

Complaints Handling Procedure Annual Report 2016-17

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/ps/strategyandpolicy/ComplaintsHandlingProcedure.pdf>

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 resolved
 - 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 2016/17 and on the resolution times achieved. It also 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 2016/17. In parallel with the introduction of the CHP in 2013, the University implemented a central recording system enabling the monitoring of complaint handling across the University and the production of statistical reports.

Summary Analysis

5. The University has recorded 64 complaints since the start of the 2016/17 academic year on 1 August 2016. The majority of complaints (81%) were received from students or former students of the University. The remainder of complaints received were from members of the public and prospective applicants.
6. Complaints were received across all academic faculties with the University's two largest faculties, Humanities and Social Sciences and Engineering, each accounting for 31% of total complaints. 17% of complaints received were related to areas within Professional Services, predominantly Estates Services and Student Experience and Enhancement Services.
7. The percentage of complaints resolved at frontline improved throughout the year, with a total of 58% across the period, a significant improvement on the previous year. The relatively high percentage of complaints escalated to the investigation stage in previous years had been noted and the decrease this session would suggest that recent efforts to increase frontline resolution are having a positive impact. Work to maintain this trend will continue during 2017/18.

8. The time taken to resolve frontline complaints fluctuated throughout the year, averaging 7 days, slightly above the 5 working day target. This represents a slight increase on the previous year's figure. However, it is likely that the increased emphasis on frontline resolution and the resulting increase in the number of complaints dealt with at frontline has had an impact here. Indeed, three frontline complaints were identified which may have been more appropriately escalated to stage 2. Discounting those three complaints brings the average resolution time down to 5.1 days, with 74% resolved within the target.
9. Complaints investigated at stage 2 of the procedure were resolved within an average of 24.8 days, slightly above the 20 working days required, which is consistent with the previous year's performance. This resolution timeframe has always been considered to be very challenging, particularly for complex complaints. Nonetheless, 50% of stage 2 complaints were resolved within 20 working days.
10. The most frequent types of complaints recorded were those relating to:
 1. Staff Attitude and/or Conduct (27%)
 2. Academic Support (17%)
 3. Teaching and/or assessment (16%)
11. Lessons learned and actions taken to improve services are recorded following each complaint, where appropriate, and examples of the learning points recorded during 2016/17 are included at **Annex B**.
12. Staff continue to engage well with the complaints process and recent work to encourage a greater focus on frontline resolution is beginning to bear fruit, demonstrated by the increase noted at paragraph 7, above. This has perhaps driven an increase in the average frontline resolution time and supporting staff in identifying which complaints are appropriate for frontline resolution and which are likely to require more detailed investigation will be an additional area of focus in the coming year.

SPSO Recommendations

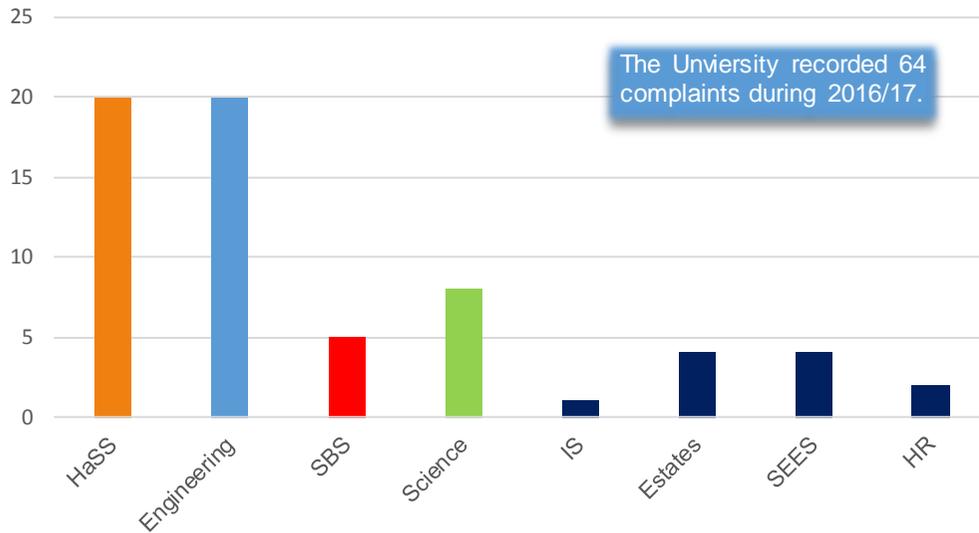
13. The SPSO has introduced a new approach to recommendations with the aim of increasing their impact and effectiveness. This approach focuses on better outcomes in relation to services as well as for individuals. SPSO expects organisations to share their findings to enable learning and improvement across the organisation and to embed learning from complaints in governance structures to ensure recommendations are shared with the relevant internal and external decision-makers, including members of Court.
14. The SPSO has made several recommendations to the University in the last year, following investigations into complaints raised by 2 former students. **Annex C** contains details of the SPSO's recommendations and the action taken in response. Recommendations from the SPSO along with follow up actions, where appropriate, are reported to Executive Team quarterly.

