

ACADEMIC BOARD – MEETING 4/04 (27 MAY 2004)

Recommendations to Academic Board on improvements to be made to the on-line special consideration process.

A. Recommendations which have either been implemented, or which will be implemented in time for the first semester examinations.

- (1) A faculty is responsible for determining the outcome of special consideration applications made by students enrolled in subjects offered by that faculty, including applications made by students enrolled in a course not offered by that faculty.
- (2) An HCAP form must be lodged within five days of submission of the original special consideration form if it is to be considered by the due date for notification of examination results.
- (3) The ‘extension of time to submit’ option has been removed from the system to take account of the fact that extensions are in some faculties not granted through the special consideration process. Faculties who award an extension through the special consideration system will be able to use the on-line system for this purpose.
- (4) Guidelines have been revised to emphasise that special consideration will only be granted where an illness or other condition has had a significant impact on a student’s academic performance.
- (5) The specifications for the system have been revised to incorporate a datefield requiring students to indicate the due date of a component of assessment.
- (6) The “other relevant information” field has been amended so as to require students to explain precisely how the illness or other condition affected their academic performance. A student who tries to submit an application without completing this field will receive a warning that the application cannot be submitted until the field has been completed.
- (7) The Disability Liaison Unit has been added to the list of “appropriate professionals” on the HCAP form.
- (8) The HCAP form has been shortened by moving the question relating to whether the application is late to the on-line application form.
- (9) The form will be amended so as to make clear to professionals that they do not have to classify the impact of a condition as ‘slight’, ‘moderate’ or ‘severe’ if they are unable to do so, and that a more general response (perhaps in question 5 ‘other relevant information’) is acceptable.
- (10) The section relating to late applications for special consideration will be clarified. In particular, it will be made clear to students that they explain why it was not practicable to provide the information by the due date. Clearer information as to the respective roles of the Academic Registrar and faculties will be provided.
- (11) A field will be added to the existing notification fields, entitled “considered but no change”.

B. Recommendations still under review by APC.

- (1) The form should be amended to require applicants to state whether an examination in respect of which an application for special consideration has been made was actually sat.
- (2) The facility for indicating a preference for the type of special consideration be removed from question one, although applicants should still be required to distinguish between subjects in respect of which consideration is being sought, and subjects not covered by the application.
- (3) A field be created on Merlin to state the HCAP’s duration of illness or other condition, as advised by the doctor or other professional, to be read alongside the student’s own statement of advised duration.
- (4) A special consideration application will remain valid for a period of two weeks from the date of submission, pending submission of the HCAP. The application will lapse at the end of that period. A student whose application lapses may lodge a request for reinstatement on the ground that circumstances beyond their control prevented submission of the HCAP form within the time allowed.

C. Students with disabilities.

A working group of APC will be established to examine assessment issues affecting students with disabilities. The group will consider all aspects of assessment, including special consideration and special arrangements for assessment.

D. Administration

Student administration is keeping all aspects of the on-line process under review. In particular,

- (1) Attention is being given to providing greater detail in email messages to students on the outcomes of their applications.
- (2) The issue of failed attempts to make special consideration applications will be examined.
- (3) Regular communication to staff administering the special consideration process, including training, will promote greater consistency of outcomes.

Michael Bryan
May 2004

Report on the on-line special consideration process

1. Introduction

The on-line special consideration process was introduced in second semester 2003, following a review by the Academic Programs Committee and subsequent approval by Academic Board. The new system is superior to the old 'paper based' system in several respects. It enables students to apply for special consideration without having to submit documentation in person, or through friends, at faculty or departmental offices. It eliminates much of the 'paper trail' of documentation, some of it of doubtful relevance, which previously accompanied a special consideration application. Medical practitioners and other professionals are now explicitly invited to assess the impact of an illness or other condition on academic performance, rather than supplying generalised descriptions of a student's medical condition. The provision of information in a standard form also promotes consistency of decision-making between faculties where a medical or other condition is under consideration by more than one faculty¹. Finally, the new process has generally resulted in greater feedback to students on the outcomes of their special consideration applications. The new processes are more transparent than many of the procedures adopted under the old 'paper based' systems².

