

Complaints Handling Procedure Annual Report 2019/20

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. Following the internal approval of a suitable procedure by Court, on the recommendation of Senate, the University implemented the current CHP on 27 August 2013. This document is publicly available here:
https://www.strath.ac.uk/media/1newwebsite/documents/complaintsprocedure/FINAL_ComplaintsProcedure_withCoverSheet.pdf
3. The SPSO published a revised model Complaints Handling Procedure at the end of January 2020 which the University is required to adopt by April 2021. Work is ongoing to meet the implementation date. One aspect of this revised procedure is a specific definition of “resolved” at both frontline and investigation stage. Therefore the categories of “upheld” or “not upheld” have been added to the options, on the recording system, at frontline stage. These new categories are beginning to be used but, as the revised procedure has not yet been fully implemented, the majority of frontline complaints are still categorised as resolved. This is anticipated to change as the revised procedure is publicised over the next year.

Recording and Reporting

4. 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 resolved
 - the trends and outcomes of complaints and the actions taken in response including examples to demonstrate how complaints have helped improve services
5. Annex A provides key performance information on the volume and types of complaints received during 2019/20 and on the resolution times achieved. Annex B 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 2019/20.

Summary Analysis

6. The University recorded 93 complaints during the 2019/20 academic year. This is a slight decrease on 2018/19 but is likely to be connected to the national lockdown and closure of the campus. The majority of complaints (83%) were received from students or former students of the University. The remainder of complaints received were from members of the public and applicants for study.

7. Complaints were received across all academic faculties with a reasonably even spread across faculties. Twenty three percent of complaints received were related to areas within Professional Services, predominantly Student Experience.
8. The percentage of complaints resolved at frontline was 73%, significantly increased from 47% the previous year. In the final quarter, when more complex complaints are often submitted and when staff were working remotely, 50% of complaints were handled at frontline. This was still a significant increase on 20% in the final quarter of 2018/19.
9. The time taken to resolve frontline complaints fluctuated throughout the year, averaging 5.5 days, only very slightly above the 5 working day target and a slight improvement on the 2018/19 average. Seventy percent of frontline complaints were resolved within the 5 working day target, up from 60%. This suggests that the focus on improving frontline complaint handling over recent years is showing results.
10. Complaints investigated at stage 2 of the procedure were resolved within an average of 31.7 days, well above the 20 working days target. This resolution timeframe has always been considered to be very challenging, particularly for complex complaints. This year, for over a third of the year, staff have been working remotely, unable to meet colleagues or complainants in person. The SPSO recognises that this situation is likely to increase the time needed for investigations. It is a credit to the staff conducting investigations for the University that the average time taken remains as low as it does and that thorough investigations have continued to be completed with alternative ways of working used to facilitate this. Twenty eight percent of stage 2 complaints were completed within 20 working days and 68% within 30 working days.
11. The most frequent types of complaints recorded were those relating to:
 1. Staff Attitude and/or Conduct (25%)
 2. Teaching and/or assessment (18%)
 3. University Policy, Procedures or Administration (15%)
12. Complaints relating to disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and industrial action have not been given a separate category as, to be classified as complaints, they would need to include allegations relating to failure to provide a service or the quality of facilities or learning resources and would therefore be captured in existing categories. Only a small number of complaints about these issues have been recorded to date. However, the University has received a significant number of requests for fee refunds due to the move to online provision. The Complaints Handling Procedure states that a request for compensation only is not a complaint and therefore these requests do not impact on the figures in this report.
13. Lessons learned and actions taken to improve services are recorded following each complaint, where appropriate, and examples of the learning points recorded during 2019/20 are included at Annex B.
14. Staff continue to engage well with the complaints process and work is continuing to encourage a greater focus on frontline resolution. During 2019/20 briefing sessions on handling frontline complaints, open to all staff, were attended by circa 40 staff. These were delivered monthly until the campus closed in March. Additional briefings were held for groups of staff in Student Experience, HR and SIPBS. As part of the implementation of the revised procedure, there is a requirement to deliver frontline complaint handling training as part of staff induction and also to provide refresher training at regular intervals. To this end, the existing training has been paused with online training in development to meet the new requirements. The training for those investigating complaints was delivered twice during 2019/20.

