Special Circumstances Review

What will we do?

1. Have the University review Special Circumstances policy to:
   a) Take into account unique circumstances which impact upon student carers which adversely affects their performance in an assessment, or resulted in non-attendance or a non-submission for a scheduled assessment.
   b) Take into account unique circumstances which impact upon student parents which adversely affects their performance in an assessment, or resulted in non-attendance or a non-submission for a scheduled assessment.
   c) Reflect changes in Extension forms so as not to focus on the individual, making it clear that familial and caring responsibilities can impact upon academic performance.
   d) Reflect changes in Late Penalty Waiver forms so as not to focus on the individual, making it clear that familial and caring responsibilities can impact upon academic performance.
   e) Reflect changes in Special Circumstances so as not to focus on the individual, making it clear that familial and caring responsibilities can impact upon academic performance.

What is the background to this?

1. The University reviewed its Special Circumstances policy in 2016 without consulting students, and has thus not taken into account the diverse range of students which attend the University of Edinburgh. In the document, the University commits to supporting its students by taking into account illness, accident or other circumstances beyond a students’ control that have adversely affected their performance in assessment. Examples given which are likely to be accepted are (and these are specifically stated in the forms):
   - significant short-term physical illness or injury;
   - significant short-term mental ill-health
   - A long-term or chronic physical health condition, which has recently worsened temporarily or permanently
   - A long-term or chronic mental health condition, which has recently worsened temporarily or permanently
   - Bereavement or serious illness of a person with whom the student has a close relationship
   - A long-term relationship breakdown, such as a marriage
   - Victim of a crime which is likely to have significant emotional impact
   - Military conflict, natural disaster or extreme weather conditions.

2. These exclude circumstances which affect student parents and carers, such as:
   - Providing care during short or long-term illness when no other party can do so.
   - As an example for a parent, if a child has an illness, such as (but not limited to) a sickness bug they are unable to attend school and/or
childcare. This could result in the student parent’s non-attendance, leaving mid-assessment or non-submission for a scheduled assessment due to additional caring responsibilities.

- If a child or person for whom the student is responsible for care suffers from a mental health condition or requires additional support for personal, medical, physical reasons, and the responsibility is on the student to provide this, then this may impact upon the student’s academic performance.
- A child or person for whom the student is responsible for caring sustaining injury. This could result in the student’s non-attendance, leaving mid-assessment or non-submission for a scheduled assessment.

3. These are only some examples of unique scenarios which are not reflected in the Special Circumstances policy and which can severely impact upon academic performance.

4. As well as the additional stress and time commitment, students have reported that they often have to stay awake 24/7 in order to prepare for/submit an assessment as they cannot neglect their caring responsibilities or their academic responsibilities, resulting in lack of sleep which again affects performance. These are circumstances which are outwith the students control and are not usual circumstances. There does not, however, appear to be a standardised response throughout Schools within the University. Some students have reported that they have been encouraged to submit special circumstances/extensions, while others have been told that these (or similar) circumstances will not be considered. This, therefore, needs to be laid out and made clear in the policy document to ensure uniformity throughout the University and to ensure that no student is left disadvantaged.

What beliefs motivate the actions you propose?
1. The student population at the University of Edinburgh are diverse and there is a renewed interest in Widening Participation to include more mature students (which will undoubtedly include parents) and young carers. Research has shown that these students can perform well academically, however their personal situations can impact upon their performance resulting in them dropping-out of University all together or not obtaining the classification of degree which they are capable. These proposals will not be putting this cohort of students at an advantage, but making the playing field more level.

2. I believe that the support given by some Schools should be uniform across all Schools at the University. The only way which this is possible is making it clear through policy and reflecting this on the relevant forms.

Submitted by the Parents and Carers convenor on behalf of the Parents and Carers Group