

Complaints Handling Procedure Annual Report 2024/25

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. The percentage of frontline complaints recorded as “resolved” has dropped 21% in 2023/24 to 12% in 2024/25.

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. The new Complaints Sharepoint was launched on 1 February 2024 and allows staff to log complaints directly at Stage 2 as well as making it easier to manage complaints through their cycle.
5. Annex A provides key performance information on the volume and types of complaints received during 2024/25 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 2024/25.

Summary Analysis

6. The University recorded 138 complaints during the 2024/25 academic year which is an increase of 28% in comparison 2023/24. Of the 138 complaints, 127 were logged at the frontline and 11 dealt with directly at investigation.
7. The majority of complaints (87%) were received from students at the University, which was a one percent decrease from 2023/24. The remainder of complaints received were from members of the public, applicants for study and anonymous complaints, the latter of which saw five complaints logged anonymously, up from one in 2023/24.
8. Complaints were received across all academic Faculties with the Engineering and HaSS accounting for 67% of complaints received, an increase of 4% compared with last year. The

remaining complaints were spread around Faculty and Professional Services with the number of complaints within the Strathclyde Business School (SBS) increasing from 13 to 28.

9. The SBS complaints were received across numerous departments with most concerning teaching and/or assessment and academic support which mirrored the main themes across the University.
10. The below table breaks down the total number of complaints received this year and the previous year for each faculty.

Faculty	2024/25	2023/24	Change
HAAS	44	34	+10
Engineering	35	34	+1
Business	28	13	+15
Science	11	14	-3
Total	118	95	+23

11. The percentage of complaints closed at frontline was 77%, down from 82% in 2023/24. The time taken to close frontline complaints fluctuated throughout the year, averaging 8.5 days, which is an increase from 8.2 days in 2023/24. 46% percent of frontline complaints were closed within the 5 working day target, down from 52% in 2023/24.
12. Complaints investigated at stage 2 of the procedure were closed within an average of 47.4 days, an increase on the 2023/24 average of 37.5 days. This timeframe has always been considered to be very challenging, particularly for complex complaints, which we saw an increase in this year.
13. 25% of complaints were completed within 20 working days, up from 15% in 2023/24.
14. The number of investigations increased from 35 in 2023/24 to 40 this year. Although a small increase, Faculty's are reporting more complex complaints which are taking up more time and are taking longer to respond to, as highlighted in point 12. In order to try and address this, the Legal Services team are providing support for complaints where there has been;
 - Allegations of the University failing in its duty of care;
 - Allegations of discrimination on the part of the University;
 - Requests for compensation.
15. 11 of the Stage 2 complaints were escalated directly by the University to Stage 2 and this is the first year in which we have been able to record this information. 29 complaints were escalated by the complainant following the Stage 1 outcome. This accounts for 22% of frontline complaints being escalated compared to 16% in the previous year
16. The most frequent types of complaints recorded were those relating to:
 1. Teaching and/or assessment(20%)
 2. Staff Attitude and/or Conduct (17%)
 3. Academic Support (11%)
 4. Service Provision & Financial (9%)
17. Teaching and/or assessment was the main category of complaints recorded for 2024/25. Both this and staff attitude and/or conduct continue to be the most cited reason for complaints. The vast majority of these relate to feedback, marking and students issues with the courses. This is not totally unexpected in the context of students becoming more aware

of what they deem to be acceptable behaviour in 2025 as well as a shift to more consumer like behaviour.

18. Complaints were spread evenly across the other categories although we did record a significant rise for complaints that cited financial reasons as the main issue. These mainly covered fees, both in the respect of increase in tuition fees and the University pursuing outstanding fee's, with the latter accounting for nearly 33% of Finance complaints.
19. Lessons learned and actions taken to improve services are recorded following each complaint, where appropriate, and examples of the learning points recorded during 2024/25 are included at Annex B.
20. Staff continue to engage well with the complaints process and work is continuing to encourage a greater focus on frontline resolution. Investigation Skills Training will be delivered this year and will target new investigators so as to ensure investigations are being spread across the relevant grades within Faculty's. A new complaints group has been set up with the Faculty's and Legal Services and at present meets twice a year to discuss ongoing trends, particularly in the context of complaints becoming more complex.

