

Complaints Handling Procedure Annual Report 2022/23

Background

1. The Public Services Reform (Scotland) Act 2010 gave the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) responsibilities and powers, specifically, to oversee the development of model Complaints Handling Procedures (CHPs) for each sector including higher education. The main aims of the model CHP are early resolution of a complaint as close to the point of contact as possible and making best use of lessons learned from complaints.
2. All Scottish universities were required to adopt the two stage model CHP by 30 August 2013. The SPSO published a revised model Complaints Handling Procedure at the end of January 2020 which the University implemented in April 2021. One aspect of this revised procedure is a specific definition of “resolved” at both frontline and investigation stage. Therefore the categories of “upheld”, “partially upheld” or “not upheld” have been added to the options, on the recording system, at frontline stage and “resolved” as an option at investigation stage. These new categories are being used but, as all frontline complaints at Strathclyde were formerly recorded as “resolved”, there is still significant use of the “resolved” option at frontline. Work is ongoing on this and the percentage of frontline complaints recorded as “resolved” has dropped slightly from 28% in 2021/22 to 24% in 2022/23.

Recording and Reporting

3. It is a requirement of the SPSO’s model CHP that the University records all complaints and that reports detailing key performance information are submitted quarterly to the Executive Team and annually to Court. SPSO Guidance indicates that such reports are expected to contain:
 - performance statistics detailing: the volume and types of complaints received and key performance information, e.g. on the time taken and the stage at which complaints were closed.
 - the trends and outcomes of complaints and the actions taken in response including examples to demonstrate how complaints have helped improve services.
4. Annex A provides key performance information on the volume and types of complaints received during 2022/23 and on the resolution times achieved. Annex B provides comparative data for the previous four years and Annex C provides qualitative information on some of the actions taken or recommendations made to deliver service improvement in response to complaints received by the University during 2022/23.

Summary Analysis

5. The University recorded 138 complaints during the 2022/23 academic year which is an increase of 23% on 2021/22. The majority of complaints (88%) were received from students or former students of the University, which was a four percent increase on 2021/22. The remainder of complaints received were from members of the public and applicants for study.
6. Complaints were received across all academic faculties with the biggest faculties of Engineering and HaSS recording the most complaints and accounting for 60% of complaints received. 19% of complaints received related to areas within Professional Services, predominantly Student Experience.
7. The percentage of complaints closed at frontline was 71%, up from 61% the previous year and on the 69% closed at frontline in 2020/21. The time taken to close frontline complaints

fluctuated throughout the year, averaging 7.2 days, which is an increase from 5.4 days in 2021/22. Fifty nine percent of frontline complaints were closed within the 5 working day target, down slightly from 60% the previous year.

8. Complaints investigated at stage 2 of the procedure were closed within an average of 31.4 days, an increase on the 2021/22 average of 28.4 days. This timeframe has always been considered to be very challenging, particularly for complex complaints. 22% of complaints were completed within 20 working days, which is down only one percent on the previous year and 36% of complaints were completed within 30 days.
9. 21 of the Stage 2 complaints were escalated directly by the University to Stage 2 and the remaining nine were escalated by the complainant following the Stage 1 outcome.
10. The most frequent types of complaints recorded were those relating to:
 1. Teaching and/or assessment (32%)
 2. Staff Attitude and/or Conduct (16%)
 3. University Policy, Procedures or Administration (13%)
 4. Service Provision (9%)
11. This was the first full year back without any disruption from Covid 19 and for the first time in three years we did not receive any complaints concerning the service provided to students in relation to covid. Teaching and/or assessment remained the main source of complaints, with just under half related to industrial action. The majority of the complaints concerning industrial action related to the noise of picket lines and strikers during an Engineering exam in December 2022. Complaints concerning Staff Attitude and/or Conduct, related to a number of issues around student support, feedback, communication and some more serious allegations around discrimination. Complaints relating to University policy have also been received relating to policy decisions made to comply with Scottish or UK Government guidelines, with applications and fees the main topics raised formally through the complaints process.
12. The below table breaks down the total number of complaints received this year and the previous year for each Faculty.

