

University of Glasgow**Academic Standards Committee – Friday 17 April 2015****Treatment of Absence with Good Cause from Honours Assessments**

Professor John H Davies, Convenor of Transnational Education, School of Engineering

The School of Engineering is concerned about absences from examinations for “Good Cause” where the School has doubts about the validity of the supporting evidence. Difficulties arise because:

- the Student Absence Policy requires only “a note from an independent responsible person who can vouch for the event which led to the absence” and disputes have arisen over who can be considered independent and responsible;
- some medical notes are so vague that they do not provide compelling evidence, such as “the candidate reported suffering from flu-like symptoms on the day”, but it is hard to see how better evidence could be obtained when it is often impossible to get an appointment until several days after the event;
- it is believed that medical notes are easy to obtain on demand in Singapore; we have some evidence of this.

The School believes that most evidence submitted in support of mitigating circumstances is genuine and does not wish to penalise students, who in some cases have appalling problems. However, the concern is that a small number of students attempt to use the system to gain strategic advantage by missing difficult examinations. This is particularly serious in the final year, where there are no resits, because the Good Cause procedures allow the missing courses to be omitted from the final Honours assessment. Engineering offers resits in year 3 (intended only to assist progression) and students can use Good Cause to allow the resit to be treated as the first attempt, thus spreading the assessment over multiple diets.

On average this concerns about one student per year. The problem has arisen both in Glasgow and in Singapore. It is not a large issue numerically but we are concerned about the potential impact on academic reputation, particularly in Singapore, if it becomes known that our procedures are open to abuse. There is particularly strong feedback from year to year in Singapore, giving potential for the problem to grow. Cases in Glasgow lead to appeals, which can consume a great deal of time unproductively.

The School invites ASC to consider whether the current arrangements are still fit for purpose. Two solutions are suggested, neither comprehensive.

- The person providing the supporting evidence is required to complete a form that makes the impact of the author’s statements clear; this does not get around the problem of vague medical notes nor whether the writer is independent and responsible.
- A student who misses an examination because of mitigating circumstances when there is normally no resit is required to sit a substitute examination, rather than having the missing assessment discounted. This may create difficulties with timing but only a few students should be involved. This should apply only in circumstances where recovery is rapid and not, say, following an accident with a prolonged recovery period;

the present Good Cause arrangements should still be available in such cases. This does not get around the problem in level 3 exams, where resits are offered by Engineering and the results usually contribute toward progression only; it still allows students to spread effort over more than one diet, but at least they cannot omit the examination completely.