

Complaints Handling Procedure Annual Report 2020/21

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 beginning to be used but, as the revised procedure was only adopted in April 2021, there is still significant use of the “resolved” option at frontline in this report. This is anticipated to change as the revised procedure continues to bed in and as uptake of online training increases.

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 2020/21 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 2020/21.

Summary Analysis

5. The University recorded 122 complaints during the 2020/21 academic year. This is an increase on 2019/20 but is in line with the figure for 2018/19 suggesting that the national lockdown and closure of the campus impacted 2019/20 figures. The majority of complaints (91%) were received from students or former students of the University. The remainder of complaints received were from members of the public and applicants for work or study.
6. 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 Information Services and Student Experience. The Information Services Directorate operates the University library, one of the few areas on campus that was open during a significant part of the pandemic, and the temporary closure of which, along with restrictions when it did open, affected all students.

7. The percentage of complaints closed at frontline was 69%, slightly down on 73% the previous year. The time taken to close frontline complaints fluctuated throughout the year, averaging 6.5 days, only very slightly above the 5 working day target. Sixty percent of frontline complaints were closed within the 5 working day target, down from 70% the previous year.
8. Complaints investigated at stage 2 of the procedure were closed within an average of 29 days, slightly above the 20 working days target but down from 31.7 days in 2019/20. This timeframe has always been considered to be very challenging, particularly for complex complaints. This year, the majority of 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. Thirty six percent of stage 2 complaints were completed within 20 working days and 54% within 30 working days.
9. The most frequent types of complaints recorded were those relating to:
 1. Staff Attitude and/or Conduct (18%)
 2. Teaching and/or assessment (18%)
 3. University Policy, Procedures or Administration (15%)
 4. Service Provision (15%)
10. The University 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.
11. 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. For example, several complaints were received about the restrictions on library opening hours and complaints were received in Engineering from several students who wished to undertake placements or exchanges overseas during a period when overseas travel was restricted.
12. Lessons learned and actions taken to improve services are recorded following each complaint, where appropriate, and examples of the learning points recorded during 2020/21 are included at Annex B.
13. Staff continue to engage well with the complaints process and work is continuing to encourage a greater focus on frontline resolution. During 2020/21 briefing sessions, on the revised CHP, were held online.
14. 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. The training for those investigating complaints was delivered once during 2020/21.

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

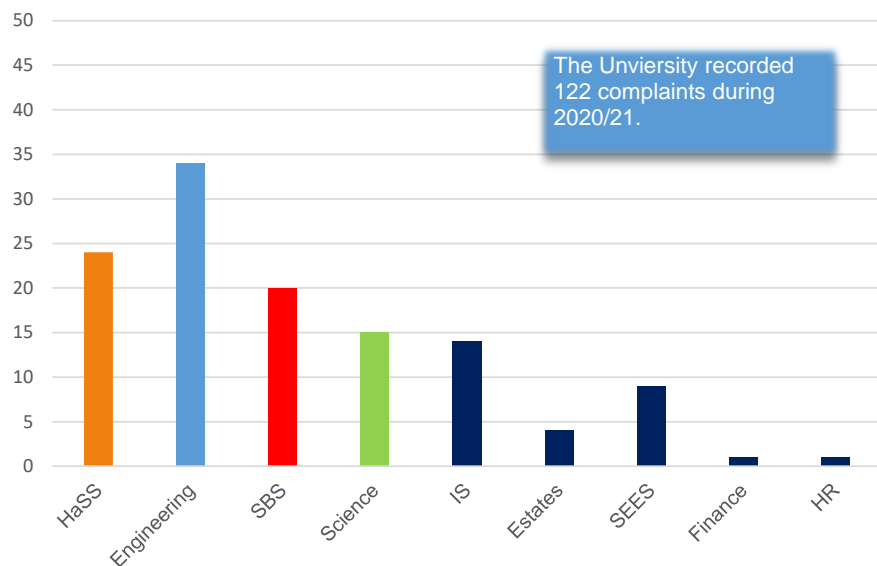
learning and improvement, with those responsible for the operational delivery of the service and across the organisation. It also expects the University to embed learning from complaints in governance structures and to ensure recommendations are shared with the relevant internal and external decision-makers, including members of Court.