SPSO Recommendations

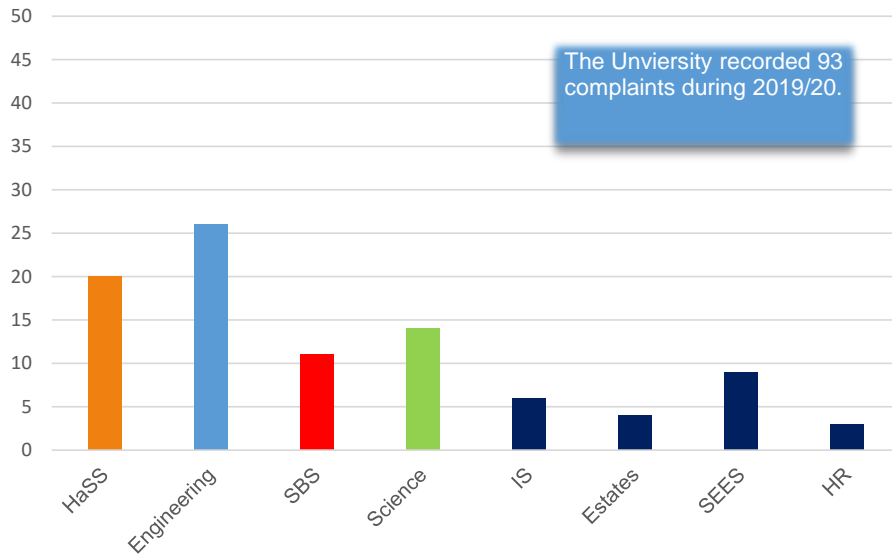
15. The SPSO approach to recommendations focuses on better outcomes in relation to services as well as for individuals. SPSO expects organisations to share their findings, to enable learning and improvement, with those responsible for the operational delivery of the service and across the organisation. 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.
16. The SPSO has made one recommendation and given feedback to the University in the last year, following complaints raised by 2 former students. Annex C contains details of the SPSO's recommendations and feedback along with the action taken in response. Recommendations from the SPSO, along with follow up actions, where appropriate, are reported to Executive Team quarterly.

Recommendation

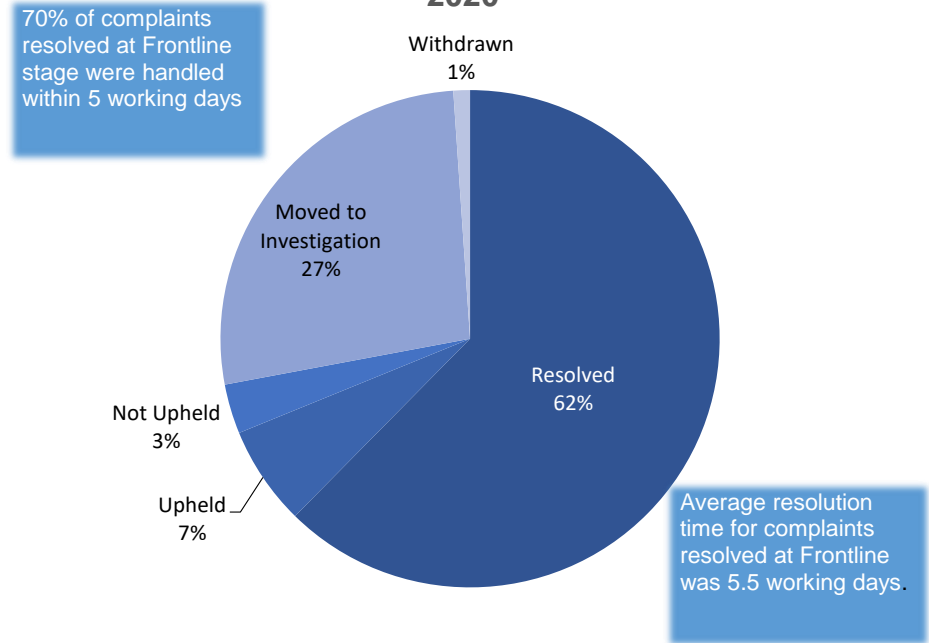
17. Court is invited to **note** the Complaints Handling Annual Report for 2019/20.

