

Complaints Handling Annual Report: Academic Session 2020-21

This report covers complaints raised with the University between 1 August 2020 and 31 July 2021. It does not cover staff grievances or student issues covered by other processes such as academic appeals or student conduct.

The University's complaints procedure is based on the Model Complaints Handling Procedure (MCHP) for Higher Education issued by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO).

1.1 Complaints Handling Procedure (CHP)

The Procedure has 2 Stages:

Stage 1: frontline resolution (issues of complaint that are straightforward and easily resolved, requiring little or no investigation)

Stage 2: investigation (these are complaints that cannot be resolved at Stage 1, or those that are complex or of a serious nature, where a more involved investigation process is available). Stage 2 complaint responses require senior management approval (Robert Partridge, Executive Director of Student and Academic Services).

The SPSO made changes to the model complaints handling procedure (MCHP) during 2019-20. These aim to standardise the handling of student complaints across the Higher Education sector in Scotland, making it simpler to complain, ensuring that staff and student have confidence in complaints handling, and encouraging universities to make best use of lessons from complaints. Importantly, the focus has shifted to an emphasis on finding resolution. Where it is not possible to reach a mutually acceptable resolution, the University will provide complainants with clear responses to each of their issues.

The SPSO asks us to resolve stage 1 complaints within 5 working days and stage 2 complaints within 20 working days, whenever possible. It can be difficult to resolve stage 2 complaints within 20 days, because they are often complex and may involve sensitive issues, which require careful consideration and detailed investigation. Where there are clear and justifiable reasons for extending the timescale, the Complaints Resolution Office will exercise judgement with the Executive Director of Student and Academic Services and set alternative targets.

If a complainant is dissatisfied following the conclusion of Stage 2, they have the option to seek a review of the University's management of a complaint from the SPSO.

1.2 Complaints Handling 2020 -21 and COVID-19

From 2019-20 there has been an increase in concerns raised with the Complaints Resolution Office (see below for further details). Like so many other areas of activity, complaint handling has continued to be impacted significantly by the Coronavirus pandemic. 2020-21 continued to be challenging for students which has resulted in complaints related to the impact of the pandemic. Similarly, to last year, we have continued to receive complaints about the delivery of teaching, which often included requests to consider financial

compensation or fee waivers due to online delivery. There has also been a notable increase in the number of complaints about communication (50%), particularly relating to not being able reach staff, lack of response or delayed response to emails.

This has continued to add to the pressure on departments and services across the University, which has impacted on response times for complaints.

2.1 Summary Analysis of cases

Over the period, 172 complaints were considered at Stage 1, (29% increase on previous year). In 2020-21 we addressed 71 Stage 2 complaints, (22% increase). The Stage 2 cases represent a combination of complex cases which were escalated directly to Stage 2 and the balance of Stage 1 complaints where the complainant was dissatisfied by the attempts at frontline resolution.

Overall, 37% of Stage 1 cases were addressed within 5 working days. Only 6% of Stage 2 cases were concluded in 20 working days. This reflects the challenges presented by this timeframe, particularly in cases that require input from multiple sources, in addition to an overall increased case load. There has also been increased activity at and greater involvement from the Complaints Resolution Office to support complaints handling and resolution at Stage 1. However only 11% of Stage 1 cases were also considered at Stage 2, compared to 24% the previous year).

Despite fewer cases being concluded within 20 working days, resolution is increasing reached within this time frame, however it can take longer to finalise the formal written response. The increased case load and Stage 1 activity has made the 20-day time frame more challenging to meet, however, on average, Stage 2 cases took 59 working days to conclude, which is an improvement on previous years (2019-20 - average 65).

Additionally, 21 complaints were raised but were withdrawn prior to consideration under the Complaints Handling Procedure, or in some cases, consent to take forward the complaint on their behalf was not received from the student.

A further 72 concerns were raised with the Complaints Resolution Office but could not be considered under the Complaints Handling Procedure, the majority of which were requests for service/information or referred to other procedures. This is an increase of 73% on the previous year.

2.2 2019-20 Stage 2: Issues and recommendations

As previously indicated, the CHP encourages us to value complaints as tools for feedback, learning and improvement.

