

**Complaints Handling Performance Report**

**2022-23**

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## Introduction

1. The University operates its complaints handling in line with the Higher Education Model Complaints Handling Procedure published by the [Scottish Public Services Ombudsman](https://www.spso.org.uk/) (SPSO). The guidance and information on the University’s Complaints Handling Procedure can be found at the ‘[Complaints](https://www.stir.ac.uk/about/contact-us/complaints/)’ section of the University website.
2. The purpose of this document is to report on the University’s complaints handling performance in the 2022-23 academic year (1 August 2022- 31 July 2023) in line with Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), and in respect of complaint trends, and actions taken or planned in response to complaints.

## Overview of the Complaints Handling Procedure

1. The University’s Complaints Handling Procedure involves up to two stages.   
     
   Stage One – Frontline Response  
   Seeks to respond to straightforward complaints swiftly and effectively at the source of the concern or issue.  
     
   Stage Two – Investigation  
   Appropriate where a complainant is dissatisfied with the outcome of frontline resolution and requires escalation, or where frontline resolution is not possible or appropriate due to the complexity or seriousness of the case.
2. These two stages represent the full scope of the University’s complaint procedure. Where a complainant remains dissatisfied at the conclusion of the University’s consideration of a complaint, a request can be made to the SPSO for an independent review of the complaint. The SPSO is the final stage for complaints about universities in Scotland.

## Complaints Received

1. The University welcomes the opportunities for learning and reflection that complaints create, and continues to focus on ensuring that students and other members of the University community are made aware of and have ready access to the Complaints Handling Procedure.
2. During the 2022-23 academic year the University received a total of 283 complaints, broken down as follows:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Total number of complaints | 283 |
| Received as a Stage 1 complaint | **229** |
| Escalated from Stage 1 to Stage 2 complaint | **3** |
| Received as a Stage 2 complaint | **30** |
| Referred to another University procedure (such as Academic Appeals or Student Discipline) | 21 |

1. The overall total number of complaints received in 2022-23 represents an increase of approximately 42% compared to 2021-22. Within the overall increase in complaint numbers in 2022-23, there was an increase of approximately 140% in the number of complaints received as a Stage 2 complaint. The University therefore experienced increases in both volume and complexity of complaints.
2. The total number of complaints received from students during 2022-23 was 166, representing approximately 59% of the total complaints received. The number of complaints received from students increased by 42% compared to 2021-22 when 117 complaints were received from students. However, it is important to note that the University’s student population has increased significantly in recent years and the number of complaints submitted by students as proportionate to the student body has remained comparable - the proportion of students who submitted a complaint continued to represent less than 1% of the student body. Furthermore, the increase is consistent with the overall trajectory of complaint volumes experienced in 2022-23.
3. The total of 283 complaints were received from complainants as follows:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Category of Complainant** | **Number of Complaints** | **Proportion of Total Complaints** |
| Applicant | 44 | 15.5% |
| Undergraduate Student | 115 | 40.6% |
| Postgraduate Taught Student | 48 | 16.9% |
| Postgraduate Research Student | 3 | 1.1% |
| External Individual Advocating on Behalf of a Student | 3 | 1.1% |
| Parent/Carer/Guardian of a Student or Applicant | 17 | 6.0% |
| University Staff Member | 2 | 0.7% |
| University Alumni | 1 | 0.4% |
| Member of the Public | 47 | 16.6% |
| Unidentified Individuals | 3 | 1.1% |

### Timing of Complaints Received

1. Complaints were received at the following points during the 2022-23 academic year:
2. As demonstrated above, the volume of complaints received was relatively steady across the year, aside from a spike in September 2022 which can be attributed to a specific operational issue experienced at the start of the academic year.

## Categories of Complaints

1. The breakdown of categories to which the complaints received in 2022-23 related is as follows:
2. It should be noted that student conduct concerns are generally received directly into the Student Discipline Procedure and therefore the numbers of concerns received as complaints do not represent the total number of student conduct concerns in 2022-23.