Faculty	2022/23	2021/22	Change	% Change
HAAS	33	31	2	+6%
Engineering	50	28	22	+44%
Business	19	12	7	+58%
Science	9	14	-5	-36%
Total	111	85	26	+31%

13. Staff Conduct and Teaching/Assessment have consistently remained the most prominent areas of complaint in the previous four years. They have both remained around the same level apart from this year which saw Teaching/Assessment complaints increase by 69% which is mainly attributed to the complaints around industrial action mentioned in point 10. Most of those complaints were upheld, which meant that more complaints were upheld this year than in any of the previous four years.
14. Lessons learned and actions taken to improve services are recorded following each complaint, where appropriate, and examples of the learning points recorded during 2022/23 are included at Annex B.
15. Staff continue to engage well with the complaints process and work is continuing to encourage a greater focus on frontline resolution. In 2023 we reconvened the Complaints Investigators Forum for the first time since 2020 and that will continue to meet throughout

the year. We are working with OSDU to update the investigators training and have developed the first version of the new complaints form which is currently being trialled by Complaints Champions throughout the University.

SPSO Recommendations

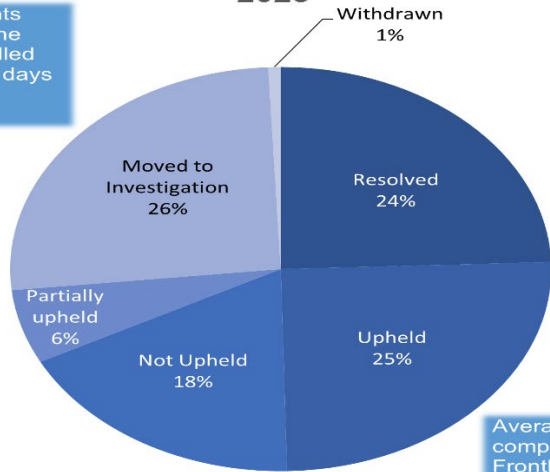
16. The SPSO approach to recommendations focuses on better outcomes in relation to services as well as for individuals. SPSO expects organisations to share their findings, to enable learning and improvement, with those responsible for the operational delivery of the service and across the organisation. It also expects the University to embed learning from complaints in governance structures and to ensure recommendations are shared with the relevant internal and external decision-makers, including members of Court.
17. The SPSO has made no recommendations to the University in the last year.

Recommendation

18. Court is invited to **note** the Complaints Handling Annual Report for 2022/23.

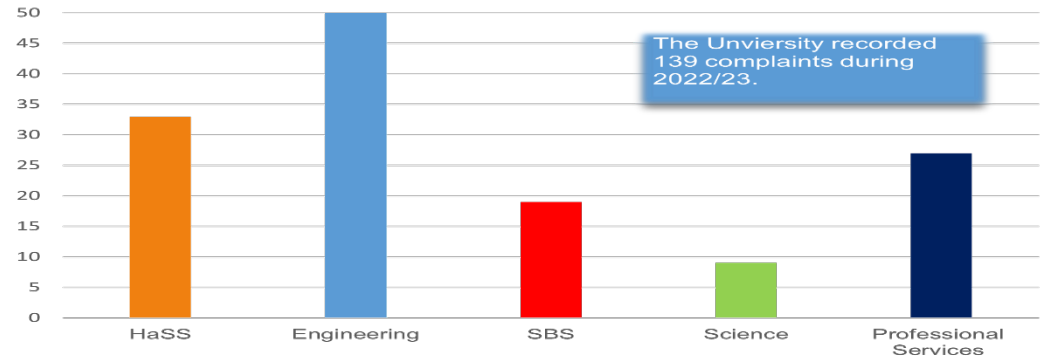
Frontline (Stage 1) - 1 August 2022 to 31 July 2023