SPSO Enquiries and Recommendations

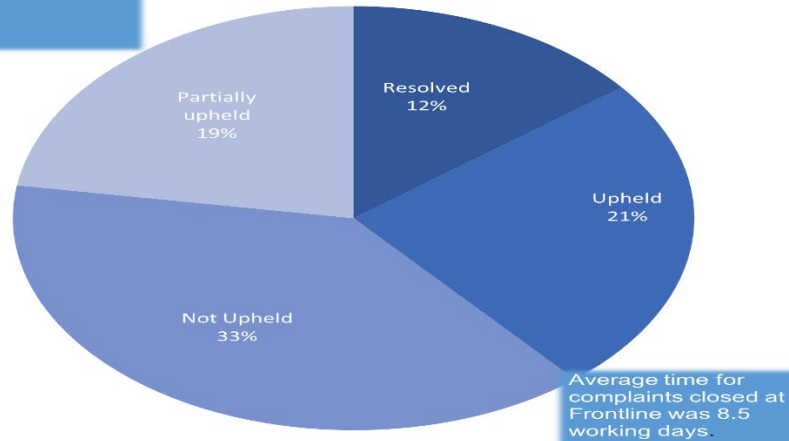
21. The SPSO approach to recommendations focuses on better outcomes in relation to services as well as for individuals. SPSO expects organisations to share their findings, to enable learning and improvement, with those responsible for the operational delivery of the service and across the organisation. 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.
22. The SPSO did conduct seven initial enquiries in relation to complaints against the University and in each instance the University was found to have acted reasonably, and no formal investigation was triggered.
23. As a result of the initial enquiries, one recommendation was made to the University to make clear in scholarship offer letters that there may be a funding gap if a students thesis is not submitted within 3 years.

Recommendation

24. Court is invited to **note** the Complaints Handling Annual Report for 2024/25.

Frontline (Stage 1) - 1 August 2024 to 31 July 2025

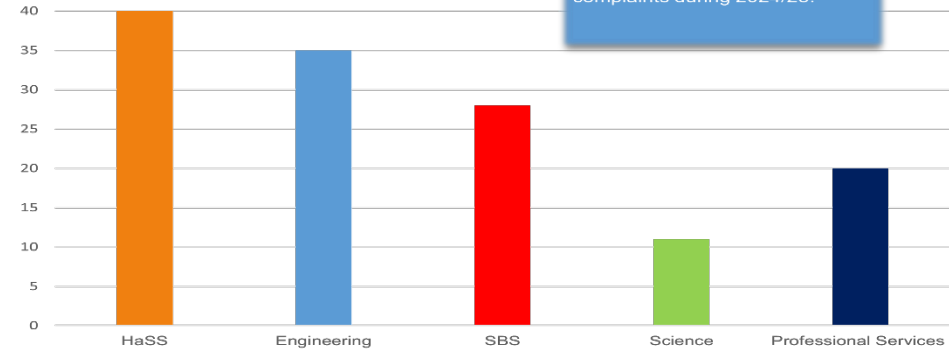
46% of complaints closed at Frontline stage were handled within 5 working days



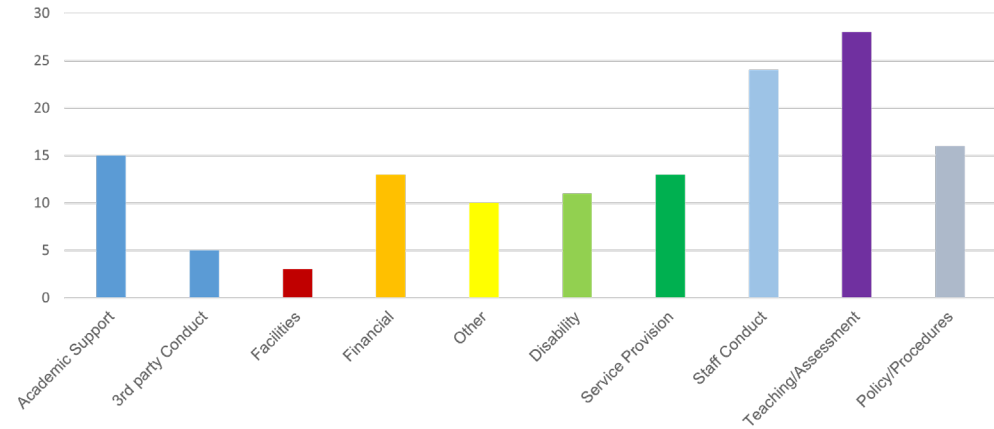
Average time for complaints closed at Frontline was 8.5 working days.