## Complaint Category Trends

1. The categories of complaints used were revised ahead of the 2022-23 reporting period to more accurately define the topics of complaints received (for example, the previous category of ‘Pastoral support complaints’ was revised to ‘Student support provision’) and ensure comprehensiveness.
2. In terms of the nature of the complaints received:

* In comparison to 2021-22, in 2022-23: there were decreases in the number of complaints received in relation to Teaching or Assessment Arrangements, and Student Accommodation Provision and Facilities; there were increases in the number of complaints received regarding University Policy or Procedure, and Campus Facilities; whilst volumes of complaints in respect of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Concerns, Accessibility, Student Support Provision, Service Delivery, Staff, and Student Conduct remained relatively consistent. There were no complaints relating to the category of Learning/Teaching Resources or Facilities, which is a new category introduced from 2022-23.
* In respect of Teaching or Assessment Arrangements, numbers of complaints fell significantly in 2022-23 compared to both of the previous two years. In 2022-23, 8% of the total number of complaints received related to Teaching or Assessment Arrangements, compared to 27% in 2021-22 and 40% in 2020-21. None of the complaints in this category in 2022-23 related to the quality of teaching and learning, rather to matters such as issues experienced whilst engaging in group work, and exam conditions. The University continues to reflect on concerns received from students regarding teaching or assessment arrangements, and to value such complaints raised in informing continuous enhancement of the student learning experience.
* Members of University and College Union (UCU) participated in approximately 20 days of industrial strike action between November 2022 and March 2023, and a Marking and Assessment Boycott between April and August 2023. Whilst this industrial action was ongoing, the University received 11 related complaints through the Complaints Handling Procedure (>4% of the complaints received in 2022-23).
* The number of complaints received regarding Student Accommodation Provision and Facilities decreased by almost 50% in 2022-23 compared to the previous year, positively reflecting ongoing, continuous improvement and focus on the student experience. In 2021-22, almost 10% of all complaints received related to student accommodation whilst in 2022-23, this proportion fell to approximately 3.5%.
* There was a significant, three-fold, increase in the number of complaints received in relation to University policy or procedure in 2022-23 compared to the previous year. 38% of all complaints received in 2022-23 related to this category. This was linked to unprecedented volumes of activity at the beginning of the academic year and consequently, a small proportion of students unfortunately having faced delays in completing their enrolment or receiving responses to requests related to this. The relevant University teams worked hard to ensure that the situation was resolved as quickly as possible. In line with continuous improvement, reflection has been undertaken upon the issues and challenges, and feedback received, in order to improve services offered moving forward.
* Numbers of complaints regarding Campus Facilities increased in 2022-23 compared to the previous year. In 2022-23, 8.9% of all complaints related to the Campus Facilities category, compared to 3.5% in 2021-22. The majority of complaints received in 2022-23 were in relation to car parking. In line with the increasing student population, there has been a corresponding increase in demand for car parking. Whilst car parking provision has already increased substantially to take account of increased demand, the University continues to reflect on the concerns raised through complaints in order to improve the facilities offered to our community.
* In 2022-23, complaints received regarding Service Delivery accounted for 20.5% of all complaints and related to a wide range of matters in line with the diverse range of University activity and service provision.

## Complaint Responses

1. The University aims to resolve Stage One, frontline complaints within five working days, and Stage Two complaints within 20 working days in line with the Complaints Handling Procedure.
2. In addition, the University is proactive in seeking to resolve complaints, in keeping with [SPSO Good practice guidance](https://www.spso.org.uk/sites/spso/files/csa/Alternative%20Complaint%20Resolution%20Approaches.pdf).
3. As experienced across the Higher Education and other sectors, complaints handling timelines were impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and the University continues to work hard to fully address and respond to all complaints in a robust manner as quickly as possible.
4. The increases in the volume and complexity of complaints that is referenced in the section on ‘Complaints Received’, sets out context in which the University’s complaints handling took place in 2022-23. Complaint response timelines achieved were as follows:

* **115 (53%)** of complaints responded to in full at Stage 1 were closed in full within 5 working days. The **average** time taken to respond to complaints handled at Stage 1 was **26 working days**.
* **9 (31%)** of complaints responded to in full at Stage 2 were closed within 20 working days. The **average** time taken to respond to complaints handled at Stage 2 was **109 working days**.
* No complaints responded to in full were closed in full after escalation within 20 working days. The average time taken to respond to complaints escalated from Stage 1 to Stage 2 was **89 working days**.