It is appropriate to review the operation of on-line consideration in the light of experience gained from use of the system in the second semester exams, and in supplementary and other exams held early in 2004. Student Administration submitted a report to APC at its 2/04 meeting, based on extensive discussions with faculties as well as on its own evaluation of the system. Following a discussion of the new procedures at the meeting of Academic Policy Forum in February 2004 it was agreed that the Chair of APC would invite submissions from faculties³, as well as from other areas of the university, such as Student Health and the Disability Liaison Unit, which have had a significant involvement with the new procedures. The following recommendations are based on these submissions.

Where a proposal relates to the operating requirements of the on-line process acceptance of the recommendation will depend on the technical feasibility of implementing the change. It has not proved possible, in the time available, to assess whether there are likely to be operational difficulties in giving effect to some of the recommendations.

Finally, this paper discusses some issues of special consideration policy which do not relate to the new on-line system. Implementation of the system has highlighted some problems in the administration of special consideration which antedated the introduction of the new system. The present report provided an opportunity to identify some of these problems and, where appropriate, make recommendations.

2. Responsibility for taking determining special consideration

One issue which emerged, somewhat surprisingly, from the submissions is that it is not always clear which faculty is responsible for making a decision on a special consideration application where a student (not necessarily be a combined degree student) takes subjects offered by more than one faculty. This is an example of an issue which not an "on-line" issue, but which has been brought into sharper focus by the introduction of the new arrangements. There is no evidence of any students failing to have their applications considered –academic administrators are well aware of the risk of students falling "between the cracks" of the system. But is worth stating (or restating) the applicable principle.

Recommendation: A faculty⁴ is responsible for determining the outcome of special consideration applications made by students enrolled in subjects offered by that faculty, including applications made by students not enrolled in a course offered by that faculty.

¹ This does not imply that faculties should reach identical outcomes in considering an illness or other ground of special consideration. Factors such as the impact of an illness on different days during the exam period will often justify differences in the amount of special consideration, if any, awarded.

² This advantage is not, of course, unique to an on-line process. Many faculties had in place transparent special consideration procedures before the new system was implemented.

³ Submissions were received from the following faculties: Arts, Economics & Commerce, Law, Music, Science and Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences.

⁴ Or department, where special consideration decisions are taken at departmental level.

3. The timelines

The application for special consideration must be made no later than three days after the date of the relevant piece of assessment is due. Under the original scheme a student was allowed a further 10 days to lodge the Health Care or Appropriate Professional Report (HCAP). The 10 day period created difficulties for meeting dates, particularly for faculties whose practice is to refer special consideration applications to a faculty committee. The 10 period also complicated other university or faculty processes, including organizing supplementary exams, enabling international students to graduate at the end-of-year graduation ceremony, the sending out of notices for unsatisfactory progress hearings, and making decisions on internal transfer applications. APC, at meeting 10/03, decided to reduce the period in which the HCAP must be submitted to 5 days. A HCAP form submitted after that date will still have to be considered by the relevant examiner or committee (as was the case under the former 'paper' system), though the student will have a 'withheld' result until the form is submitted and considered.

The submissions made by faculties have served only to reinforce the correctness of APC's decision to reduce the HCAP submission period to 5 days. The following recommendation therefore only confirms that decision:

Recommendation: The HCAP form must be lodged within 5 days of submission of the original special consideration if it is to be considered by the due date for notification of examination results.

A special consideration application will continue to be valid even after the 5 day period has elapsed, although a 'withheld' result will be entered until the supporting documentation has been received and considered. Since the provision of documentation often lies outside the student's control it is not recommended that a time limit should be imposed for its submission.

4. Assessment covered by the on-line application procedure

Some faculties separate their procedures for granting assignment extensions from their special consideration processes. Confusion is caused when students use the special consideration procedure to apply for an extension instead of the faculty's own separate process. Primary responsibility for ensuring that students are aware of the different application processes rests on the faculties which operate these separate procedures. Nevertheless, the guidelines for applying for special consideration should be amended to alert students to the fact that the on-line form should not be used, in some faculties, to apply for an extension to an assignment.

Recommendation: The guidelines for special consideration should be amended to advise students that applications for an extension to an essay must, in some faculties, be made by a separate faculty process.

5. The on-line application form

All faculties who made submissions commented on both the increase in the number of special consideration applications, as well as in the increase in the workload (especially in photocopying HCAP applications) consequent on processing the applications. The new system will have succeeded if it has made the special consideration procedure more accessible to deserving applicants. But there was a widely-held view that the system had also been made more accessible to undeserving applicants, and that excessive academic and administrator time had been expended on considering and rejecting unmeritorious applications. It needs to be emphasized that consideration under the process is intended to be "special", in the sense of not covering all the hazards of everyday life. Factors such as minor ailments outside the assessment period or outside work undertaken by students are not properly matters for special consideration. The guidelines should emphasise the special nature of the consideration process, perhaps by providing examples of conditions which are not grounds for awarding special consideration.