Complaints Received by Area 1 August 2024 to 31 July 2025

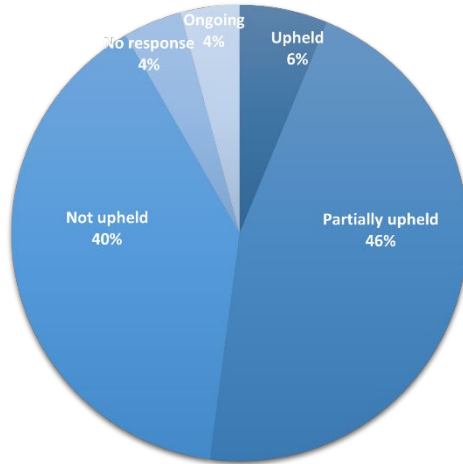
The University recorded 138 complaints during 2024/25.



Complaints Received by Category 1 August 2024 to 31 July 2025

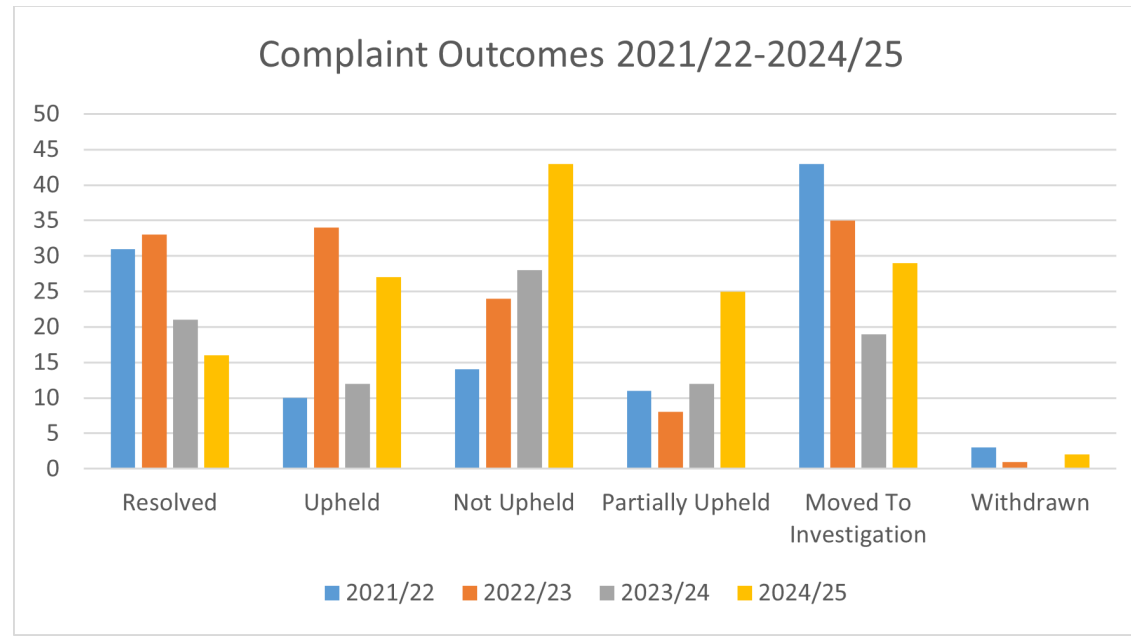