1. Where a complaint was not fully responded to within the specified timeline, the University sought to ensure that complainants were kept up to date with the progress of their complaint and that communication remained open with the complainant.
2. The University has recognised the increases being experienced in complaint volume and complexity levels and has made significant internal investment to bring capacity for complaints handling in line with these emerging levels. A new, dedicated Student Conduct and Casework team has been established as part of the Academic Registry department, creating an increase in staff capacity of approximately 225%, and a resilience to enable effective operational delivery, customer responsiveness and business continuity.

## Complaint Outcomes

1. There are four complaint outcome categories available: resolved, upheld, partially upheld, or not upheld.
2. Complaints where the outcome is that the complaint is ‘upheld’ or ‘partially upheld’ are those where the University identified that something had gone wrong. Complaints where the outcome was ‘not upheld’ may remain helpful to inform service improvement, and recommendations are sometimes still made although a complaint has not been upheld.
3. Stage 1, or frontline complaints, are addressed whenever possible as close to the source of the matter complained about. 82% of complaints received at Stage 1 in 2022-23 were successfully resolved in line with our complaints handling objectives. Outcomes of the **229** complaints handled at Stage 1 in 2022-23 were as follows:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Outcome** | **Number of Stage 1 Complaints** |
| Resolved | 187 |
| Upheld | 6 |
| Partially Upheld | 2 |
| Not Upheld | 23 |
| Withdrawn | 11 |

1. Stage 2 complaints are often complex in nature and require careful investigation. Outcomes of the **30** complaints handled at Stage 2 in 2022-23 were as follows:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Outcome** | **Number of Stage 2 Complaints** |
| Resolved | 4 |
| Upheld | 7 |
| Partially Upheld | 5 |
| Not Upheld | 10 |
| Withdrawn | 1 |
| Yet to be Fully Concluded | 3 |

1. Some complaints that are received at Stage 1 go on to be considered under Stage 2 of the Complaint Handling Procedure where the complaint has not been resolved for the complainant, or where the complainant was not satisfied by the outcome at Stage 1. Of the **3** complaints in 2022-23 which were escalated from Stage 1 to Stage 2:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Outcome** | **Number of Escalated Complaints** |
| Upheld | 2 |
| Partially Upheld | 1 |

## Action and Learning Following Complaints

1. As part of the complaints process, relevant University teams are expected to routinely reflect on the outcomes of complaints and consider any lessons that can be learnt. Where investigations identify areas of practice that could be improved or enhanced, recommendations are made within the complaint response, and progressed by the relevant faculty or directorate.
2. The following recommendations were made following outcomes from complaints investigated at Stage 2 during 2022-23:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | **Recommendation** |
| **1** | Restructure a specific module and improve timing of communications sent to students. |
| **2** | Update the Accommodation Services’ Occupancy Agreement to enhance and clarify provisions. |
| **3** | All relevant staff members should be made aware of the additional obligations owed to any student who has a Financial Guarantee Letter in place from an external funder. |
| **4** | Increase signage to warn campus users of adverse weather conditions. |
| **5** | Consider approaches and procedures to work with external partners on placements. |
| **6** | Improve the process for communicating information regarding repairs works to students. |
| **7** | The student discipline procedure should continue to be reviewed and enhanced. |
| **8** | Continue to explore the most effective methods of providing appropriate feedback to students. |
| **9** | Teams preparing for graduation should review procedures in respect of confirmation of student names for announcement at a graduation ceremony. |

1. The University considers each complaint and concern received to be an opportunity to learn and ensure continuous enhancement. As part of that commitment and as previously articulated, the University has invested in a dedicated Student Conduct and Casework team, and continues to engage proactively with SPSO resources, training and events, and with a range of other relevant events, activities and developmental opportunities relevant to effective complaint handling.

**March 2024**