

Complaints Handling Procedure Annual Report 2017/18

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 2017/18 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 2017/18. 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 recorded 132 complaints during the 2017/18 academic year. This is a significant increase on 2016/17 and is considered a positive development as there were concerns that the low overall number of complaints (compared with similar sized competitors) was due more to under recording than service quality. Work has therefore been ongoing during session 2017/18 to increase awareness and recording of frontline complaints as noted at paragraph 9 below. The majority of complaints (88%) 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 largest faculty, Humanities and Social Sciences accounting for 49% of total complaints. Eleven percent of complaints received were related to areas within Professional Services, predominantly Student Experience and Enhancement Services.
7. The percentage of complaints resolved at frontline varied throughout the year, with a total of 63% across the period, a 5% 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 over the last two sessions would suggest that efforts to increase frontline resolution are having a positive impact. Work to maintain this trend will continue during 2018/19.

8. The time taken to resolve frontline complaints fluctuated throughout the year, averaging 7.3 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 increase in the number of complaints dealt with at frontline has had an impact here. Sixty five percent of frontline complaints were resolved within the 5 working day target.
9. During the early part of 2018, the role of Complaints Champion began to be rolled out across the faculties to provide support for staff in handling and recording frontline complaints. This initiative was implemented to enhance practice in complaints handling and recording, raise awareness of the categories of complaints and recording requirements and provide support to staff in how complaints should be handled and by whom. Indications suggest that the introduction of this 'champion' role is having a positive influence as the number of complaints recorded has increased significantly. However, it is to be expected that this would impact resolution times in the early period of implementation.
10. Complaint volumes, escalation to investigation and resolution times in the third and fourth quarters of 2017/18 were also affected by the industrial action which took place during March 2018 prompting 16 recorded complaints. Nine of these complaints required further investigation into the direct effect on the individual involved impacting on the movement of complaints to Stage 2 of the procedure. Many of the strike related complaints were not made direct to Departments or Faculties or were made or forwarded to staff who were out of the University. This meant that there was a delay in responding to these complaints, adversely affecting the timescales for frontline resolution and increasing the likelihood of dissatisfied complainants requesting a stage 2 investigation.
11. Complaints investigated at stage 2 of the procedure were resolved within an average of 28.7 days, slightly above the 20 working days required. This resolution timeframe has always been considered to be very challenging, particularly for complex complaints. The 20% of investigations which involved correspondence with third parties such as contractors or placement providers, particularly school placement complaints received at the commencement of the school summer closure, has had a significant impact on investigation timescales. Nonetheless, 44% of stage 2 complaints were completed within 20 working days.
12. The most frequent types of complaints recorded were those relating to:
 1. Teaching and/or assessment (19%)
 2. Service Provision (19%)
 3. Staff Attitude and/or Conduct (17%)
13. Lessons learned and actions taken to improve services are recorded following each complaint, where appropriate, and examples of the learning points recorded during 2017/18 are included at **Annex B**.
14. Staff continue to engage well with the complaints process and 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 a continued area of focus in the coming year.

SPSO Recommendations

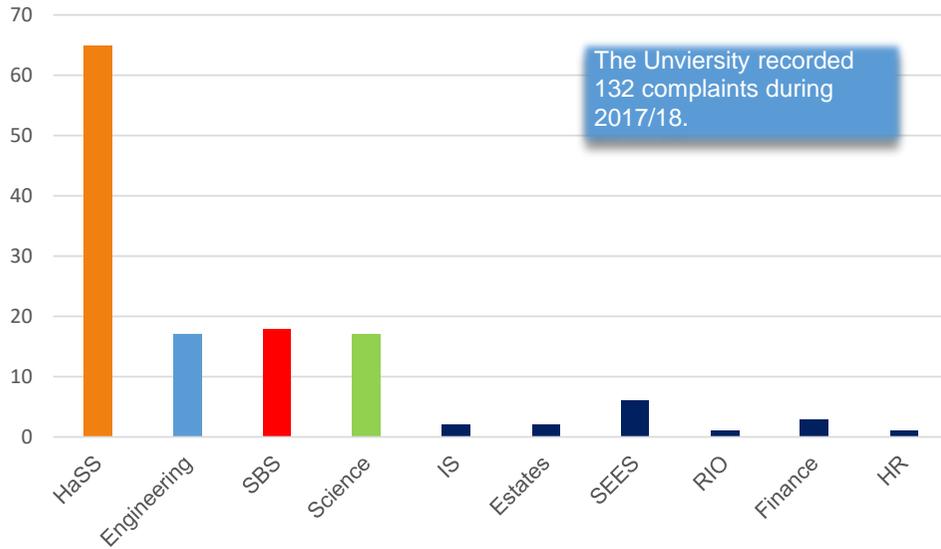
15. The SPSO introduced a new approach to recommendations in 2016/17 with the aim of increasing their impact and effectiveness. This approach focuses on better outcomes in relation to services as well as for individuals. SPSO expects organisations to share their findings to enable learning and improvement 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.
16. The SPSO has made one recommendation and given feedback 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 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