Recommendation

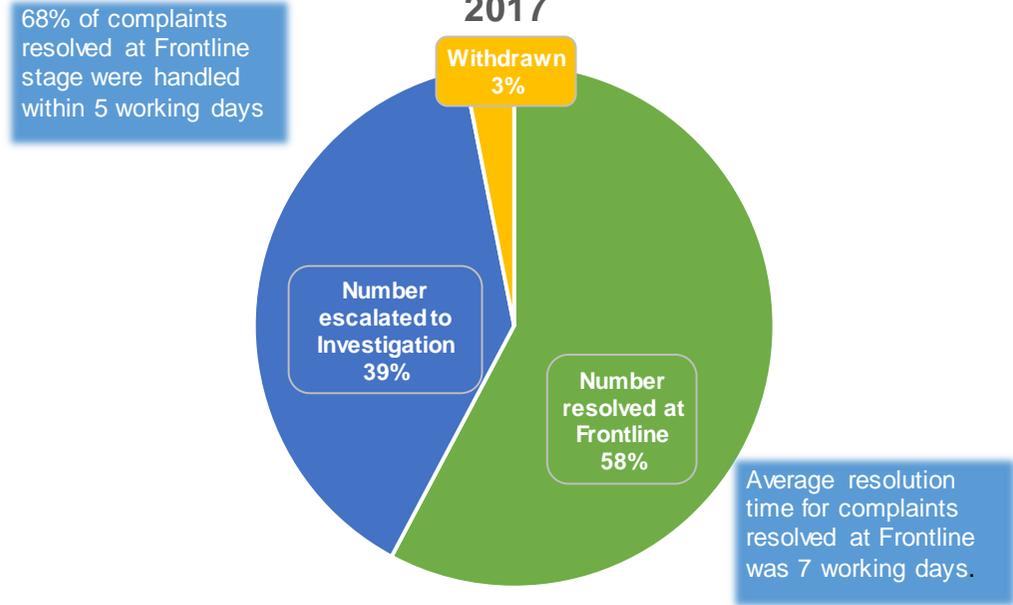
15. Court is invited to **note** the Complaints Handling Annual Report for 2016-17.

Complaints Recorded 2016-17

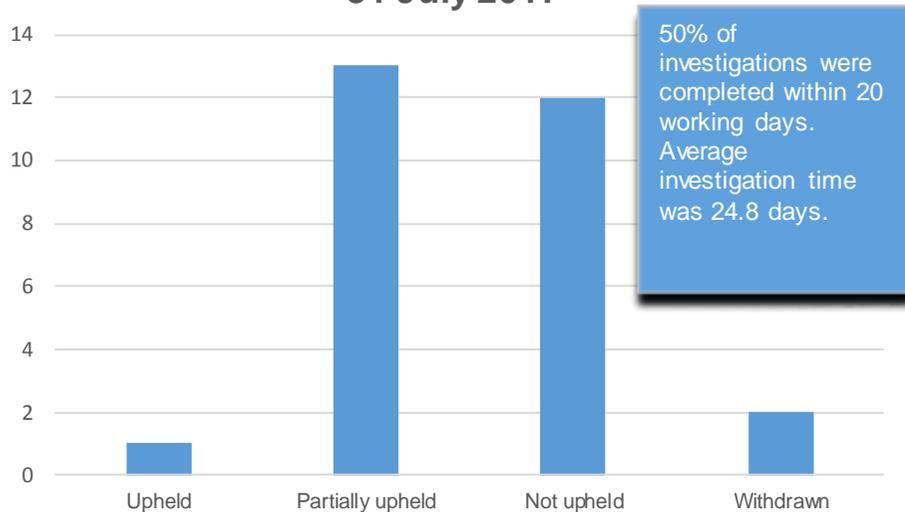
Complaints Received by Area 1 August 2016 to 31 July 2017