59% of complaints closed at Frontline stage were handled within 5 working days



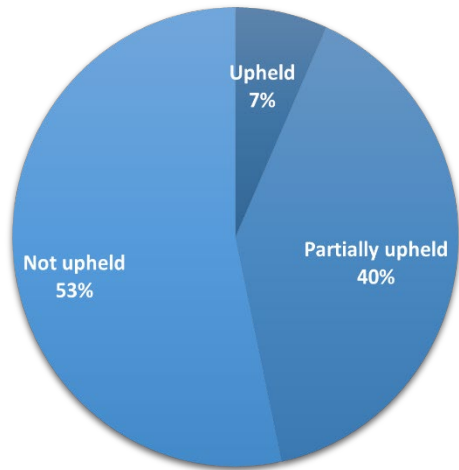
Average time for complaints closed at Frontline was 7.2 working days.

Complaints Received by Area 1 August 2022 to 31 July 2023



The University recorded 139 complaints during 2022/23.

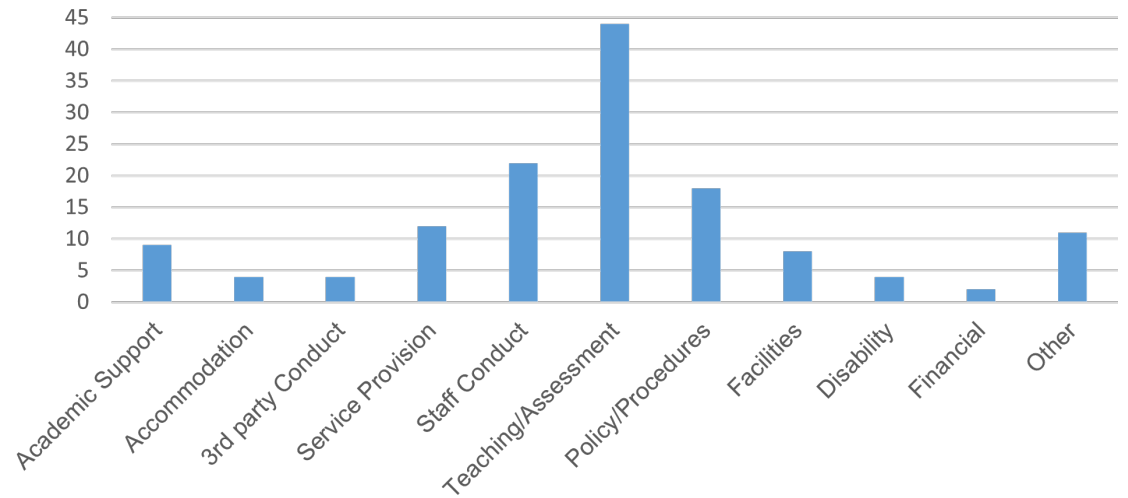
Investigation (Stage 2) Outcomes 1 August 2022 to 31 July 2023