16. The SPSO has made no recommendations to the University in the last year.

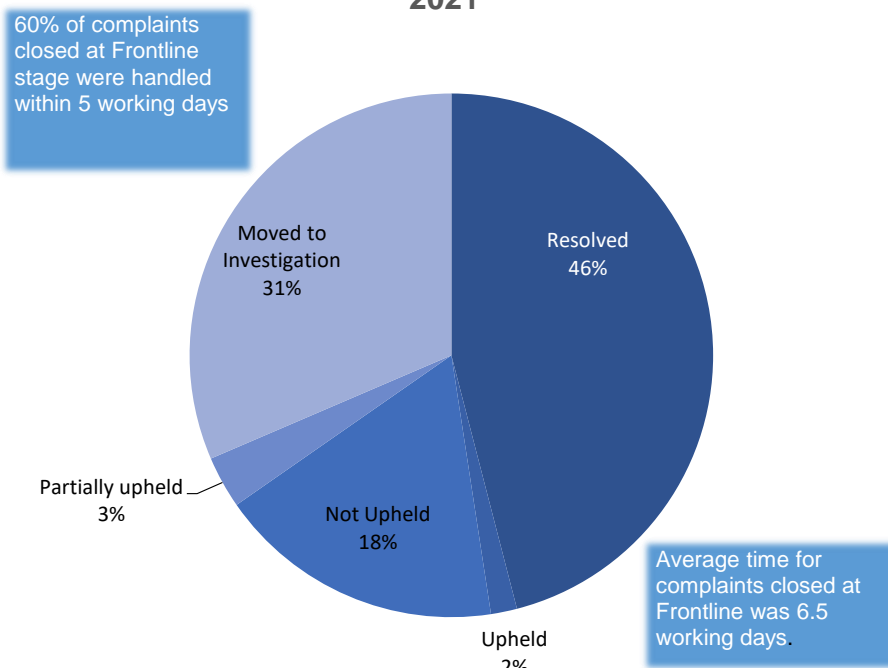
Recommendation

17. Court is invited to **note** the Complaints Handling Annual Report for 2020/21.

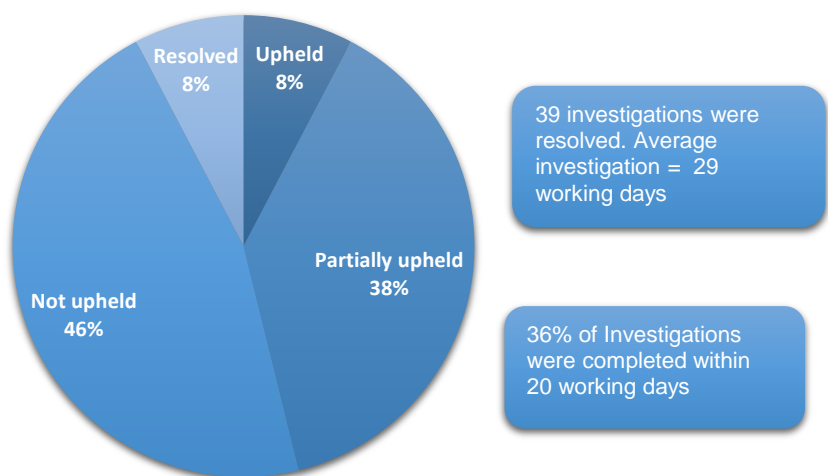
Complaints Received by Area 1 August 2020 to 31 July 2021



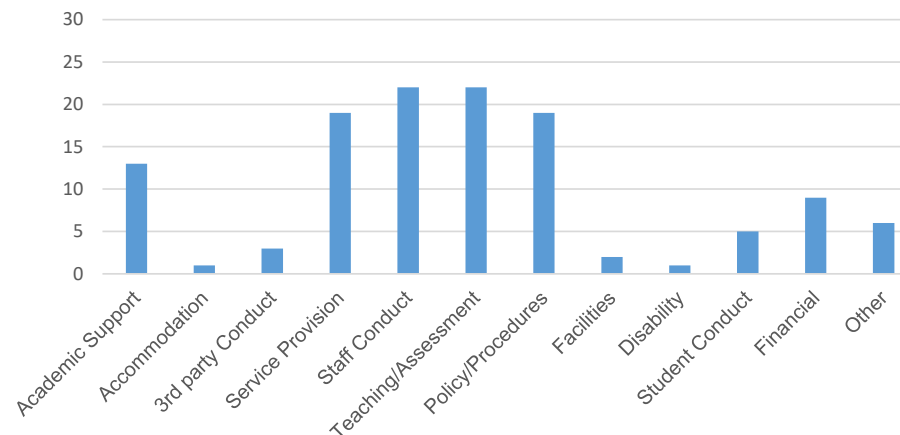
Frontline (Stage 1) - 1 August 2020 to 31 July 2021