In almost all cases we aim to acknowledge the student's experience and apologise, where appropriate, for failing to meet their expectations. We provide an explanation of the University's position and the circumstances which may have led to the complaint. And we would normally make recommendations for improvements as a result of our investigation. To ensure improvement, we share the outcomes and recommendations with relevant staff in Colleges, Schools and University Services, and follow up to ensure that these recommendations have been implemented.

Admissions

Examples of issues raised include:

- Lack of response or delayed response times
- Errors or lack of clarity in communications
- Issues with CAS documentation - delays in issue or containing incorrect information.
- Queries/ challenges to fee status.

Examples of recommendations:

- Review of School and Admissions communications including:
 - To ensure clarity and accuracy of information
 - when students are facing registration and enrolment issues.
- Amended application procedures:
 - A school have amended their admissions interview procedure
 - Interviewers can access candidates' documentation prior to interview.

Fees/Grants/Bursaries

Examples of issues raised include:

- Covid-19: requests for the refund or reduction of tuition fees
- Tuition fees: delays or errors in refund processing
- Lack of responses and delays in students receiving timely responses
- Concerns about communication and impact this can have on students

Examples of recommendations:

- Review the Direct Debit set up process.
- Review of communications

Harassment/Bullying/Discrimination

Examples of issues raised include:

- Discrimination/Bullying/harassment: inappropriate behaviours by members of staff towards students, including the use of discriminatory and offensive language

Example of recommendations:

- Referral of staff member to HR procedure

Student Support/Wellbeing

Examples of issues raised include:

- Concerns about wellbeing support in University accommodation
- Dissatisfaction with level of support available
- Concerns about wellbeing support for students who are struggling because of remote learning
- Concerns about reasonable adjustments not being appropriately implemented by Schools

Examples of recommendations:

- Review of local arrangements of dissemination of information about reasonable adjustments required to ensure that these are implemented
- Additional support measures to be put in place

Teaching and Supervision

Examples of issues raised include:

- Covid-19: students dissatisfied with changes in teaching delivery, particularly the use of Moodle and a perception that recorded lectures are inferior to face-to-face delivery.
- Breakdown in relationship between student and dissertation supervisor
- Breakdown in relationship between PGR student and primary supervisor/supervisory team
- Insufficient support when experiencing challenges in placement setting

Examples of recommendations:

- Review of supervisor training including student support matters
- Review/clarity of guidance and information provided to students and supervisors about avenues of support both within the College and Institute and in the wider University, particularly where students have additional support needs.
- To ensure documentation of standard operating procedures is available in accordance with good laboratory practice.

2.3 Learning and process improvement

The pattern of complaints can highlight areas in which we need to make changes and improvements to our provision.

1. Clarity and timeliness of communication to students has featured significantly in complaints received during 2020-21.
2. The need to enhance sharing of information between teams, schools and service areas to ensure a joined-up approach, has also be identified through a number of complaints received this year.
3. We have and continue to work with a number of School, Colleges and teams to deliver training on frontline complaints handling.
4. Continue to work with colleagues in Human Resources to improve collaboration in cases where there is overlap between the CHP and HR policies and procedures.
5. We have been working with colleagues in Research and Innovation Services and Graduate Schools to address the support needs for PGR students when they experience difficulties.

2.4 Referrals to the SPSO

We have been notified of eight cases from 2020-21 complaints having been referred to the SPSO. Six of these were determined by the SPSO to have had an appropriate level of investigation by the University of Glasgow, one was raised prematurely, and one is pending. We have also received notification of a further case from 2019-20 being considered.

In all cases, the recommendations made by the SPSO have been implemented.

3. Conclusions

Stage 1 cases have primarily raised concerns about Admissions, Programme and Course Information, Fees/Grants/bursaries/finance and how the University has responded to the pandemic and communication.

At Stage 2 cases have tended to focus primarily on administrative procedures, teaching and supervision, including lack of on campus delivery, requests for reductions in tuition fees, and communication.

Despite the challenges faced, only 11% of the complainants who raised issues at frontline sought further consideration at Stage 2 after receiving the initial response at Stage 1. This indicates an effective level of frontline resolution and complainant satisfaction with their case and is a lower percentage than in previous years (2019-20 - 24%).

