**Complaints Handling Procedure**

**Annual Report 2021/22**

**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 significantly from 46% in 2020/21 to 28% in 2021/22. It should be noted that some of these will have been resolved in line with the new definition so definite progress is being made.

**Recording and Reporting**

1. 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
1. Annex A provides key performance information on the volume and types of complaints received during 2021/22 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 2021/22.

**Summary Analysis**

1. The University recorded 112 complaints during the 2021/22 academic year. This is a slight decrease on 2020/21 but is still up on the figure for 2019/20 which was impacted by the national lockdown and closure of the campus. The majority of complaints (84%) 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.
2. Complaints were received across all academic faculties with the biggest faculties of Engineering and HaSS recording the most complaints. Twenty four percent of complaints received were related to areas within Professional Services, predominantly Student Experience.
3. The percentage of complaints closed at frontline was 61%, slightly down on 69% the previous year. The time taken to close frontline complaints fluctuated throughout the year, averaging 5.4 days, only very slightly above the 5 working day target. Fifty nine percent of frontline complaints were closed within the 5 working day target, down slightly from 60% the previous year.
4. Complaints investigated at stage 2 of the procedure were closed within an average of 28.2 days, slightly above the 20 working days target but down from 29 days in 2020/21. This timeframe has always been considered to be very challenging, particularly for complex complaints. This year, the majority of staff have been working remotely for a significant period, 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 three percent of stage 2 complaints were completed within 20 working days and 70% within 30 working days.
5. The most frequent types of complaints recorded were those relating to:
6. Teaching and/or assessment (23%)
7. Service Provision (18%)
8. Staff Attitude and/or Conduct (18%)
9. University Policy, Procedures or Administration (15%)
10. Complaints relating to disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic which included allegations relating to failure to provide a service or the quality of facilities or learning resources were captured in existing categories and have potentially impacted the numbers of complaints relating to teaching and assessment and service provision. Complaints relating to University policy have also been received relating to policy decisions made to comply with Scottish or UK Government guidelines. However, requests for fee reductions or refunds due to changes in delivery necessitated by Government restrictions were classed as requests for compensation only and not recorded as complaints.
11. Lessons learned and actions taken to improve services are recorded following each complaint, where appropriate, and examples of the learning points recorded during 2021/22 are included at Annex B.
12. Staff continue to engage well with the complaints process and work is continuing to encourage a greater focus on frontline resolution. 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, online training has been developed and is available to staff through MyPlace. Training for those investigating complaints was also placed on MyPlace during 2021/22.

**SPSO Recommendations**

1. 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.
2. The SPSO has made no recommendations to the University in the last year but did provide some feedback after one complaint as noted in Annex C.