Recommendation: The guidelines for submission of special consideration should emphasise that special consideration will only be granted to applicants where the ground of consideration has had a significant impact on a student's academic performance. The guidelines should include examples of matters which, without more, do not provide grounds for special consideration.

In subjects with more than one form of assessment it is not always clear whether the application relates to one component of assessment or to all components.

Recommendation: The form should require applicants to indicate the component(s) of assessment to which the application for special consideration relates.

Examiners or special consideration committees often do not know whether the applicant sat the examination in respect of which the application has been made. The information is obviously relevant to determining the type of special consideration that will be given.

Recommendation: The form should be amended to require applicants to state whether an examination, in respect of which an application for special consideration has been made, was sat.

The form permits applicants to specify the type of special consideration sought. While there can be no objection in principle to a student identifying the preferred form of special consideration, the current version of the form may reinforce a widely-held misconception that special consideration is a matter for negotiation, and not for determination in accordance with the appropriate faculty or departmental procedures. If this section of the form is removed applicants can still indicate their preferred mode of special consideration, if they so wish, in the “other relevant information” section.

Recommendation: The facility for indicating a preference for the type of special be removed from question one, although applicants should still be required to distinguish in that question between subjects in respect of which consideration is being sought and subjects not covered by the application.

Many students do not complete the “other relevant information” field. Experience with the on-line system has shown that information provided in this section may be crucial to the success of the special consideration process. Students should be strongly encouraged to complete this section. Although the field ought to remain a general one, applicants should be advised to state precisely how the illness or other condition has affected their studies. It can also provide an opportunity for students to indicate their preferred type of special consideration. Completion of this field should not be mandatory, but consideration should be given to creating a pop-up warning where the field has not been utilized.

Recommendation: The “other relevant information” field should be amended. Students should be urged to complete this field, and in particular to explain precisely how the ground of special consideration has affected their academic performance. If feasible, a pop-up warning should be created where the field has not been completed.

6. Students with disabilities

In its submission the Disability Liaison Unit identified several issues affecting students with disabilities. They are not specific to the introduction of the on-line process. Nevertheless, at a critical time for the review of the special consideration process it is important that these issues are kept in mind. Submissions made by the DLU include:

(1) The role of the DLU in validating special consideration applications should be recognized.

Recommendation: The DLU should be added to the list of “appropriate professionals” on the HCAP form.

(2) The impact of disability is often overlooked in the special consideration process if students are receiving other accommodations, such as alternative exam arrangements. The impact of disability is not always negated by the provision of such an accommodation. This point does not call for a specific recommendation, but it ought to be taken into account by all decision-makers involved in the special consideration process.

(3) For privacy reasons faculties and departments should be careful not to collect information on disability through the special consideration process if it is unlikely to result in the award of special consideration (perhaps because alternative arrangements for the student are, in the circumstances of the case, appropriate). Information on disability should not be collected if it will have no bearing on teaching and assessment outcomes.

(4) Students with permanent non-changing disabilities have indicated a need for ongoing special consideration. To repeat the same information on the disability each semester, and in respect of each subject, is always onerous and often demeaning.

Recommendation: Consideration should be given to creating a facility for on-line consideration to “carry over” information relevant to the impact of permanent disability on assessment in consultation with the DLU and with the consent of the student. This will not, of course, preclude an additional application for special consideration where factors additional to those identified in the “carry over” application have affected academic performance.

7. The HCAP form

The Report by Health Care or Appropriate Professional (HCAP) is completed by a medical practitioner or other appropriate person who is familiar with the application for special consideration and who can evaluate the severity of the circumstances that may have affected the student's academic performance. Some submissions considered that the HCAP form was too long. It was also suggested that the form encourages a "rubber stamp" approach by practitioners. The former view was expressed by the Faculty of Economics & Commerce, whose own form was a model for the current university form and which was successfully used several years before the on-line system was implemented. The latter view was expressed by some doctors working for Student Health.

The elimination of all "rubber stamping" professional opinions from the special consideration process represents an unattainable ideal. Uninformative, stereotyped medical certificates, or other professional advice, were a pervasive feature of the old "paper based" special consideration system. It would be unrealistic to suppose that its replacement by an on-line system would alter deeply entrenched attitudes to form-filling. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to suppose that a shorter form might encourage at least some professionals to be more forthcoming.