The trends identified by complaints are a valuable tool to enable improvement and enhancement and we anticipate this will be further advanced by the revisions to the CHP.

Annex: Key statistics (August 2020 – July 2021)

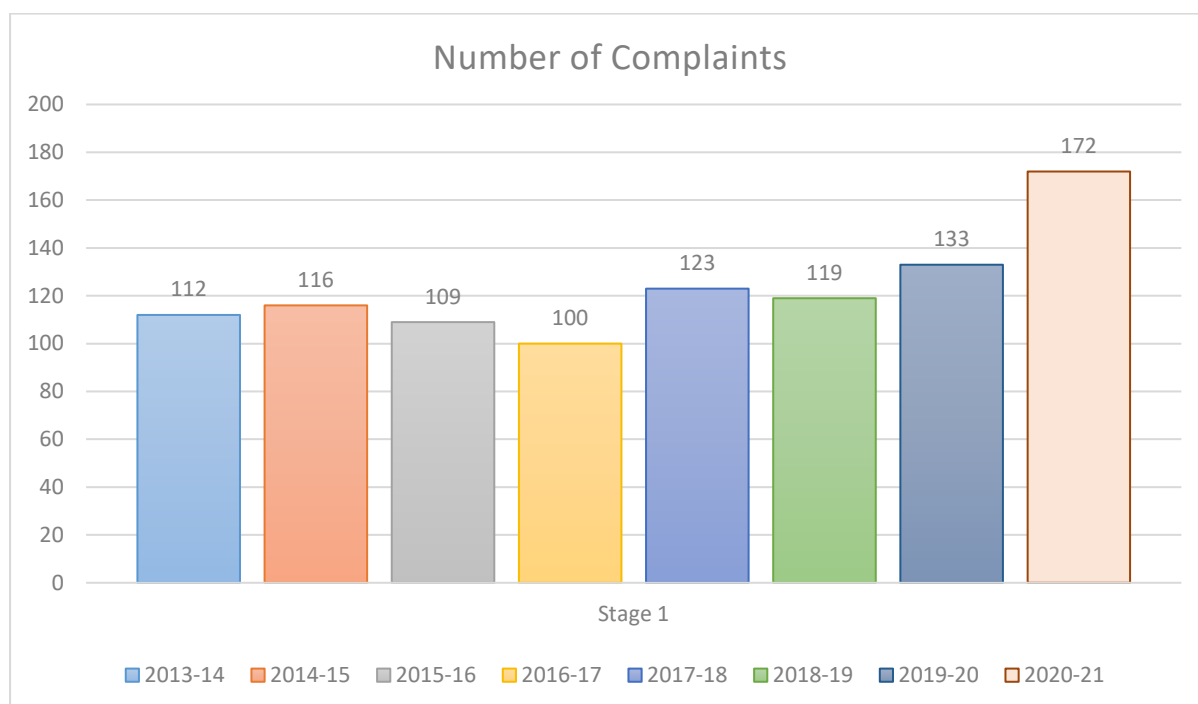


Table 1: Stage 1 Frontline resolutions

	Arts	MVLS	CoSE	CoSS	US	Cross College & Services	Total
Complaints considered at Stage 1	14	15	8	28	106	1	172

Table 2: Stage 1 complaints and response times

	Arts	MVLS	CoSE	CoSS	US	Cross	Total
Within 5 days	6	4	2	4	46	1	63
Within 10 days	2	5	2	11	15		35
Longer than 10 days	5	4	4	10	28		51
No detail of resolution provided/timeframe not known	1	2		3	17		23

Table 3: Stage 2 Complaints

	Arts	MVLS	CoSE	CoSS	US	College s / Services	Total
Stage 2	6	7	3	25	19	11	72
Stage 1 first	3	3	2	6	3	2	19