Complaints Recorded 2019/20

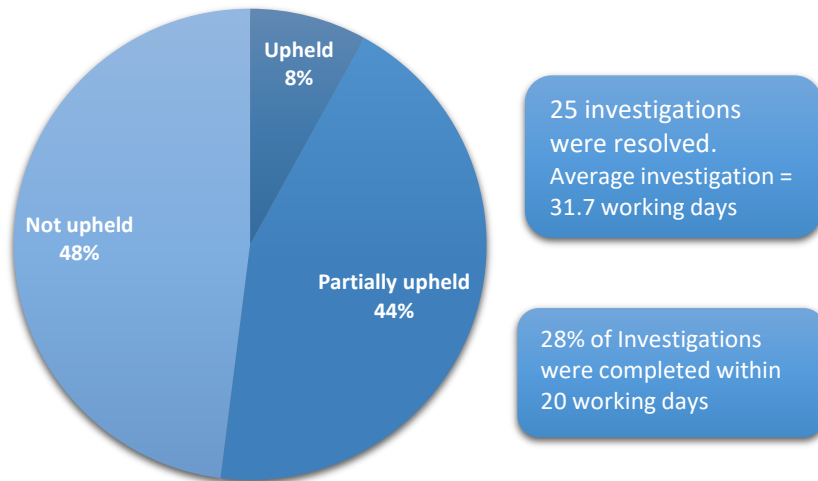
Complaints Received by Area 1 August 2019 to 31 July 2020



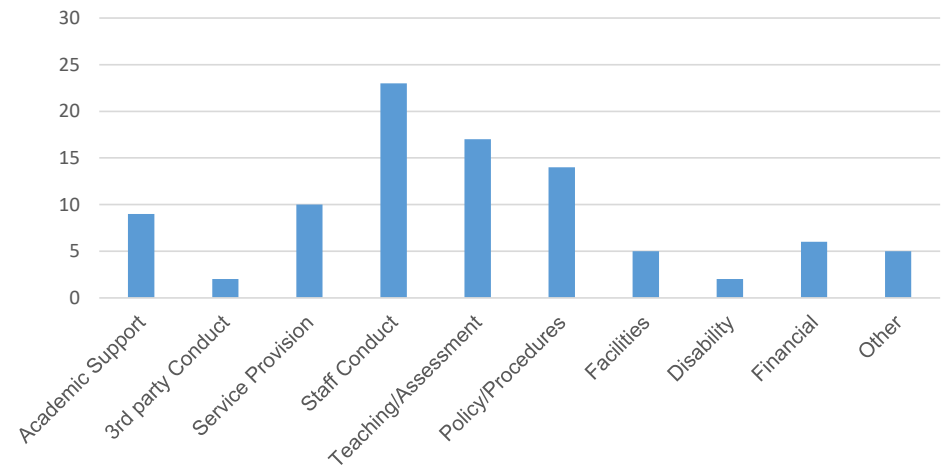
Frontline (Stage 1) - 1 August 2019 to 31 July 2020