Investigation (Stage 2) Outcomes 1 August 2020 to 31 July 2021



Complaints Received by Category 1 August 2020 to 31 July 2021



Learning from Complaints 2020/21 – Examples

Complaint Category	Complainant	Complaint Summary	Outcome	Frontline Learning
Academic Support	Student	PGT student complained that project supervision was poorly supported and communication between supervisor and student inadequate.	Frontline Partially Upheld	Department requested to establish better guidelines for staff and students on level of supervision a student should expect for MSc PGT courses.
Academic Support	Student	Complaint regarding the process and administrative procedures followed in a student dissertation class	Partially Upheld	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Department to ensure all information uploaded on MyPlace is clear and up to date. • Where there is a fail in a substantial piece of coursework external examiners should be asked to review the work prior to the September Board of Examiners.
Staff Attitude and/or Conduct	Applicant for study	Applicant was unsuccessful at interview and at the first stage the following year. Failure to meet the entry criteria was not highlighted the first year.	Not Upheld	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Notes added to applications to outline how credit totals are met; • More robust checking of reasons given for unsuccessful applications. • More detailed feedback to be provided post-interview, if requested; • Detailed interview notes to be kept on file; • Review of the entry criteria to emphasise need for a breadth of subjects; • Enhanced training in the assessment of overseas qualifications.
Staff Attitude and/or Conduct	Student	Complaint that a member of staff approached a student who had temporarily removed their mask and spoke in a rude and disrespectful tone.	Resolved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Library continues to review and adjust internal processes, staff training and messaging in light of any feedback and evidence received.
Reasonable Adjustment/ Disability-related	Student	Complaint regarding Department's inability to resolve issues between student and Supervisor.	Not Upheld	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review portfolio of Researcher Development courses to ensure coverage of topics around managing supervisory relationships including conflict; • Develop a toolkit/guidance on managing conflict in supervisory relationships and signposting to further support and training; • Consider an independent arbitration process for when a change of supervisor request is not granted.
Facilities	Student	Complaint regarding maintenance work being conducted during the library opening hours. Request information regarding maintenance work and disruptions and when works can be expected to be finalised.	Resolved	Publicising essential maintenance work in the Library via website, social media and digital signage.

ANNEX B

Complaint Category	Complainant	Complaint Summary	Outcome	Frontline Learning
University Policy, Procedures or Administration	Student	The complainant believed that procedures were not followed in a case of academic dishonesty.	Resolved	The Department has instigated a new standard approach to communicating with students when dealing with a case of academic dishonesty.
Academic Support	Student	Complaint regarding quality of feedback on assignments, assignment too challenging, insufficient support and feedback was too harsh.	Moved to Investigation Stage	Course Team will ensure that there is some individual form of feedback fed into the question next year and that feedback sheets are suitably amended. There will be a longer gap between the two assessments.
University Policy, Procedures or Administration	Applicant for study	Applicant's previous study initially deemed acceptable proof of language ability. Subsequently a further HE Assessment was required. Applicant complained about the duplication in the process.	Resolved	A review of checking off English language conditions to be undertaken.
Staff Attitude and/or Conduct	Student	Attitude of Library staff when dealing with customer non-compliant behaviour relating to the COVID control rules.	Not Upheld	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Library to confirm widespread publicity of Covid-19 measures. Recommend restrictions on Annex rooms be retained and the feasibility of more regular changing of the access code to restricted rooms be considered.
Other	Student	Student complained that the department withheld their PhD award despite revisions being completed and that Academic staff were utilising student's IP without agreement.	Partially Upheld	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arrange for PhD award to be released to enable student to graduate as planned. Ensure that all PGR students have valid Data Management Plans in place and are fully aware of their obligations in relation to IP.
University Policy, Procedures or Administration	Student	<p>Delay in provision of paper graduation certificate.</p> <p>Accommodation service handling of issues with another resident</p>	Partially Upheld	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The production of paper certificates should be an operational priority in the graduation period and, if necessary, additional staff employed/re-deployed to assist. Option of a paid courier delivery could be made more prominent on web pages. Accommodation Services to consult with appropriate colleagues to develop a clearer process for dealing with such circumstances in line with the Student Discipline Procedure and Data Protection regulations.