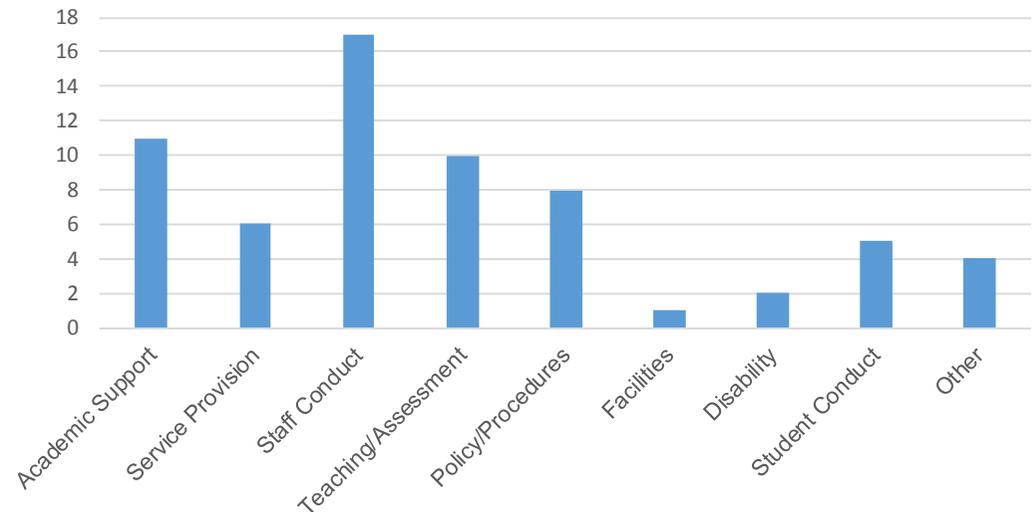
Frontline (Stage 1) - 1 August 2016 to 31 July 2017



Investigations (Stage 2) 1 August 2016 - 31 July 2017



Complaints Received by Category 1 August 2016 to 31 July 2017



Learning from Complaints 2016/17 – Examples

Complaint Category	Complainant	Complaint	Outcome	Actions
Reasonable Adjustment/Disability-related	Student	Identified adjustments not in place at start of course.	Partially Upheld	A procedure will be put in place to clarify who is responsible for ensuring an item or alteration is available once identified by Disability Services.
Staff Attitude and/or Conduct	Student	Student Rep expressed concerns about inconsistent practices and treatment of students in the Department workshop.	Resolved at Frontline	Workshop is now being relocated to the James Weir Building. Department will continue to monitor staff performance in this area.
Other	Student	Complainant has an issue with an advert posted on Myplace for a Student Vegan Society event.	Resolved at Frontline	Procedures around editorial decisions of this sort are being developed in conjunction with the Corporate Communications team.
Staff Attitude and/or Conduct	Student	Student complained about another user of the facility and their attitude towards them.	Resolved at Frontline	Staffing in this area is being reviewed and workshops have been introduced to educate users.
Service Provision	Applicant for employment	The complainant submitted a CV as part of the Global Talent Attraction Platform and was not satisfied with the response and the process.	Partially Upheld	Executive Deans will give a more detailed explanation to potential candidates when they have determined that strategic alignment is lacking.
Academic Support	Student	Student writing up PhD was told they were not entitled to supervision.	Partially Upheld	Faculty guidance to be in place for 2017/18. The University is taking this forward through the relevant committees to ensure policies are adjusted to make explicit what writing-up students are entitled to.
Reasonable Adjustment/Disability-related	Applicant for study	An attendee at the Science at Strathclyde event indicated on their registration that they had limited mobility. This was not followed up and the event was difficult for the attendee.	Resolved at Frontline	Procedures have been updated for this event to ensure special requirements are reviewed prior to the event. As registrations are received, special requirements will be highlighted and acted on. This will be rolled out across all Faculty events.
Staff Attitude and/or Conduct	Student	Included in a complaint regarding assessment criteria and procedures, was an allegation that a tutor used offensive language when discussing a student's project.	Resolved at Frontline	All staff will be reminded to conduct themselves in a professional manner and the Department will monitor this.