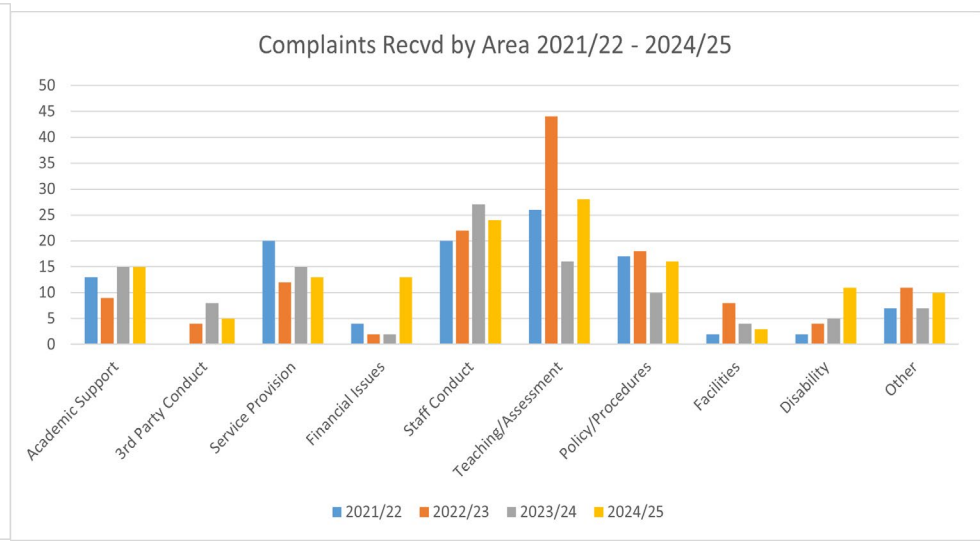
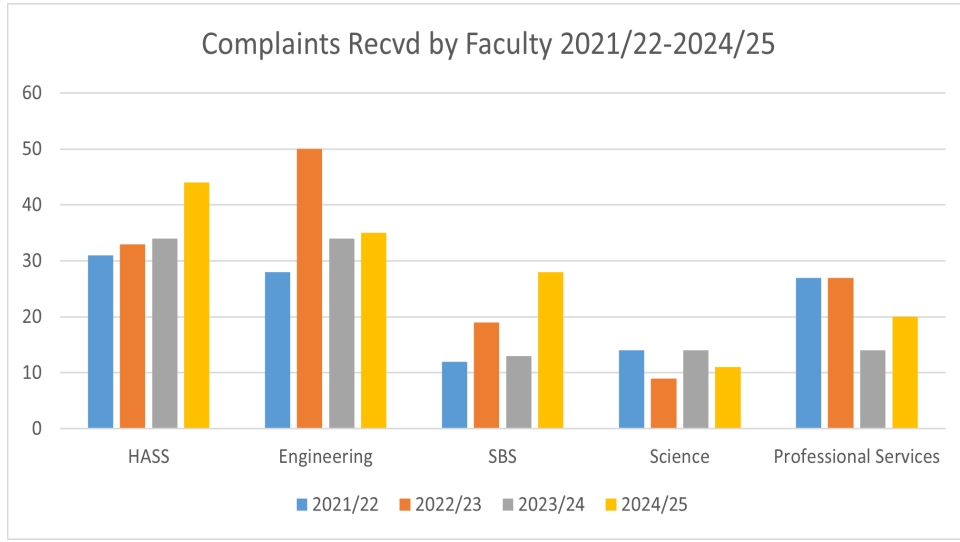


Investigation (Stage 2) Outcomes 1 August 2024 to 31 July 2025



44 investigations were completed throughout the year with an average response time of 47.4 working days.

