

UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

Complaints Handling Annual Report: Academic Session 2021-2022

1. Introduction

This report covers complaints considered through the University's Complaints Handling Procedure between 1 August 2021 and 31 July 2022. The Complaints Handling Procedure considers dissatisfaction about service delivery. 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). The Complaints Handling Procedure was updated in 2021, following a refresh of the MCHP.

The SPSO has set four KPIs for complaints handling and address these in the first section of the report which follows.

2. Key Performance Indicators

Total number of complaints received

The sum of the number of complaints received at Stage 1, the number escalated from Stage 1 to Stage 2, and the number of complaints received directly at Stage 2.

	Total	Stage 1	Stage 2 overall	Escalated to from S1 to S2	Direct to S2
Incidents received	607				
Request for service and/or information	93				
Referred to another procedure	64				
Complaints which have been submitted beyond the timeframe set out in the CHP	2				
Taken forward	448	364	84	30	54

There were 448 complaints in total during the reporting period. 364 at Stage 1. The number of Stage 1 cases has increased considerably from previous years. For example, in 2020-21 there were 172 Stage 1 complaints, the previous year, 133 were recorded.

In 2021-22 only 8% of cases were escalated from Stage 1 to Stage 2 because the complainant was dissatisfied with the response they had received. This indicates an effective level of frontline resolution and complainant satisfaction, It is a lower percentage than in previous years (2020-21, 11% and 2019-20, 24%), despite the substantial increase in cases. We have been working with colleagues across the University to support and improve complaints handling at Stage1.

As well as the small number of cases that were escalated from Stage 1, 54 complaints were considered directly at Stage 2, this is when cases are determined to be more complex or where it is unlikely resolution can be achieved at Stage 1. In total there were 84 Stage 2

complaints (4 of these were considered as part of one combined investigation). For comparison there were a total of 81 complaints considered through 73 investigations in 2020-21. Six Stage 2 cases were withdrawn by the complainant prior to conclusion of our consideration.

The outcome of complaints at each stage

The number of complaints upheld, partially upheld, not upheld and resolved at stage 1 or stage 2 and stage 2 following escalation as a proportion of all complaints closed at stage 1, stage 2 and stage 2 after escalation.

Outcome	Stage 1 (%)	Stage 2 overall (%)	Escalated to S2 (%)	Direct to S2 (%)
Withdrawn	9.3	7.1	0.0	10.7
Resolution /Remedy	76.9	7.1	3.6	8.9
Resolution not accepted	6.6	0.0	0.0	0.0
Not upheld	3.3	60.7	82.1	50.0
Upheld in part	0.3	15.5	7.1	19.6
Upheld	0.3	7.1	3.6	8.9
Presumed resolved	2.7	0.0	0.0	0.0
No finding		1.2	0.0	1.8
Pending		1.2	0.0	

Complaints at each stage that were closed in full within the set timescales of five and 20 working days.

The number of complaints closed in full at stage 1, stage 2 and after escalation within MCHP timescales as a proportion of all stage 1, stage 2 and escalated complaints.

Stage 1 Timescales	S1 (%)	Stage 2 Timescales	Stage 2 overall (%)	Escalated to S2 (%)	Direct to S2 (%)
<5	46.1	<20	2.6	0.0	4.0
<10	20.0	>20	96.2	100.0	94.0
>10	30.9	Pending	1.3	0.0	2.0
unknown	3.0				

Stage 1 complaints are normally responded to by the local area where the issue arose. Almost half of all complaints considered at Stage 1 were resolved in five days or less. The average time taken to respond to a complaint at Stage 1 was 12.

It can be difficult to resolve stage 2 complaints within 20 working days, because they are often complex and may involve sensitive issues which require careful consideration. Where there are clear and justifiable reasons for extending the timescale, there is scope to do so as part of the Complaints Handling Procedure.