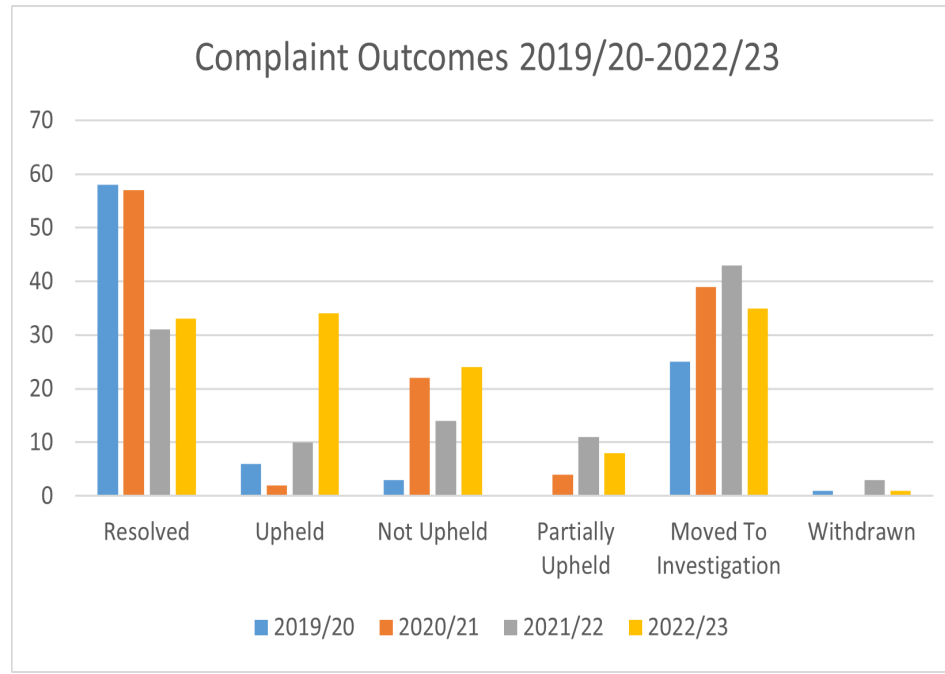
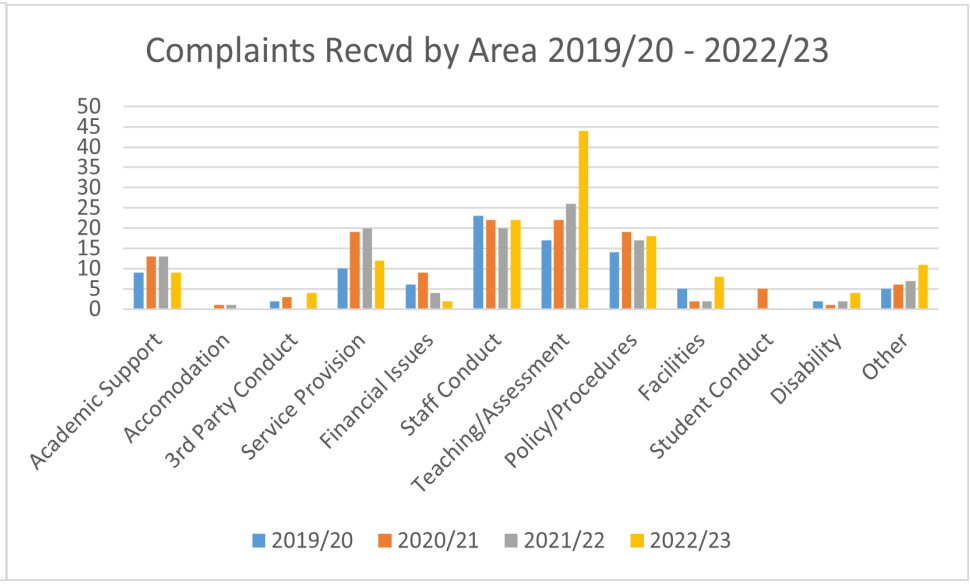
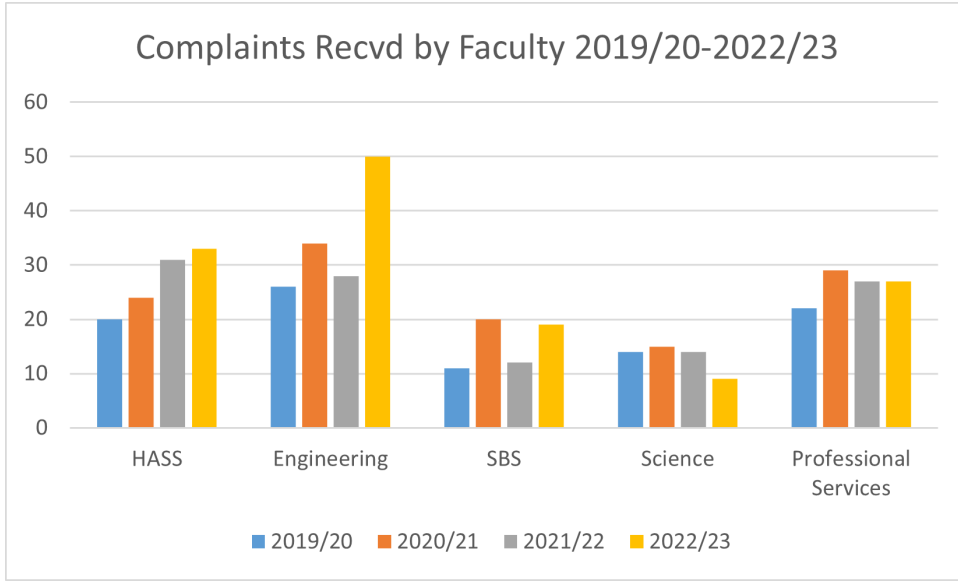


