- For PGR students we provide letters confirming mitigating circumstances to support requests for suspension/extension of study.

Students should not be encouraged to attend just for the purpose of receiving a mitigating circumstances letter. This will often lead to a lack of commitment to the process by students and a probable waste of counselling resources.

2. Letters of Attendance

We provide letters/emails confirming student attendance here at the SCC. However the provision of a letter/email confirming attendance is not in itself, proof of a mitigating circumstance.

3. Mitigating Circumstances and Confidentiality

Most students coming to counselling do so because the issues they present with cannot be discussed with friends, family, tutors, schools, exam boards and can only be discussed in the knowledge that their personal information will remain confidential.

As you will be aware, students present for a whole range of complex reasons. There is rarely one presenting problem. It is also rare that a student presents with an issue as straight forward as purely an academic difficulty, homesickness or boyfriend/girlfriend concerns. The issue usually has a long history and feelings brought up by relationships and stresses at university have merely brought the issue into focus again. This is particularly so of issues related to family, bereavement, eating disorders, drugs and alcohol, identity, isolation, sexual and physical abuse, self-harm and suicide.

The experience of struggling with such concerns can have an extreme effect on the individual's ability to concentrate on exams and studies. However, whilst this is the case, it is unlikely that the client will want anyone else to know about the material they have been discussing. To many students, the thought of having their personal information deliberated over by an exam board could be very damaging.

This is why the letters which we write to boards contain no personal information. Boards can trust that we do not write these letters lightly and that the material discussed in counselling is affecting the client's ability to concentrate on academic work.

4. Letters/emails confirming fitness to study

We do not provide emails/letter confirming fitness to study. These letters can only be provided by a doctor.

To Summarise:

- 1. The SCC provides two types of letter, for mitigating circumstances and attendance, but only after a person has been seen for a therapeutic consultation or a counselling contract.**
- 2. We do not put personal information into SCC mitigating circumstances letters for the confidentiality reasons outlined above.**
- 3. Do not encourage students to attend the SCC purely for the purpose of receiving a mitigating circumstances letter.**
- 4. We do not provide 'fitness to study' assessment letters. They can only be provided by a student's GP or a qualified medical practitioner.**

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