ANNEX B

Complaint Category	Complainant	Complaint	Outcome	Actions
Service Provision	Student	Student was disappointed with the lack of tutor support on the online course 'Using Technology in your Family History Research'. Student stated that student questions were not being answered.	Resolved at Frontline	Improved processes for communicating with students across online classes when a tutor is absent. The Department will examine ways to manage student expectations of tutor input
Other	Student	Complaint about an administration error between the department and university central graduation services which adversely affected the student's graduation.	Resolved at Frontline	The Department and Faculty will develop a checking process at exam boards to capture students applying for graduation to ensure they match up with exam board records of degrees awarded.
University Policy, Procedures or Administration	Student	Failure of the University to follow the proper process for Stage 1 Disciplinary Procedure. Inappropriate behaviour of staff members.	Partially Upheld	The Student Discipline Procedure is under review and will be updated to strengthen the guidance that students can be accompanied to all meetings. Training information for Stage 1 Disciplinary officers is currently being developed.
Academic Support	Student	The standard of teaching and educational support offered by an academic member of staff was below the standard expected. The complainant lists lack of professionalism, minimal preparation for teaching, insufficient feedback and disregard for assessment as areas of concern.	Partially Upheld	The School will review the appropriate policy and ensure that staff-student meetings are held early enough in the semester to allow issues to be addressed. Timing of assessments will be reviewed to ensure fit with the new teaching schedule. Course documentation will also be reviewed to include clear guidance on assessments and feedback.

SPSO Recommendations

During 2016/17, the following recommendations were made by the SPSO following investigation into complaints raised against the University by 2 former students.

Complaint	Outcome	Recommendation	University Response
The University failed to follow the proper process/procedure in relation to the appointment of examiners for a PhD viva.	Upheld	Apologise to the complainant for failing to follow the procedures in approving the examining committee and for the delay in identifying this error.	Apology sent on 3 November 2016.
The University delayed unreasonably in appointing an external examiner.	Upheld	Put in place processes to ensure that the availability of a fully approved examining committee is checked promptly when a thesis is submitted, to avoid delays in identifying any problems.	The University's Policy and Code of Practice on Postgraduate Research Study and the External Examiners Guide to a PGR Committee have been amended to ensure that checks are made on the approval of a full examining committee prior to the submission of a thesis. The nomination form has also been amended to reflect the changes and to ensure there is space for all the required members of the committee to be recorded on the same form.
The University failed to follow the proper process/procedure as it did not actively consult the two supervisors at the Faculty appeal stage and did not take their views into account in reaching the decision on the appeal.	Not Upheld	Review the response to the Senate appeal in light of the inaccuracies identified, to ensure that the overall decision not to hear the appeal was appropriate.	A Deputy Associate Principal reviewed the appeal to Senate and concluded that the University's decision regarding the appeal was appropriate.
The student was not given an adequate opportunity to defend the design of "study 3" in the PhD viva.	Not Upheld	The SPSO suggested that the University may wish to introduce a requirement for notes to be taken during PhD vivas, to ensure there is a contemporaneous record of the topics discussed and timing of the examination and breaks.	Although this was not an official recommendation from the SPSO , it has been incorporated into the amendments of the Policy and Code of Practice on Postgraduate Research Study and the External Examiners Guide to a PGR Committee.
The university unreasonably failed to make the complainant aware of an examiners' rule	Upheld	The university provide evidence to the SPSO confirming they have taken steps to ensure that students are notified of the examiners' rule in future.	The University had already updated its communications with students to cover this and provided the relevant documentation to SPSO.