

Student Accommodations and Considerations - Information for Instructors

Updated: September 2024

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1. Academic accommodations and considerations

Effective Fall 2024, the University of Waterloo adopted new language to recognize some of the distinct ways that we fulfill our duties to accommodate as well as the considerations that we provide for a variety of circumstances. The following excerpts from the [Regulations section](#) of the Academic Calendar describe these distinctions:

Students' ability to complete some component of a course may be affected by short-term extenuating circumstances or long-term or chronic medical conditions (physical or mental). For short-term extenuating circumstances, the term academic consideration is applicable and provides students with consistent, fair, and pedagogically appropriate consideration, without compromising the academic integrity of the course or program. Short-term extenuating circumstances might include common illness and ailments such as a cold or flu, minor injuries, compassionate/personal/wellness needs (unrelated to a disability/condition), bereavement, and participation in University of Waterloo sanctioned academic or athletic events that prevent them from meeting academic obligations.

In comparison, the term academic accommodations are modifications or adjustments to the way a student receives course curriculum and materials, participates in course activities, or demonstrates knowledge of course content and skills. Reasonable accommodations reduce or eliminate barriers in the academic environment but are not intended to alter the fundamental purpose or essential requirements of the academic program, milestone, or course. The University has a legal duty to accommodate students on a variety of grounds protected from [discrimination](#) including disability (which includes physical and mental health related conditions), creed, family status, and sex (including pregnancy and breast feeding).

Whether through academic consideration or academic accommodation, the University supports and upholds the duty to accommodate, and provides support to students who are experiencing extenuating circumstances

2. Accommodations due to disabilities

The University of Waterloo has a [duty to accommodate people with disabilities](#) under the Ontario Human Rights Commission (2016) Policy on Ableism and Discrimination Based on Disability. -

Please review information on the [responsibilities of course instructors and faculty members](#) for accommodating students' accessibility needs.

Existing accommodation plans

If a student has an existing accommodation plan and the student activates that plan at the start of the term, the instructor will receive a [notification](#) email from AccessAbility Services that explains the student's accommodation needs. AAS also provides instructors with an [online dashboard](#) that conveniently lists all the students in their course with a registered accommodation plan. It is strongly recommended that instructors review the [brief video tutorial](#) explaining how to use the AAS faculty module. While students are strongly encouraged to activate their existing accommodation plans at the start of the term to optimize their accommodation arrangements, instructors are responsible for working with the student and AccessAbility staff to accommodate students' needs whenever their accommodation plans are activated. This may include [retroactive accommodations](#).

Emergent accommodation plans

A student may identify or develop an accommodation need after the start of the term. For example, a student may experience an injury that impacts their coursework, or a student may discover an accommodation need of which they were previously unaware. In such cases, the student will submit an online application and submit relevant documentation to AAS. The AAS office will arrange an interim accommodation plan for the student and help them to activate that plan. Once the student activates their accommodation plan the instructor receives a notification email from AAS about the student's accommodation needs. Instructors are responsible for working with the student and AAS to provide reasonable accommodations for these emergent needs. These accommodation needs may include [retroactive accommodations](#) for components of the course that have already occurred – e.g., additional time to complete an assignment after the original submission deadline has passed, or a make-up session or alternative assignment for a quiz/test/exam that was missed.

Retroactive accommodation process

If a student approaches you with a request for [retroactive accommodation](#) during or after the course, then you should let them know that this request will be given thoughtful consideration and that AAS will need to be consulted to make arrangements. More information can be found at the AAS site's [resources for faculty and staff](#). It is important that instructors follow the retroactive accommodation process.

Referring students to AAS

Instructors can play a valuable role in helping students to seek out needed accommodations. AAS provides a set of [tips and scripts for referring students](#) to seek support from their office. These include suggestions for responding when a student discloses a disability or condition as well as suggestions for how to refer students when you observe them struggling academically and believe they may require accommodations.

Facilitating student accommodations

To accommodate students' needs instructors may be required to provide relevant information or materials to AAS, such as a testing agreement, copies of tests, and course materials for alternate format production. The AAS office will inform instructors about what is needed to arrange relevant accommodations for a student. To be prepared, please consult the [timeline](#) for providing needed resources to AAS.

Respecting students' privacy

In providing accommodations it is vital to [respect the privacy](#) of students' medical information. Instructors may not require or request that students provide them with medical documents. Also, while instructors may inquire about the student's needs and accommodation plans, they should not seek information about the student's underlying condition. Instructors should not disclose information about students' accommodation needs to others unless those others have a specific need to know in order to arrange the accommodations. Please remember that disclosure can be inadvertent; for example, if an instructor prohibits the use of internet-connected devices in class or portions of classes, a student with an accommodation that requires use of such a device will be identifiable by classmates as having an accommodation.