25% of Investigations were completed within 20 working days



Learning from Complaints 2024/25 – Examples

ANNEX C

Complaint Category	Complainant	Complaint Summary	Outcome	Learning
University Policies and/or Procedures	Applicant for Study	Complaint received about the potential transfer from another University to Strathclyde	Withdrawn	The Initial complaint was received via email from a relative of the applicant, and not the actual applicant. Once contact was made with the applicant, it was established that they did not want to make a complaint. Teams must ensure they are speaking with the individual who is complaining. If someone is complaining on their behalf, then the University must seek the relevant permissions from the complainant to for someone to act on their behalf.
Reasonable Adjustment/Disability Related	Student/or Former Student	Complaint from student undertaking the MSc within the Centre for Lifelong Learning (CLL) about lack of student support from CLL team and central Disability Services.	Partially Upheld	The CLL should review provision for supporting disabled students to ensure that all staff members are aware of how to access advice from a designated disability contact person. If adjustments are put in place over and above those indicated in provisional adjustment recommendations from D&W, we recommend that these be immediately communicated to the student concerned. We recommend that a review also considers whether additional support should be provided specifically to distance learning students.
Other	Student/or Former Student	Complainant raised concerns about accessing information in relation to the possibility of studying abroad as well as the assessment and feedback in concerning two modules of study and communication of the degree classifications.	Partially Upheld	Information relating to studying abroad was out of date. There must be regular checks to ensure the information on MyPlace is up to date. With regards to assessment and feedback, anything provided verbally should be followed up formally either via email or on MyPlace.
Staff Attitude and/or Conduct	Student	Unhappy with an interaction they had with the student helpdesk	Upheld	Ensure that all new helpdesk staff receive training to better handle a range of situations, including those involving sensitive issues. To strengthen links between the Student Experience Helpdesk and the Disability and Wellbeing Service to improve access to support and ensure staff can provide accurate advice or signposting.

Service Provision	Student	A delay in making reasonable adjustments and when the student tried to contact Disability and Wellbeing to chase this up, they had difficulty contacting them.	Upheld	A review of the provisional adjustment process took place, and a further review of temporary administration cover would take place and would include looking at increasing telephone cover capacity.
Service Provision and Teaching and/or assessment	Student	Complaint was from a distance learning student about the late access they were given to module content and that some of the content was out of date.	Partially Upheld	Implement adequate succession planning for staff taking over as class registrar or delivering new classes. • This approach will help mitigate stress for staff and ensure optimal delivery for students. • Identify key staff members and clearly define their roles and responsibilities. • Create a supportive environment for staff. • Provide and signpost training opportunities for staff regarding class design and delivery on MyPlace.
Service Provision and Reasonable Adjustment	Student	Complaint centred around a lack of support and Disability and Wellbeing in making adjustments for the students learning.	Partially Upheld	Recommended that the department should review provision for supporting disabled students to ensure that all staff members are aware of how to access advice from a designated disability contact person. If adjustments are put in place over and above those indicated in provisional adjustment recommendations from D&W, we recommend that these be immediately communicated to the student concerned. It was also recommended that a review considers whether additional support should be provided specifically to distance learning students.
Other	Student	The complainant was unhappy at changes to the curriculum.	Partially Upheld	The Faculty will work with Departments and the Faculty Academic Committee to ensure that appropriate and timely communication regarding curriculum changes takes place going forward. When making curriculum changes in the future, the Investigators would recommend that the Department ensures that discussions re: curriculum amendments are formally recorded (e.g. meeting notes and emails to Externals/Professional bodies).
Staff Attitude and/or Conduct	Student	Student is unhappy with the outcome of their PhD viva, citing inadequate supervisory support in the period leading up to the viva.	Partially Upheld	The Department should review their PGR monitoring processes to ensure that all PGR students and supervisors are aware of their responsibilities regarding PGR progress reviews and that these are signed off in a timely manner, as per the University Policy and Code of Practice for Postgraduate Research Study

				The Faculty should review communications to supervisors and staff regarding the purpose of the PGR reviews and how they relate to progress and submission.
Service Provisions and Reasonable Adjustment/Disability Related	Student	Student had complained that they did not get a timely response from the Disability Service about their request for support with their exams.	Partially Upheld	Disability & Wellbeing has developed clearer protocols to ensure that when a student discloses a disability but does not complete the necessary referral process, a more proactive approach is taken, and students are contacted to ensure they complete all the relevant information.
Service Provision	Student	Complainant alleges inadequacy of supervision as one of their Strathclyde supervisors left the University in 2018. Complaint was submitted as an appeal, but appeal was paused as per policy to investigate this element.	Upheld	The Faculty will ensure that all PGR students and supervisors are aware of their responsibilities regarding PGR progress reviews as per the University Policy and Code of Practice for Postgraduate Research Study.