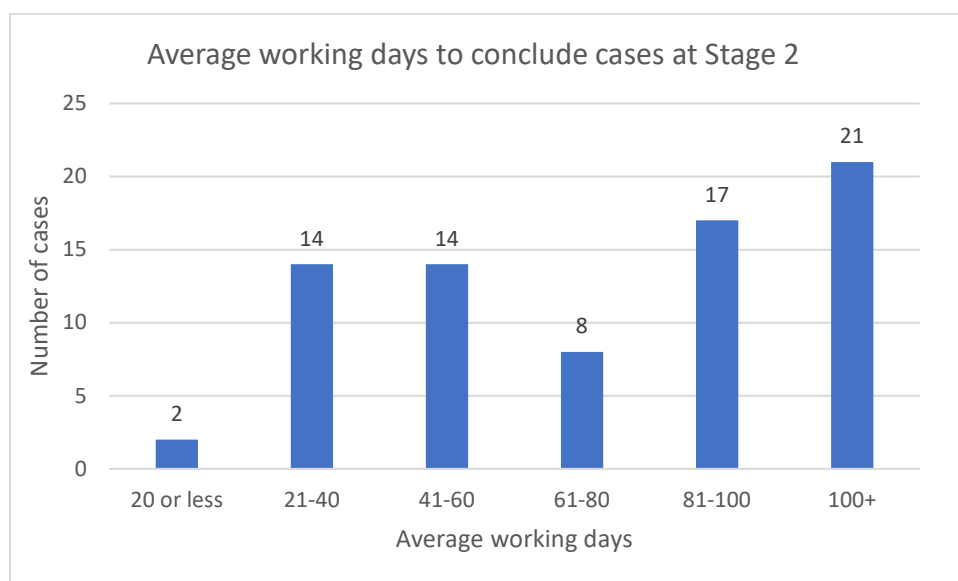
In those cases that require full investigation (where acceptable resolution is not achievable), the investigation can often take longer than 20 days to conclude. Competing cases and a high caseload also impact on the timeframe of conclusion for individual cases.

The average time in working days for a full response to complaints at each stage

The average (mean) time in working days to respond at stage 1, stage 2 and after escalation.

Average working days	Stage 1	Stage 2 overall	Escalated to S2	Direct to S2
	12.1	79.7	64.5	89.4

On average Stage 2 cases took 79.7 working days to conclude. This compares to 59 working days in 2020-21 and 65 in 2019-20. The table below provides a breakdown of cases and the average days taken.



The timescales prescribed by the SPSO continue to be a concern as our experience of complaint investigation work identifies many practical reasons why the 20-day deadline is challenging. 20 working days,

There are several factors that have contributed to the increased time taken to conclude cases at Stage 2 during the reporting period. As in other years, these include the complexity of some of the cases, delays due to the complainant, the unpredictability of complaints workflow and availability of members of staff who are needed to contribute to the investigation. Of particular significance during 2021-22 is the marked increase in Stage 1 caseload and the work involved to support complaint handing and resolution at Stage 1. This has put additional pressure on the team and made the 20-day time frame for Stage 2 case more challenging to meet.

Additional resource has been secured through the 2021-22 planning round and through specific investment for complaints and student conduct. This will provide additional capacity to improve on timescales for completing cases at Stage 2.

3. Learning from Complaints and process improvement

This section identifies the key issues and learning from complaints in 2021-22. We provided some of this information in a paper which was considered by Court and the Student Experience Committee in June 2022.

Postgraduate research students

These complaints often involve a breakdown in relations between student and supervisor(s). They can be quite difficult to resolve because the depth of expertise required to supervise a student means that there may not be a suitable alternative supervisor/team inside the university. In addition, the terms of a scholarship may mean that it is non-transferable.

When issues arise early in a student's programme of study, this often seems to be because there has been insufficient scrutiny during the selection process, a mismatch of expectations between student and supervisor, or failures of induction and training.

PGR complaints are often made more difficult to resolve, because the process of informal resolution within the relevant graduate school can become extremely protracted

When problems arise in the later stages of study, they are more difficult to resolve because both parties have usually invested significant time and effort to reach this point. Sometimes the problem is triggered by a period of ill health or other adverse circumstances affecting the student. However, we often learn that the problems have existed for some time and have not been addressed through the supervisor or through annual progress review. The resolution in these cases may be to work towards an early exit award, such as a MSc by research or MPhil degree.

In some cases, the best resolution for both parties is for the student to withdraw, in which case we normally reimburse fees and associated costs and we might offer a letter of introduction/reference to another university.

The Complaints Resolution Office are continuing to work with colleagues in Research and Innovation Services and Graduate Schools to consider the support needs for PGR students when they experience difficulties. Some of the measures already taken include enhancements to the APR process and PGR students receive increasing amounts of training and support related to their wellbeing. Supervisors also benefit from a range of initiatives to support them as supervisors (training, supervisor community of practice, supervisor buddying), and links with research integrity training - more information can be found here: <https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/ris/researcherdevelopment/supervisors/>. There is also a new programme of inductions that takes place across a week in October and a week in January that is shared between the researcher development team and Graduate Schools – this gets students off to a much better, more informed start.

There is also a Research Experience project which is in the early stages of looking at data management and reporting with a view to improve processes.

Thirty-eight new Respect Advisers across all four Colleges have been appointed; it is anticipated that this will help to resolve some of the issues that PGR students experience, before they become formal complaints.

