

UNIVERSITY OF ST ANDREWS
COMPLAINT HANDLING PROCEDURE
REVIEW ACADEMIC YEAR 2014/15

1. BACKGROUND

The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman Act 2002 established an independent complaints function, operating across the public sector. In academic year 2013/14, all Scottish higher education institutions were required to manage complaints following a standard approach, developed specifically for the sector i.e. *The Scottish Higher Education Model Complaints Handling Procedure* (“the CHP”). This standard was developed by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (“the SPSO”) with representation from the sector.

The CHP is a 2 stage process. Issues of complaint that are straightforward and easily resolved, requiring little or no investigation, are managed at Stage 1. For issues that cannot be resolved at Stage 1, or those that are complex, or of a serious nature, a more involved investigation process is available i.e. Stage 2. Complaints managed via Stage 2 require senior management involvement, where the University’s definitive response is provided, normally within 20 working days. If a complainant is dissatisfied following the conclusion of Stage 2, they have the option to seek a review from the SPSO.

Academic appeals are dealt with separately, although in the minds of students they are often conflated. All issues of complaint received via Stage 2 are first assessed with input from the Court & Senate Office, to ensure that issues are dealt with under the correct procedures.

2. OPERATION

In 2013/14 the University established a role of Complaints Officer, a dedicated email contact and provided training for staff in Stage 1 complaint management. A system of Annual Reports to the Audit & Risk Committee was also established. In line with the CHP, the Annual Report is published as a matter of public record, and the publication details are reported to SPSO.

In January 2015 responsibility for day to day management of the CHP moved to the University’s Information Assurance and Governance function. The process of managing Stage 2 Complaints and responding to SPSO (non-academic) reviews requires a similar skills set to managing freedom of information requests: the intention being to manage complaints more efficiently and effectively, fulfilling obligations while limiting the resource burden of legislative compliance.

3. ASSESSMENT OF MANAGEMENT CONTROLS

It is considered that the University’s approach to managing this legislative regime continues to be appropriate.

Although no requirement to substantially amend or revise the University's operation of the CHP is required, the following improvements are planned:

1. Over the next 3 - 6 months, utilisation of an existing incident reporting system will be extended to allow Schools and Units to record Stage 1 complaints as these are raised. This will reduce the reporting burden, and improve the accuracy of Stage 1 reporting. It will allow for more detailed analysis of issues of complaint to help identify root causes, with a view to improving the student experience and the operation of the University. Demonstration of organisational learning (from issues of complaint) is part of the CHP; and
2. A managing unacceptable behaviour process will be developed for use with the CHP. This will provide a framework to enable the University to refuse to hear a complaint if it was found to be vexatious etc. The Complainant will still have the right to ask SPSO for a decision on how the University has managed their issue(s) of complaint.

4. RESULTS

A total of 21 student and public Stage 2 complaints were managed via the University's CHP in academic year 2014/15. This is a significant fall compared to the 41 complaints received in the previous reporting period (academic year 2013/14).

Of the 21 Stage 2 complaints considered in the reporting period:

Outcome

- 5 upheld; and
- 16 not upheld.

Response within 20 working day time limit

- 20 concluded within the prescribed time limit; and
- 1 concluded outwith the prescribed time limit, by arrangement.

Organisational learning

- A cluster of complaints (3) on the same issue was received from students on the International Foundation for Medicine Programme, delivered by English Language Teaching. The complainants had formed a view that they could progress to Medicine, without having secured a core entry requirement. While none of the issues of complaint were upheld, the complaint outcomes are to be reviewed with a member of the Principal's Office to understand if there is any scope to reduce the likelihood of students in future cohorts from forming a similar misapprehension; and
- One complaint identified a policy flaw concerning penalties for late submission of paper and electronic coursework. That complaint was upheld and the degree classification of the student concerned was revised (upwards) before graduation. Steps were taken to identify whether any other students could have been disadvantaged. None were identified. This is a positive example of the complaints process working actively to improve the quality of services provided to students and to address structural issues in service delivery where these are identified.

During the reporting period, following the conclusion of Stage 2, a total of 3 complaints were referred to SPSO for a decision:

- SPSO have still to return with a decision for 2 of those complaints; and
- Where a decision was reached, SPSO found that the University had managed that complaint correctly.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The operation of the CHP across the sector is relatively new. The University has robust and effective systems in place to manage complaints. In moving forward, steps can be taken to simplify and reduce the resource burden of recording and reporting Stage 1 complaints. This will improve opportunities to develop organisational learning from Stage 1 complaints.