30 investigations were completed. Average investigation = 31.4 working days

22% of Investigations were completed within 20 working days

Complaints Received by Category 1 August 2022 to 31 July 2023





Learning from Complaints 2022/23 – Examples

ANNEX C

Complaint Category	Complainant	Complaint Summary	Outcome	Learning
Service Provision	Student	Level 5 of the Library was closed for the installation of new windows. Student was told that level 5 of the Library would be open during the July/August exam period, and then subsequently told that it was closed to the public during the exam period.	Partially upheld	Signs to be removed and updated. Signs for students should be reviewed/updated regularly during large projects.
Accommodation	Student	Lack of accommodation. Support groups offered no solution. Lack of reasonable accommodation available or too far from campus which made it daunting for student and would impact important study time. Would feel safer in university accommodation.	Not upheld	Accommodation services responded. Student rejected first offer of accommodation with the knowledge that they could not be offered an alternative.
Staff Attitude and/or Conduct	Student	Complainant was treated unjustly and unfairly at the graduation ceremony on 23 June 2022.	Partially upheld	The training programme for security staff will now include unconscious bias training.
Other	Student	A former student contacted the Head of Department regarding an article in a journal which quoted some of her academic work verbatim/or was paraphrased. The article did not credit her as author nor acknowledge her contribution. The academic work involved related to her 4th Year Statistics project which she undertook in 2017/2018 under the supervision of a member of staff in the Department.	Upheld	The Department will review how staff communicate with students and former students and put appropriate measures in place.

Complaint Category	Complainant	Complaint Summary	Outcome	Learning
Financial Issues	Student	A student complained to the HoD regarding the increase in the annual fee (by £100) for PT masters students. The student was funded via Student Finance which was fixed and not increased annually. The increase placed additional pressure on their finances during a cost-of-living crisis and rise was felt to be unjustified. The student asked the HoD to review the fees for existing students and wished to have the fee fixed for the duration of their studies. They also stated that there were not informed in writing that the fees would increase. They also mentioned that a scholarship which they received had not increased in line with the fee increase.	Not upheld	We will convey our concern that the communication about these fee increases could have been handled more sympathetically and make sure that all students are aware that fee levels are not guaranteed to be limited at the start of any PT Masters course
Facilities	Student	The student submitted a complaint through the Library's Feedback and Complaints team. The complaint was about the slow running of the PCs in the Library. It took 20 minutes to log into a PC, open a browser and download a simple file.	Upheld	Centrally managed PCs are usually replaced every 5 years (300 a year) but the money to do this was reallocated to the Windows Virtual Desktop during Covid in order to provide a solution for students working remotely. Therefore the usual replacement schedule is behind. The EUC team are aware of this. Further learning has been to ensure that Library staff and the EUC team are continuing to have their regular monthly meetings to share information like this.
Teaching and/or Assessment	Student	A student complained about the topic imposition, unwelcoming behaviour of the supervisor, negligence in supervision and misguidance from the supervisor of the master's project.	Not upheld	Students will be reminded to discuss any issues/concerns with regard to the feedback from supervisors with the module registrar.
Teaching and/or Assessment	Student (or former student)	The student complained about the tone and timing of an email sent by a Teaching Assistant. She also	Resolved	Departmental Director will investigate whether or not all communication with students should be restricted during the evening before an exam/test.