**Recommendation**

1. Court is invited to **note** the Complaints Handling Annual Report for 2021/22.



**Learning from Complaints 2021/22 – Examples**

| **Complaint Category** | **Complainant** | **Complaint Summary** | **Outcome** | **Learning** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Service Provision | Student | Student card production had not restarted since being put on hold due to COVID19 and there were no updates on current situation with cards.  | Partially Upheld | Webpage would be updated with the most recent information regarding student card production and updated information would be sent to Departments, the Student Helpdesk and Student Union Advice Hub.  |
| Staff Attitude and/or Conduct | Student | Student received an email in which, they believed, an assumption had been made that they were an international student due to their name. | Not Upheld | Consider whether it would be appropriate to give Careers Advisers access to student curriculum details on Pegasus in order that a more personalised response could be offered to students. |
| Reasonable Adjustment/Disability related | Student | Complaint centred around the inability to offer a part-time, flexible placement as a reasonable adjustment to a student with a disability. | Not Upheld | School of Education requested to write formally to GTCS to explore part time/flexible placements and update policy where necessary |
| Service Provision | Student | Library discussion rooms are booked but unoccupied. | Partially Upheld | Review use of discussion room usage by:- asking for customer feedback via a survey or similar- observing room usage to identify the frequency with which rooms are vacant- reviewing the booking reminders sent to customers- investigating the addition of a cancellation function in the app |
| Service Provision | Student | The complainant had a semester abroad as part of their degree requirements which was cancelled by the host institution. They were dissatisfied by the service provided by the exchange team.  | Partially Upheld | Communication will be reviewed to ensure students are kept informed as situations develop, even if solutions are not available/known or finalised.  |
| Financial Issues | Student | Student withdrew, unhappy that semester 1 was online and citing lack of support for mental wellbeing.  | Not Upheld | Programme Teams reminded to flag availability of Student Support Services. Any student contacting the faculty wellbeing team will receive a response redirecting them to their programme team and the University’s student support services regardless of whether any of these services are already copied in. |
| Service Provision | Student | Course advertisement did not inform students of the duration the course was valid for  | Resolved | Information has been added to the course website on the duration that the course is valid for. It will also be added to the student handbook for next year. |
| Staff Attitude and/or Conduct | Student | Student working in a lab was told that he would need to leave as a class was about to begin. The staff member asking him to leave was patronising and cheeky. | Not Upheld | The department will reflect on how communications can be reviewed to avoid a repeat of such situations. |
| Facilities | Member of Public | Following a fire alarm activation at 2.45am and 5am, a local residents association has sent in a complaint to the university | Resolved | Email sent to the residents association advising of remedial actions being undertaken by the university and offering the opportunity of a walk round. |
| Other | Member of Public | Complaint by a member of the public about an abandoned student project on Irvine Beach park. | Resolved | Project supervisors have been reminded to monitor experiments and ensure they are cleared up once finished. |
| University Policy, Procedures or Administration | Student | Complaint centres on a decision not to approve an International Exchange. | Not Upheld | The School intends to implement full written International Exchange guidance to ensure the decision-making strategy is more transparent.  |
| University Policy, Procedures or Administration | Student | The student is complaining about the general timeline of January start programmes. | Resolved | A review of January-start programmes was already in progress, the contents/outcome of this complaint will be fed into the review process.  |
| Reasonable Adjustment/Disability-related | Student | Student dissatisfied with correspondence and approach from disability adviser | Partially Upheld | All reviews, in which significant changes to support for disabled students are likely to be recommended, should be carried out in a meeting format.  |
| Teaching and/or Assessment | Student (or former student) | A student complained that they felt the teaching delivery and support from a member of staff was not good enough.  | Withdrawn by Complainant | An experienced staff member has been assigned to oversee module evaluation to pick up poor responses from staff. |
| Teaching and/or Assessment | Student (or former student) | The teaching received via the tutorial process had been severely disrupted, due to extended periods of staff absence, which left students feeling underprepared and concerned about their ability to complete the dissertation successfully.  | Upheld | The issues highlighted resulted in significant design changes in planning for this class next year. |
| University Policy, Procedures or Administration | Applicant for study | An applicant complained of a lack of guidance, on the website, on the use of specific words in the personal statement element of UCAS applications and that the wording of the outcome correspondence felt harsh and had a negative impact. | Not Upheld | Recommendations1. That the University ascertain if descriptors for rejection codes on the UCAS system can be changed at an institutional level, and if so, these are reviewed and improved within the constraints of the UCAS Admission system.
2. That the Admissions team consider providing additional feedback in the free text box on the UCAS Admissions system when a rejection code is used.
3. That the webpage which details common reasons for unsuccessful applications is expanded to include further information on all rejection codes/descriptors used.
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**ANNEX C**

**SPSO Feedback**

The following feedback was provided by the SPSO, following a complaint raised against the University by an ex-student. These are not formal recommendations and no confirmation to SPSO is required. The Ombudsman expects all organisations to learn from complaints and requests that the findings from its reports be shared throughout the organisation. The learning should be shared with those responsible for the operational delivery of the service as well as the relevant internal and external decision-makers who make up the governance arrangements for the organisation.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Complaint** | **Outcome** | **Feedback** | **University Response** |
| That University dismissed complaint as not in line with the CHP. | No further investigation by SPSO. | The University to ensure that staff are aware of their complaint handling obligations, specifically in terms of timescales for response and providing updates during the complaint handling process. | Timescales, the need to provide updates and the requirement to tell the complainant if their issue will not be handled under the CHP are all included in the guidance and training videos available to all staff on [MyPlace](https://classes.myplace.strath.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=26168).  |