Organisational learning at Stage 2 is effective:

- All complaint outcomes are reviewed by the Associate Chief Information Officer (Information Assurance & Governance) – any potential issues or areas for further assessment are identified and communicated as appropriate. Notable areas of organisational learning now feature in this annual report; and
- All Stage 2 complaints are investigated by a senior University Officer, who is normally a member of the Principal's Office. The final decision on each complaint (as communicated via an outcome letter) is normally made by the Vice Principal (Planning & Governance) or on occasion the Principal (where a complaint directly involves a member of the Principal's Office). Thus, issues can be promptly identified and steps put in place to remedy these, or further work can be commissioned.

Christopher Milne
Associate Chief Information Officer (Information Assurance & Governance)
August 2015

SUMMARY TABLE: STAGE 1 AND STAGE 2 COMPLAINTS

Stage	School/Unit	Number		Completed within time frame	Outcome	SPSO Decision	
		2013/14	2014/15				
1	Schools	15	11	100%	100% of Stage 1 complaints raised via a School based services (11) in 2014/15 were escalated to Stage 2		NA
	Units	85	79	100%	4% of Stage 1 complaints raised via a Unit based service (3) in 2014/15 were escalated to Stage 2		NA
	Total	100	90				
2	Schools	35	13	92% 1 extension	4 Upheld 9 Not upheld	1 Pending 1 Not upheld	
	Units	6	8	100%	1 Upheld 7 Not upheld	1 Pending	
	Total	41	21				

Notes

There is no significant variation in the number or pattern of Stage 1 complaints received by Schools and Units over the two reporting periods.

STAGE 1 COMPLAINTS

School	Outcome		Unit	Outcome	
	Resolved at Stage 1	Escalated to Stage 2 from Stage 1		Resolved at Stage 1	Escalated to Stage 2 from Stage 1
Biology	1	1	HR Services	1	-
Computer Science	2	2	Chaplaincy	1	-
Divinity	2	2	Development	8	-
Economics and Finance	1	1	Estates	1	-
International Relations	3	3	CAPOD	1	-
Management	1	1	Admissions	1	1
Medicine	1	1	Finance	2	-
Social anthropology	1	1	English Language Teaching	2	2
			IT Services	9	-
			RBS	17	-
			Sport and Exercise	5	-
Total	12	12	Total	79	3

Notes

- 92% of Stage 1 complaints arising from a School based service were escalated to Stage 2. A single Stage 2 complaint, generated from a School based service was dealt with at Stage 2, not having first passed through Stage 1.
- Of the 12 Stage 1 complaints arising from a School based service that were escalated to Stage 2, only 2 complaint outcomes were reversed as Stage 2.
- Of the 3 Stage 2 complaints arising from a Unit based service that were escalated to Stage 2, only 1 complaint outcome was reversed at Stage 2.

STAGE 2 COMPLAINTS STATUS

Course Type	Faculty/Unit	Category	Reason for Appeal/Complaint	Outcome	Closed within time
UG	International Relations	Current Student	School based service	Upheld	Yes
NA	Economics and Finance	Potential Student	School based service	Not upheld	Yes
PGT	RBS	Current Student	Unit based service	Not upheld	Yes
UG	International Relations	Past Student	School based service	Not upheld	Yes
UG	Computer Science	Past Student	Unit based service	Upheld	No
UG	Management	Current Student	School based service	Upheld	Yes
PhD (MPhil)	Computer Science	Current Student	School based service	Not upheld	Yes
PG	International Relations	Current Student	School based service	Not upheld	Yes
UG	Social Anthropology	Current Student	Unit based service	Not upheld	Yes
PGR	Divinity	Past Student	School based service	Not upheld	Yes
UG	Admissions	Potential Student	Unit based service	Not upheld	Yes
PGT	Medicine	Past Student	School based service	Not upheld	Yes
N/A	Modern Languages	Job applicant	School based service	Not upheld	No
UG	Biology	Current Student	School based service	Not upheld	Yes
PhD (MPhil)	Computer Science	Current Student	School based service	Not upheld	Yes
PG	Divinity	Current Student	School based service	Upheld	Yes
UG	Medicine	Current Student	Unit based service	Not upheld	Yes
UG	Geography	Current student	School based service	Upheld	Yes
IFM	English Language Teaching	Past Student	Unit based service	Not upheld	Yes
IFM	English Language Teaching	Past Student	Unit based service	Not upheld	Yes
IFM	English Language Teaching	Past Student	Unit based service	Not upheld	Yes