Resources for accessible planning in course design

The Centre for Teaching Excellence provides valuable information for [accessible course planning](#) and [universal course design principles](#).

3. Absence System database

The Absence System database (<https://vif.uwaterloo.ca>) stores records of student absences due to verified illnesses, religious observances, extenuating circumstances (e.g., bereavement), self-declared COVID absences, and short-term absences. Instructors can log in to this database to see an up-to-date list of all recorded absences for each of their courses. The database allows instructors to select which records they want to display for each of their courses in each term. Instructors can also filter results as needed. The records can be displayed in list view or calendar view.

Each time a new absence is recorded in the system, the instructor will receive an email notification from the account absence-noreply@uwaterloo.ca. The email will list the student's name and ID number, the absence type, dates of absence, and courses affected. The email will also include a link to the Absence System database.

4. Accommodations due to creed/religion

The University of Waterloo has a duty to accommodate religious and spiritual observances and other creed-based beliefs and practices under the Ontario Human Rights Commission (2015) Policy on Preventing Discrimination Based on Creed. Available at: <https://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/policy-preventing-discrimination-based-creed>

Beginning Fall 2024, students can submit a [Religious Observance Self-Declaration Form in Quest](#). This form allows the student to register dates of potential conflicts with coursework. Students are expected to record their absence within two weeks of announcement of the due date or scheduled examination date for which academic accommodation is being sought. However, please note that there may be cases where students become aware of the conflict with a creed/religious observance more than two weeks after the due date was announced. Instructors are thus expected to accommodate conflicts with creed/religious observances even if they are declared more than two weeks after the announced due date.

Instructors will receive an email from the Absence System to notify them of the dates when the student will be absent from their classes due to a religious observance.

The student is then responsible to contact the instructor to make arrangements to accommodate the missed work. Instructors who receive notification of a conflict with a religious observance are expected to work with the student to provide reasonable accommodations to meet the need. For example, an instructor might arrange a make-up test date when a student notifies them of a conflict with a religious observance on the original date.

When a student presents an instructor with a need for a religious/creed-based accommodation the instructor should: 1) accept the request in good faith, 2) only request information that is needed by the instructor to understand how to make the accommodation, and 3) maintain confidentiality about the student's accommodation need, sharing it only with those who need to know in order to arrange the accommodation (OHRC, 2015, p. 5). Instructors may not require students to provide documentation from religious authorities to support such requests.

In addition, the University of Waterloo's Office of Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Anti-racism provides a termly list of [religious and spiritual days of observance](#). Please note that this list includes commonly observed dates and is not an exhaustive list. It is provided to instructors for proactive, inclusive planning purposes to help them schedule the dates of class activities to avoid potential conflicts. An instructor should not deny a student's accommodation request just because it does not appear on this list of dates.

Students may also request accommodations for temporary absences from classes or other course-related activities to engage in prayer or other daily spiritual practices. Instructors are expected to make reasonable arrangements to respectfully accommodate such requests. The University of Waterloo has [multi-faith spaces](#) that students can use for faith-based practices.

5. Considerations due to verified illness

Instructors are expected to provide reasonable arrangements when students miss coursework due to illness. Such arrangements may involve extensions on assignment deadlines, make-up dates for missed tests/quizzes, or dropping the missed component and shifting the weight to other components.

For absences due to illness that are not pandemic-related, students need to obtain a [Verification of Illness Form](#) (VIF) that is completed and signed by a healthcare practitioner. The VIF indicates the determination by a care provider of the degree of incapacitation for a given period. The VIF should then be submitted by the student to the undergraduate office of the student's home faculty for processing through the [Verification of Illness or Extenuating Circumstances intake form](#). Typically, the student's request will be processed within 2 working days.

To arrange accommodations, it is the student's responsibility to contact the instructor within 24 hours of the date of any missed course component, or as soon as the student can given their health condition. The instructor is then expected to attempt to come to an agreement with the student regarding how any missed mandatory class, lab, assignment, test, or exam will be addressed.

When a student's VIF has been processed, each of the student's instructors will receive an email from the Absence System (<https://vif.uwaterloo.ca>) to notify them of the dates when the student will be absent from their classes due to verified illness. The email will include a link to the Absence System where the instructor can click on the record and see information about the severity of the illness and the dates that are covered.

Students should not submit their VIF to their instructor. If a student attempts to submit a VIF to their instructor, then the instructor should direct the student to follow the [process](#) for submitting their VIF to their home faculty for processing.