Investigation (Stage 2) Outcomes 1 August 2019 to 31 July 2020



Complaints Received by Category 1 August 2019 to 31 July 2020



Learning from Complaints 2019/20 – Examples

Complaint Category	Complainant	Complaint Summary	Outcome	Frontline Learning
University Policy, Procedures or Administration	Applicant for study	Complaint about the time taken for a fee assessment.	Resolved	Discussion ongoing with ISD colleagues to automate part of the process to speed it up.
Financial Issues	Student	Student complained about the process and timeframe for refunds.	Resolved	Explore with Finance methods of shortening the refund process.
Academic Support	Student	The student believes that they were incorrectly informed about the start date of the next year of their course	Partially Upheld	The University webpage be updated to include reference to sources of information for students interested in changing course. School should consider whether it would be appropriate to make Course Handbooks and similar documentation available earlier in the admissions-registration cycle.
Attitude and/or Conduct of a Third Party Contractor	Student	Student was verbally abused by contractor in lift.	Resolved	Contractors will be reminded of the University Dignity and Respect policy
Teaching and/or Assessment	Student	Student complained that there were mistakes in the way Myplace quizzes allocated marks.	Resolved	Academic staff will be made aware of how to set up a Myplae test avoiding this error.
Service Provision	Student	Relating to appointment for Needs Assessment at the Disability & Wellbeing Service.	Resolved	Frontline reception staff will be made aware that when a student/applicant discloses details surrounding their needs these can be logged and support begun prior to meeting with an adviser.
Teaching and/or Assessment	Student	Student taking an exam complained that, although the class was informed via MyPlace which material would not be examinable because it had not been covered during the industrial action, there was no announcement at the start of the exam. Also, a student's mobile phone rang in a different part of the exam hall but none of the invigilators took any action.	Resolved	Instructions to invigilators to be modified to ensure that exams affected by strike action include an announcement at the start of the exam. Staff will also be reminded to deal quickly with issues such as mobile phones ringing and to remind students to have their phones on silent.

ANNEX B

Complaint Category	Complainant	Complaint Summary	Outcome	Frontline Learning
Academic Support	Student	Student was withdrawn from exchange programme at a very late stage having booked and paid for flights and accommodation.	Resolved	Department will review procedures for decision making and check points for students participating in exchange programme.
Teaching and/or Assessment	Student	Group complaint about a module not taught with the seriousness offered in other modules. Assignments too difficult for the skills developed in tutorials, requiring a software knowledge that students did not have. Practical exercises not done in class.	Resolved	Staff involved with the module to hold a teleconference to discuss how the module has progressed and lessons learnt.
Teaching and/or Assessment	Student	Concerns raised about the assessment procedure for a group project.	Resolved	There was already a review of the assessment under way and outcomes will be implemented in 2020/21
University Policy, Procedures or Administration	Student	Complainant alleges International team had wrong credit value logged on their record.	Partially Upheld	The Exchange team added extra process to ensure year-long exchange students have signed up for the correct number of classes.
Staff Attitude and/or Conduct	Student	Student complained that Security staff were not following the correct procedure for out of hours access to buildings.	Not Upheld	Security to review the wording of the Access Policy to make the role of the department, in setting time limits for the use of red cards, clearer.
Service Provision	Student	Complaint regarding communication and support given to a student on exchange during the COVID-19 pandemic.	Not Upheld	Procedures should be developed regarding what will happen when unforeseen circumstances impact the continuation of student exchanges. Guidance should be provided to students going on exchange detailing the support framework in place and the steps that would be taken. Information and guidance should be available on the website.
University Policy, Procedures or Administration	Student	PEGASUS account was taken down prematurely depriving complainant of a vital part of documentation.	Partially Upheld	Clear information should be provided to applicants on when access to their PGR applicant record will be deactivated, how it can be reactivated, when messages in the Pegasus messaging service are automatically removed and instructions on how these can be saved. Applicants should receive alerts prior to deactivation.

SPSO Recommendations and Feedback

During 2019/20, one recommendation was made by the SPSO following complaints raised against the University by an ex-student.

Complaint	Outcome	Recommendation	University Response
Student complained about the conduct of their tutor in meetings and the University's subsequent consideration of this.	Sent back after early assessment for further response from University.	Referred complaint back to the University to provide a more detailed response covering the following points: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reasons for the decision on the complaint; • fuller explanation of whether or not tutor had acted inappropriately; • fuller explanation of how the University assessed or balanced the differing positions of witnesses; • explain the weight given to an independent, third party. 	Outcome letter revised and reissued, within requested timescale, with a letter from the USCO.

The following feedback was provided by the SPSO, following a complaint raised against the University by an ex-student, during 2019/20. These are not formal recommendations and no confirmation to SPSO was required.

Complaint	Outcome	Feedback	University Response
Various concerns raised about Fitness to Practice Procedures (FTP).	No further investigation by SPSO.	The University's complaint response did not specifically address a point made by the complainant. It is good practice for complaint responses to address all the issues raised and the University may want to reflect on their complaint handling in this case.	This was fed back to the investigators. However, it should be noted that the complainant had raised an earlier complaint with the University which had dealt with issues related to this point, therefore this investigation dealt only with the FTP complaint.