Self-certification, Exceptional Circumstances and Student Support Plans (Revised April 2023)

The self-certification campaign and where we are at

YUSU has been running a campaign seeking the reinstatement of unlimited self-certification (the policy that was adopted last year).

Both unlimited self-certification for 2021-22 and the limitation of its use from 2022-23 onwards were decisions of the Standing Committee on Assessment (SCA) of which I am Chair. SCA reports to the University Teaching Committee (UTC) and these policies were therefore approved there also.

Having discussed the matter with YUSU and GSA officers and student representatives, we are going to invite a review of the 3-use limit on self-certification. We will discuss that at our next SCA meeting. I cannot promise that the current policy will be reversed - there are very substantial reasons relating to fairness to students, student welfare concerns, the overall running of assessment processes to ensure that students can progress and graduate, and the potentially unfair and otherwise negative consequences of adjusting an approved policy mid-year. But we do intend to revisit the issue.

What I am particularly wanting to let you know about now, however, is some particular adjustments and actions that we have felt able to take immediately. These steps are particularly intended to support many of the most vulnerable students whose issues were identified through the campaign and discussions with students. We are also reaching out to departments and schools with the aim of ensuring greater consistency of application of existing policies. This will involve reminding departments of some existing provisions of the EC policy and in relation to SSP provision that might be underused. I thought it might be useful to share some of what we are communicating to departments and schools with you so that you have a clear sense of what is happening and feel confident using any such support systems if you need to.

What support exists at the moment

Before getting into some the details, and by way of reminder:

- **Self-certification** claims are intended to deal quickly with sudden and short-term issues you may face. They are not intended to be a means of long-term support or adjustment. You have three uses of self-certification per year. [More information can be found here.](#)
- **Exceptional circumstances** claims are intended for longer-term issues. By default they need to be supported with some evidence (but see below) because giving a student an adjustment compared with other students on the same assessment needs only to be done in cases of genuine need to ensure overall fairness. More information on exceptional circumstances claims can be found [here](#) (for how such claims work) and [here](#) (for types of claims to which the policy usually applies). The claim form is at the bottom of that page.

- **Student support plans** (SSPs) are intended to provide a more flexible system of support to students with a long-term disability, medical condition or specific learning difficulty which is impacting on study. (If you think the problem will pass reasonably soon, use exceptional circumstances; if not, consider an SSP). They are overseen by Disability Services and are intended to cover a wide range of circumstances and situations (physical, mental, learning difficulties, etc). SSPs are not just intended to help you with assessments but more generally with learning here at York so do not just think of them when it comes to assessments. If you think you might benefit from one go to the [University’s Disability Support pages](#) and see what sorts of support can be accessed.

### Adjustments and additional support right now

#### Making sure the existing exceptional circumstances policy works for you

We have reached out to all Schools and Departments to remind them of some existing elements of the policy that we want to make sure are applied consistently across the University. I thought it would be useful to let you know what we are telling them so that you feel you can use the EC policy in the way that is effective and as supportive as it reasonably can be:

1. **An EC decision can be made temporarily before supporting evidence is available.** We understand that departments have been applying the policy a bit differently around this but we have asked all departments to be willing to accept claims ‘subject to evidence.’ You would have to produce the evidence by the time of the final exam boards (so that we can actually make final decisions on your results) but the department might ask you to produce evidence quicker than that. The key thing is that you can make an EC claim if you are still trying to get evidence to support it. If what you put down on the EC form sounds like a valid claim, it can be accepted provisionally. **Caution:** If you cannot provide evidence by then, there is a risk that the claim will have to be rejected (but see below on waiving evidence requirements) so we do recommend that you try to get something submitted by the actual deadline or give exams a go even if you want to apply for an SAIFFT).

2. **It is possible to approve an EC claim without evidence if it is not reasonably possible for you to produce such evidence.** If there are reasons you cannot produce
evidence, explain them. You might be given time to get the evidence (see above) or, in some cases, it might be possible to accept the claim without evidence - but this would be exceptional. You should still try to back up your EC claims with what evidence you can get (and as soon as you can) but, if that is not possible, you should explain why not. You should also try to produce the best alternative evidence you reasonably can. Your claim might still not be accepted if it is decided that you might reasonably produce some evidence (and your department should tell you what it is that is required). **Caution:** accepting a claim without evidence is only done exceptionally. You should try to complete the assessment by the deadline even if you have made an application. Please do not assume that it will be accepted. If it is you may either get an extension to improve your work or an opportunity to take the assessment again ‘as if for the first time’.

3. We have also asked departments to consider the **appropriateness of requiring evidence and whether other, less direct evidence could be sufficient for the claim being made.** This might depend a bit on what you are asking for (what sort of problem and what sort of adjustment) but you may be able to make an EC claim and have it accepted without any evidence or, more likely, with the evidence that does not directly prove the core issue but shows likely impacts and consequences. We have asked departments to be mindful of the difficulties that are currently being faced generally. We have also asked them to be mindful of the sort of evidence that you can be asked to produce for very personal and traumatic events. In may such cases, EC claims are really about the knock-on effects (e.g. on mental wellbeing) and so evidence of that may be better. If you are in doubt about a claim, we recommend you speak to someone in your department (supervisor, student welfare officer, etc) rather than being put off from making a claim.

Extending the existing application of the EC policy to cover particular situations and groups of students

We are also asking departments to deal with particular sets of claims as set out below in particular ways to extend the application of the EC policy to students suffering particular disadvantages.