Students also should not submit detailed medical documents or private health information such as a physician's letter to their instructors. If a student attempts to give private medical documents to an instructor the instructor should not view or accept those documents, nor should they pass those documents on to any third parties. Please see guidelines on [protecting student's privacy rights](#). If a student discloses a disability or health condition, then instructors can use some of the recommended [tips and scripts for referring students](#) to AccessAbility Services for support.

6. Considerations due to extenuating circumstances (e.g., bereavement)

For absences due to extenuating circumstances (e.g., bereavement, serious family illness), students submit [a request for absence due to extenuating circumstances](#) to the undergraduate office of their home faculty for processing. Students use the form to submit supporting documentation, which will be considered in a comparable manner to a VIF. Official documentation is necessary before any action can be taken. Examples are plane/train/bus tickets, court documents, police reports, death certificates/obituaries/letters from funeral directors. Typically, the student's submitted form will be processed within 2 working days.

When a student's absence due to extenuating circumstances has been processed, all the student's instructors will receive an email from the Absence System (<https://vif.uwaterloo.ca>). This email includes information on the dates covered and a link to the record for that student's absence within the Absence System database.

It is the student's responsibility to contact the instructor within 24 hours of the date of any missed course component, or as soon as possible to make arrangements for the missed work. The instructor is then expected to attempt to come to an agreement with the student regarding how any missed mandatory class, lab, assignment, test, or exam will be addressed.

7. Considerations due to COVID-related absences

Students can [self-declare](#) an absence on Quest due to COVID-related illness or a requirement to self-isolate. A self-declared COVID absence covers up to 10 days and no documentation is required. No in-person course activity is permitted during the period of a self-declared COVID absence. Participation in on-line components is permitted but should not be required if the student notifies the instructor that they are too ill to participate in the online work.

When a student declares a COVID-related absence, instructors receive a notification email from the Absence System (<https://vif.uwaterloo.ca>). This email includes information on the dates covered and a link to the record for that student's absence within the Absence System database.

It is the student's responsibility to contact their instructors within the first 24 hours after submitting their self-declaration of absence, or as soon as they are well enough, to discuss arrangements for missed course components. Instructors are expected to provide reasonable options for students to make up for any missed course components. Examples of such considerations include extensions on assignment deadlines, make-up dates for tests/quizzes, or dropping the missed assessment and shifting the weight to other assessments.

8. Considerations due to short-term absence (for any reason)

Students can [self-declare](#) one short-term absence per term on Quest for any reason. A short-term absence covers two calendar days, and no documentation is required. The student has only one self-declared short-term absence per term and this absence can only be used during the formal lecture period. Self-declared absences cannot be applied to Laboratory (LAB) and Clinic (CLN) course components.

When a student declares a short-term absence, instructors receive a notification email from the Absence System (<https://vif.uwaterloo.ca>). This email includes information on the dates covered and a link to the record for that student's absence within the Absence System database.

It is the student's responsibility to contact their instructors within the first 24 hours after submitting their self-declaration to discuss accommodations for missed course components. Instructors are expected to provide reasonable accommodations for any missed course components. Examples of accommodations include extensions on assignment deadlines, make-up dates for tests/quizzes, or dropping the missed assessment and shifting the weight to other assessments.

9. Considerations due to varsity athletic activities

The Faculty of Arts is committed to supporting varsity athletics at the University of Waterloo. Accordingly, instructors are strongly encouraged to provide reasonable arrangements for quizzes, tests, and other course components that student athletes need to miss due to travel for team games/events. Students are responsible for notifying instructors as soon as possible when they become aware of scheduling conflicts. The instructor is then expected to work with the student, possibly with assistance of the staff of Varsity Athletics, to make appropriate arrangements.

When possible, the Wellness Coordinator at Varsity Athletics may proctor the test or quiz. In cases where the student's team is on the road, then one of the coaches may proctor. The Wellness Coordinator will still usually pick up, drop off the test materials, and provide the instructions to their coaches.

If the student athlete has specific AccessAbility accommodation needs the Varsity Athletics proctors will implement those accommodations.

Varsity Athletics strives to have the student athlete write the exam at the same time as the class whenever this is possible. If the timing does not work, they will arrange for the student athlete to write the exam in a time block as soon as is athletically possible. They ensure that if a student athlete is writing before or after a test/quiz is scheduled that they secure their cell phones and laptops until such a time as the conflict is over. The staff of Varsity Athletics understand and strongly respect the need for academic integrity. They observe the principles of academic integrity in arranging and implementing accommodations for student athlete