Students with disabilities

Complaints received from students with disabilities have typically related to dissatisfaction with the support provided during their studies. The issues raised by students include:

- registration with the Disability Service is not automatic following the disclosure of a disability at registration/enrolment
- the timeliness of the implementation of reasonable adjustments or failure to implement adjustments consistently
- Failures in communication between central services and subject areas the extent to which support can be proactively offered, and the way in which information about disabilities/support requirements is shared across different parts of the University

The University completed a major review of provision for disabled students in February 2021 and is pursuing a programme of work which builds on its commitments to access and inclusion. Of particular significance are actions to improve the sharing of data concerning the needs of new students and the implementation of a new case management system. There will also be a review of the roles of school-based disability coordinators, which will address concerns about the implementation of teaching-related adjustments.

Steps have been taken since 2020 to make approach offer holders and further work is being undertaken by the service at present to create a data feed from admissions, which will allow support options to be outlined proactively.

Academic Advising

Complaints relating to Academic Advising are frequently linked to issues of support and wellbeing and reflect some ambiguity around the roles and reasonable expectations of Academic Advisers. Students typically complain about lack of contact with their Adviser, poor or inaccurate information and signposting to other sources of support, and inadequate advice about matters of progression.

To address these concerns, the University has implemented a new support and wellbeing service model and invested in a team of Student Support Officers to work alongside Academic Advisers.

There are developments to Academic Advising to ensure support for PGT students (following an ELIR recommendation) which will also help to address the types of concerns raised through the Complaints Handling Procedure. Other developments within the Colleges include new appointments to dedicated advising posts and roles the additional Senior Advisors to address the needs of both UG and PGT students.

In the future, the University may want to undertake a further review of the Academic Advising system, clarify the role and responsibilities, and enhance induction and training for Advisers.

Communication

Issues of communication are a feature of almost all complaints:

- They sit at the heart of some of the most intractable problems affecting research students
- Inconsistencies between institutional, school and programme/course messaging can be a source of confusion and anxiety to students
- Our messages often employ complex educational terminology and jargon which can be difficult for all students and particularly so for non-native speakers of English
- Communication with students particularly around issues that can cause anxiety or distress sometime lack empathy which can exacerbate dissatisfaction
- Failure to respond to queries or requests for service or delayed responses can result in complaints
- Sharing of information between departments – having to reexplain a situation several times to multiple staff members can be frustrating when trying to get an issues resolved and in some instances where the information is sensitive or upsetting can cause anxiety and distress.
- Our reaction to complaints is often defensive, which can lead to unhelpful escalation

A number of recommendations have been made via complaints for improvements to clarity, transparency and timeliness of communications

In some cases, additional training has been undertaken by staff in student facing roles.

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 and local areas are working on enhancements

The Complaints Resolution Office have been working with a number of Schools, Colleges and teams to provide support to enhance frontline complaints handling and a more resolution focused approach.

Where teams have experienced a number of complaints about lack of delayed communication, improvements to local processes have been identified and implemented. Learning from patterns of complaints, have lead to changes to complaints handling have been introduced to improve response times and anticipate potential issues that might result in complaints so that responses/ remedies can be given consideration in advance.

To Note:

Industrial Action

Students have understandably been concerned by the impact of the ongoing Industrial Action, particularly those who have already experienced disruption from the pandemic and the previous round of strikes. Complaints tend to relate to the impact of cancelled classes and are often associated with requests for reduction in tuition fees. It is apparent from the concerns raised, that students are often not clear about the measures that are being put in place to minimise the impact of disruption and that University and schools should therefore do more to explain the mitigating measures in place.

Covid-19

Complaint handling has been impacted significantly by the Coronavirus pandemic. The number of complaints has risen markedly, but they also reflects the wide-ranging impact of the pandemic on students' lives and the associated stress and anxiety they have experienced. This is hardly a surprise and is replicated across the HE sector.

It has been a challenging time for staff as well as for students and many decisions have understandably had to be made a short notice, in line with changing Government guidance. The complaints we have received underline the importance, at times of uncertainty, of clear, consistent, and timely communication.

The main themes reflected in Covid-related complaints relate to:

- inadequate, unclear or conflicting communication, particularly as it related to the provision of on-campus and online teaching and assessment
- the timeliness and quantum of information and support for students
- a perception that online teaching is not a good substitute for on-campus teaching and does not deliver value for money
- teaching materials and assessments, which have not been adapted sufficiently for delivery online

It is worth noting, though, that the total number of complaints relating to the pandemic has been smaller than we had expected. In the main, students seem to have recognised that the

staff has made every effort to ensure that standards are maintained and keep disruption to a minimum.