1. We are going to set up a system so that students in **particular defined groups can use the EC process to secure 4-day extensions or deferrals** (as if they had been self-certified). We are setting up a system to produce a letter for students in the groups listed below. If you are in one of these groups, you can use the EC process to seek 4-day extensions or deferrals of assessments. You will just need to use that letter as the evidence and nothing else should be required. We are going to ask departments and schools to keep an eye on such applications to make sure we are protecting your welfare (i.e. all the adjustments are manageable, etc) and there might be some assessments for which these changes are not appropriate (those you cannot get an SC for) but the idea is that if you are in one of these groups you should be able to get the equivalent of
self-certification simply on the basis of this letter. We will be in touch with you if you are in one of these groups with that letter later this term. The groups are:
   a. Students in receipt of hardship funding or University Bursaries
   b. Estranged Students
   c. Care Experienced students
   d. Students with caring responsibilities
   e. Students with children
   f. Students being supported by Sexual Violence Liaison Officers
   g. Students on active Support to Study cases

2. Students in other particular groups will be entitled to use the EC process to secure 4-day extensions or deferrals for a single term. This will work like the groups above but these students will get a letter covering one term. The idea is that these are less long-term issues and we hope the issue will be resolved in other ways within a term. The groups are:
   a. Students subject to or bringing disciplinary action
   b. Students who are actively seeking disability support adjustments but who have not yet been able to have an SSP put in place. Once an SSP is in place you can use that instead for any adjustments.

3. EC adjustment can be applied to deal with bunched assessments where a student has sought self-certification - It was not technically possible to put in place a self-certification system that covered a number of days and nor could we come up with different numbers of self-certifications for different students (e.g. those on different programmes with different numbers of assessments). We therefore particularly want to deal with situations where assessment deadlines are on the same day or at about the same time. We agree that you should not be using multiple SC uses for the same issue just because of bunched deadlines. We have therefore asked departments to treat all assessments due within 72 hours of each other as though covered by one self-certification if a student so requests. So, if you make an SC 4-day extension request for an assessment on a particular day, you can put in an EC request for a similar extension of all other assessments on that same day or due within 72 hours after that assessment. You must make any request under this process before a submission deadline or before you start any exam (online or in person) that you want to defer. You make an application using the usual Exceptional Circumstances process and should use the acknowledgement email you get for your self-certification as the evidence to support that claim. (We know this is a bit of a technical workaround but it allows us to achieve something that we would like to have put in place for self-certification but could not do with current IT systems). You can ask for the adjustments that you would get for self-certification (4-day extensions or deferral) using this process. If you have any more complicated requests you may be required to supply fuller evidence.
Disability and SSPs

We know that a lot of you have struggled to get disability student support plans (‘SSPs’) in place and we have heard accounts from some of you about ways in which even when you have an SSP, it is not felt that it is being implemented properly within particular departments. We want to work with your YUSU and GSA reps to get a better sense of some of these issues particularly but we thought it would be useful to reach out to all departments and schools to remind them of the principles underlying SSPs and disability support.

These are the key points that we have been reiterating to departments. We are setting them out here to reassure you that you should feel entitled to seek adjustments for assessments (and for areas of teaching and learning too) and that an SSP means that you should not be having to go through complicated processes or producing further evidence of disadvantage or impact. Once you have an SSP, then you should be entitled to the adjustments for assessments set out under it. There are only two reasons why an adjustment should be refused:

- There are concerns about the overall impact on your welfare from making adjustments (for example, there are reasons to believe that pushing back lots of assessment deadlines or deferring too many until August would be worse for you than making some sort of other adjustment)
- The adjustment sought would not be appropriate in relation to the particular assessment (for example, an extension that would extend past the point at which feedback and answers are released to other students, a 2-week extension for a piece of coursework intended to be completed within 24 hours).

Note that most SSPs allow a degree of flexibility so if you are told that a particular adjustment cannot be approved, you should feel able to discuss with the person responsible for making decisions whether your plan allows other types of adjustment instead. The key things that we have reminded departments (and so principles on which you can expect them to operate SSPs) are:

1. ‘Occasional’ extensions under SSPs should be easy to secure
2. SSP requests do not have to be backed up by further evidence
3. Where the SSP adjustment requested is not obviously covered by the provisions of the SSP, departments consider whether the request made is sufficiently within the scope of the plan to justify accepting the claim. We are asking departments to interpret SSPs reasonably broadly because we know that conditions and circumstances captured in SSPs may have consequences and impacts that are not within the narrow definitions of the plans. We want departments to be mindful of wider impacts.

This does not mean that you should always have your SSP requests approved. Rather, it means that you have good reason to expect that they will be seriously considered and granted unless you are given good reasons for that not being the case. We want to work with you and your representatives to ensure that you are being as well supported as you can and that this policy (and the ECA policy) are being implemented as they are intended. So do feel free to keep your
reps informed so that we can receive constructive feedback about how you are being supported and so that we can take what steps we can to solve any problems.

Next steps and upcoming actions

We are going to review our decision about 3-use self-certification at the next SCA meeting. We are going to discuss with departments and other bodies in the university what the implications of any change to the current policy might be. As I stated previously, there may be strong reasons for not changing the policy for this year but we are going to discuss the matter.

We are also looking to review our overall EC and Disability Support processes for next academic year. We work with your YUSU and GSA reps in doing so and so please do make sure you are talking to your own representatives so that ideas are being fed into this conversation.