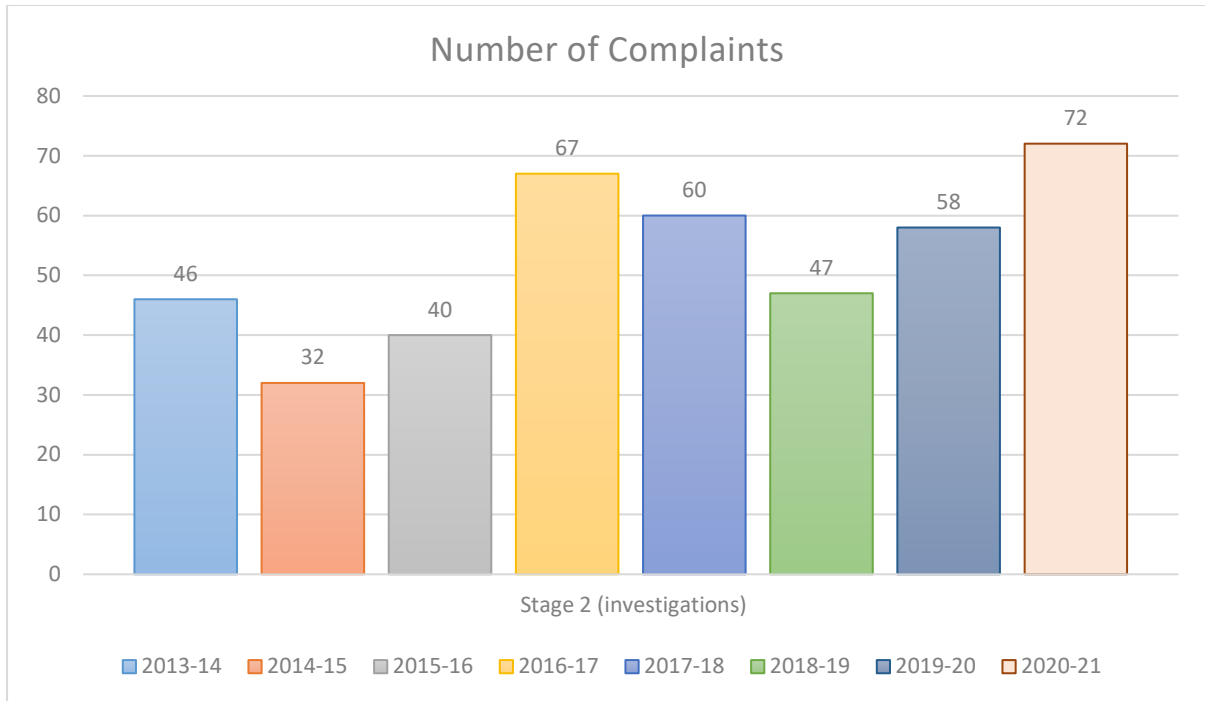


Table 4: Stage 2 Complaints by outcome

	Arts	MVLS	CoSE	CoSS	US	College s / Services	Total
Complaints Considered	6	7	3	26	20	10	72
Complaints Resolved	1		1	1	2	1	6
Complaints upheld	0	0	1	4	2	2	9
Complaints partially upheld	0	1	0	1	4	5	11
Complaints not upheld	4	6	1	15	9	2	37
No finding made		0	0	1	0	0	1
Not CHP	1			1	1		3
Complaint Withdrawn					2		2

Table 5: Stage 2 Complaints by response time

	Total
Completed within 20 working days	2
Completed beyond 20 working days	68
Pending beyond 20 working days	0
Closed or withdrawn	2

Table 6: Categories of complaint compared to last year

Complaint Category (complaints may cover multiple categories)	2019-20		2020-21	
	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 1	Stage 2
Academic Advising	1	2	4	7
Administrative Procedures	17	13	13	26
Admissions	8	6	42	7
Assessment - arrangements, feedback, changes, guidance	18	13	10	11
Communication	11	7	22	15
Complaints Handling	0	1	0	4
Finance - Fees/Grants/Bursaries/Finance	32	13	34	18
Harassment/Bullying/Discrimination	5	15	8	15
Non-Teaching Space and Facilities	3	1	4	4
Programme/Course Guidance and Information	0	2	3	3
Residential Accommodation	8	10	14	3
Student Support/Wellbeing	4	11	8	15
Teaching Space and Facilities	5	3	4	22
Teaching and Supervision	54	23	32	2
Other	20	16	39	13