Complaint Category	Complainant	Complaint Summary	Outcome	Learning
		complained about the conditions and the behaviour of an invigilator.		The University is going to begin that process of finding invigilators much earlier than we did this semester and commit to having a minimum of 2 invigilators per test/exam.
Teaching and/or Assessment	Student (or former student)	The short-term alterations to allow students an extra 3 days to submit a report originally scheduled for 4 December 2022 had a subsequent knock-on effect on another upcoming deadline, which caused undue stress to students, and there had been a lack of communication which exacerbated the problem.	Upheld	The department will consider the following adjustments to the module next session: 1. Consider the possibility of timetabling the presentations on consecutive days in the same week. 2. Consider moving the submission deadline, either to during semester 1 exam week period, or to the January consolidation week, to allow more time if students need it.
University Policy, Procedures or Administration	Student (or former student)	Concerned that the University will not extend visa.	Not Upheld	Asked Team to provide more detail to students on the visa extension processes and when and why the university cannot extend visas in certain circumstances.
Teaching and/or Assessment	Student (or former student)	Student who failed MSc dissertation and who failed to resubmit graduated in absentia with Postgraduate Diploma in May 2022. Student wants to resubmit his dissertation and for it to be considered.	Not Upheld	The investigators noted that some University processes, such as the automatic carrying forward of a student's registration for graduation (if they do not qualify for the award in time) to the next ceremony could benefit from further improvement.
University Policy, Procedures or Administration	Student (or former student)	Complaint is regarding resit examination provision and communication, including the set up for those run via British Council Centres.	Partially Upheld	That the Department includes a standard paragraph on all PGT Exam Board Outcome correspondence, when a Resit decision has been, that students may request to take examinations out with the University if they meet the exceptional circumstances as defined by the University 'Assessment and Feedback Procedures' document. That the responsibility for the arrangements of these examinations and payment of the fee sits with the students.
Service Provision	Student	The complainant experienced a delay in response to email requests about marks given in one group assessment and as they didn't receive a timely response, requested help from the Faculty Office.	Resolved	There had been an issue with staff being on leave and absent and a reminder has been sent to all staff ensuring that they have automatic replies on and that they redirect any queries to the relevant inbox or member of staff.

Complaint Category	Complainant	Complaint Summary	Outcome	Learning
Staff Attitude and/or conduct	Student	A student has complained about the behaviour of a member of staff in their department.	Partially Upheld	The department to provide mentoring and support to the staff member to improve their awareness of what is considered appropriate professional behaviour in the workplace. More generally, the availability of Active Bystander training should be promoted within the department to provide staff with techniques to challenge unacceptable behaviour at the earliest opportunity in a supportive environment.
Reasonable Adjustment / Disability Related	Student	As a result of the outcome of the Cause for Concern panel, a student was unable to enrol into the fourth year of their programme. They did not receive any clarification on the impact this decision would have on their financial support.	Upheld	The process for making these decisions will be made clearer and consideration will be made as to whether any further mitigation could be put in place for students who are unable to attend the panel.
University Policies, procedures or administration	Student	The student complained that the disparity of grading systems across Scottish Universities was leading to inequity and inequality for student's undertaking the Postgraduate Certificate in Into Headship as this is a compulsory national qualification and as such, they were not awarded a distinction.	Not Upheld	This degree is a compulsory national qualification and as such there was no requirement for Universities to follow the same grading structure. The University was unable to say that it caused inequity or inequality, however, it was agreed that the University would revisit all awards given during 2021/22 and apply the award of merit and distinction classifications retrospectively where applicable.