A slightly different point is that the form compels professionals to express their opinions in terms of the university classification of special consideration, which may not always be appropriate to a professional assessment of the particular illness or other condition. In particular, there has been some resistance to question 2, which requires the professional to assess the impact of the condition as "slight", "moderate" or "severe". Similarly, some counselors have stated that they are unable to state, in answer to question 4, whether a student with a psychiatric illness can attend an examination. This suggests that some professionals would welcome the opportunity to express a more open-ended and less category-driven way. The recommendations are directed to, first, creating a shorter form and, secondly, to enabling professionals to answer the questions in a more open-ended form, if they so wish.

Recommendation: Consideration should be given to shortening the HCAP form.

A section of the form which could be reduced in length is the "professional details" section, including the requirement that the form be stamped.

Recommendation: The form should indicate that, while it would assist the university if specific answers could be given to questions 2 and 4, a more general response can be given. A field should be provided for this purpose. Alternatively, this could be the function of an amended question 5 ("other relevant information").

A special problem which has been identified in several submissions is that the duration of illness certified by the professional may be inconsistent with the dates stated by the student on the on-line application.

Recommendation: Student Administration is requested to examine a proposal of the Faculty of Science that a field could be created on Merlin to list the HCAP's advised duration of illness, or other condition, under the student's advised duration of illness or condition.

8. Late applications

Under Statute 12.4.5 (4) late applications can only be considered by the Vice-Principal and Academic Registrar, who must be "satisfied that it was not reasonably practicable for the application to have been made on the prescribed form or at an earlier date, as the case may be". If the Academic Registrar is satisfied that it was not reasonably practicable for the student to submit the application within the prescribed period she will return the application to the relevant faculty for consideration of its substantive merits.

The procedure is not well understood by many students and academic advisers. The procedure applies to a late application for special consideration, and not to a late HCAP form (which can be considered at any time). The current form makes little provision for late applications, and the following recommendations are designed to remedy this situation.

Recommendation: Students should be required to state, with respect to each component of assessment for which they are applying for special consideration, what the date of assessment is, and whether the application for special consideration is late. The application form must state clearly that the student is required to show why it was not reasonably practicable to provide the information by the due date, in addition to information about the illness or other

condition. The email acknowledgement to the student when the application is sent should explain the procedure which the Academic Registrar and Faculty will follow.

Some confusion has arisen where special consideration applications have been wrongly sent to the Academic Registrar where the HCAP has been returned late, even though the original application was in time. Faculty submissions identified administrative difficulties in correcting this error. A solution to this problem ought to be found without the necessity of making a specific recommendation.

9. Communication of outcomes

A feature of the on-line process is that students are now provided with feedback on the outcome of special consideration applications. The greater transparency of the process is one of the advantages of the new system, although it has predictably resulted in more queries and attempts to re-open results than occurred under the "paper" system. The querying of decisions can be expected to continue, at least until the special consideration system is fully understood by both students and staff.

No submission recommended a return to the old system under which, in many cases, students were unaware of the outcome of their special consideration applications. Several submissions, however, recommended refinements and additions to the outcomes notified to students. It was suggested, for example, that it should be possible to record that account had been taken of special consideration without the necessity of taking any action (perhaps because the student had obtained a high grade anyway). A return of "not approved" is misleading in such a case, and invites unnecessary challenge.

Recommendation: A field should be added to the existing notification fields, named 'considered but no change'.

Some faculties which constitute special consideration committees to consider applications have experienced difficulty in timing the communication to the students. It is usual to communicate the outcome of the committee's decision to the subject co-ordinator or the Chair of the Examination Board who must then decide whether to give effect to the Committee's decision. Most examiners accept the recommendation of the Committee, but exceptional cases do occur when an examiner considers that there is good reason not to accept the recommendation. If students are informed immediately by email of the committee's decision it is difficult to preserve the individual academic input.

Recommendation: Student administration should examine the feasibility of implementing a system of entering results by delaying email communication to students for a period (not to exceed the university deadline for entry of results) to enable subject co-ordinators to consider the recommendations of special consideration committees.

If it should not prove feasible to implement such a system faculties employing special consideration committees will need to abandon their "enter- results- as-they- go" methods and delay email communication of results until the special consideration process has run its full course.

Michael Bryan
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