



ABN 86 800 958 958

Special consideration during the COVID-19 climate May 2020

On 31 March 2020, Stage 3 social distancing rules were announced for Victoria. Monash University moved to remote teaching. The MGA advocacy service has seen an increase in cases as a result of the pandemic.

Submission Purpose

The University has made some concessions which recognise that graduate students are dealing with job losses, financial strain, enforced isolation, challenges of parenting and home schooling.

The MGA is concerned that the special consideration policy is not broad enough (or interpreted widely enough) to cater for a new range of Covid-19 caused difficulties.

Special Consideration

The current regime states:

“...short-term or acute illness or other exceptional circumstances beyond their control. Special consideration seeks to ensure that all students have one opportunity to demonstrate the achievement of the learning outcomes of a unit.”

The case studies below show the student applications that were rejected (or students fearing they will be rejected) as falling outside the current policy, and in particular for failing to meet the ‘exceptional circumstances’ criterion.

Case studies

Case study A: A mother of a young child was granted a deferred exam because she was unable to sit an exam at home. Stage 3 restrictions will be in place at the time of her deferred exam date. Her situation at home is the same, her children require care all day which means she is unable to sit an exam until her children go to sleep at night. She requested to alter the exam conditions, such as moving the time of the exam to when the children are asleep, or to give her extra time in recognition of the distractions in her exam environment. Her requests were rejected because having children is not a disability. If she sits an invigilated exam she faces the possibility of breaching academic integrity rules if she reacts to distractions too many times during the exam. (For example the Respondus software used by some faculties is extremely sensitive to eye diversions) Alternatively she is likely to fail because she is not able to focus.

Case study B: A high performing student had to isolate in a house with 7 other students. The rental property is poorly insulated. There is traffic noise as well, making it difficult to focus on his online lectures. He is concerned about taking exams in this environment. It would take him 5 hours on public transport to reach Clayton campus in order to sit an exam on site. (He is enrolled at a different campus.) He will no doubt perform well below his usual standard. Taking an exam in a frenetic environment is

not a ground for special consideration it is assumed under current examination rules that students will find.

Case Study C: Unfortunately, home isolation has seen an increase in domestic violence. Where there is domestic violence in the home, not necessarily aimed at a student, but perhaps between parents, this will have a detrimental impact on a student's performance. This is not a ground under the current special consideration regime.

Case study D: A student was undertaking a hospital placement. She became exhausted and overwhelmed dealing with an increased workload in a hospital during COVID-19. She feared not being able to complete her assessments and wanted special consideration based on 'exhaustion'. She was told that exhaustion was not an acceptable for special consideration.

Case study E: A student lost her job, as did her housemate, and had to focus on navigating Centrelink. In addition, there was a confirmed case of COVID-19 in her apartment complex requiring her to remain in lock-down. The student was extremely anxious and distressed and could not focus on study. Her request for a further extension was denied.

Case study F: A student had two different faculty-administered exams that clashed. When the student informed both faculties of the clash, she was told to apply for special consideration because the times/dates of the exams could not be moved. A clash of exams is not a ground for special consideration. Clashes for centrally held exams are dealt with the by the exams team, but this is not the case for faculty administered exams.

Case study G: A student's old laptop broke down and she lost her work. She also lost her means of accessing online classes and assessment materials. She could not come on campus to use university computers. She applied for special consideration but was told outdated technology was not a ground for special consideration.

Lack of eligibility for special consideration

While the Exams branch may lodge an incident report to say a student experienced technical difficulty during an invigilated exam, such a report will have no value if there are no commensurate grounds in the special consideration policy.

MGA understands exam services do not currently have anything in place for students who can't take exams at home or cannot attend an exam venue due to travel restrictions, self-isolation, lack of public transport, or prohibitive distance. The University's normal stance that it is up to the student to prepare a means of making it to the exam venue does not recognise the reduction in public transport, the distance some students must travel from the home they are social-distancing in, and the anxiety some students feel about going outside at this time.

Reasons why a student may not be able to sit an exam at home include:

- poor or non-existent internet access, inability to log on, internet failure during exam;
- computer or software not compatible with Monash platform;
- computer too old to run software;
- poor computer skills for older graduates;
- no suitable study space;
- noisy housemates or neighbours;
- young children who require constant attention;
- carer responsibilities for elderly relatives;
- distance from a campus and/or exam venue;

- self-isolation; special needs/disability;
- limited access to public transport.

Consequences for graduate students and the University

There are financial repercussions for graduate students repeating failed units. The consequences for graduate students are that they have to pay for the unit again. This is very difficult for international students in their last semester where a fail means they have to extend accommodation and visas. Most of these students will have lost their casual jobs. The consequences for the University are that this will likely result in a decrease in completion rates.

General observations about Special consideration

Supporting documents shouldn't be limited to just medical certificates because some circumstances will not be medical related. E.g. carer responsibilities, sudden unexpected changes in work requirements, lack of suitable study space.

The timeline for submitting supporting documents needs to be extended. Medical services are overwhelmed and experiencing delays in appointments. Employers are not a normal source for supporting documents and may move more slowly on such request. Extended timelines are needed to accommodate for these situations.

MGA would like clarity on what criteria SEBS are using in assessing COVID-19 applications for special consideration.

Faculties need to have in place clear steps for students with clashes which are communicated to all students.

Recommendations

MGA recommends all COVID-19 situations are recognised by the university as grounds for special consideration. Including but not limited to:

1. Exhaustion and stress from workplaces impacted by COVID-19.
2. Caring for young children be included as part of the "carer" category.
3. Technical disruptions (poor internet, old computers, lack of access internet)