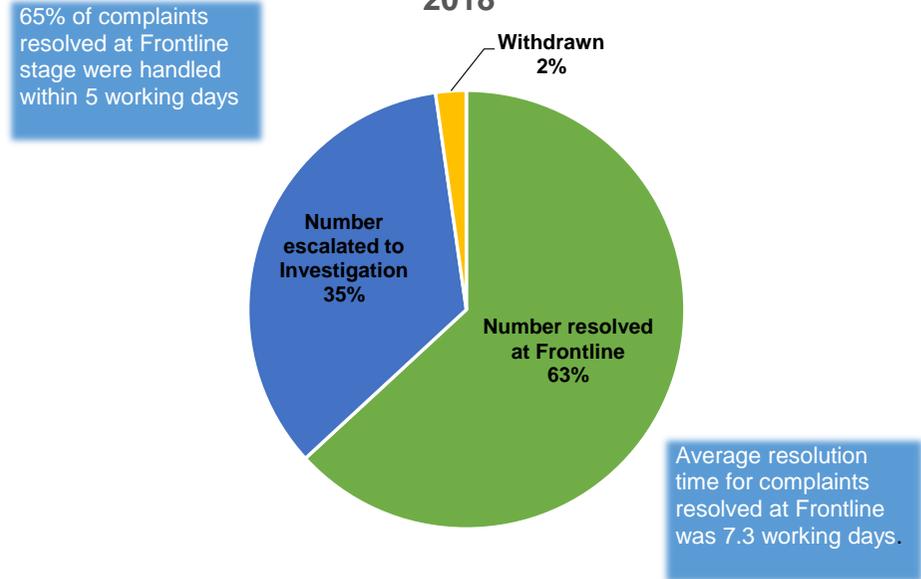
17. Court is invited to **note** the Complaints Handling Annual Report for 2017/18.

Complaints Recorded 2017/18

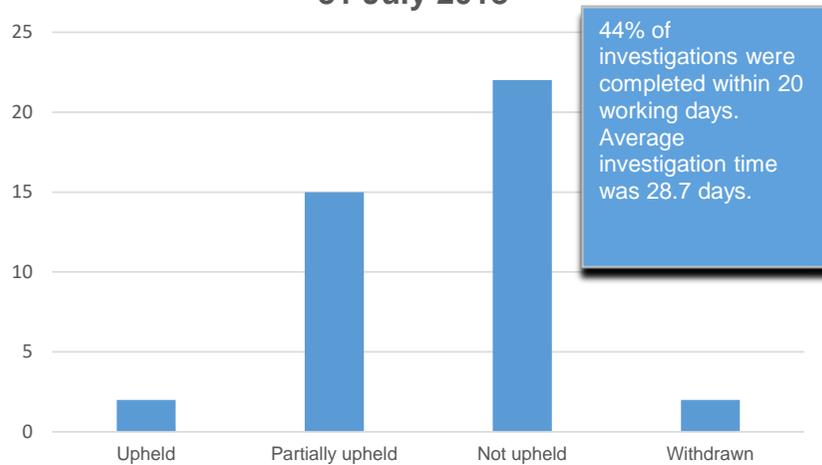
Complaints Received by Area 1 August 2017 to 31 July 2018



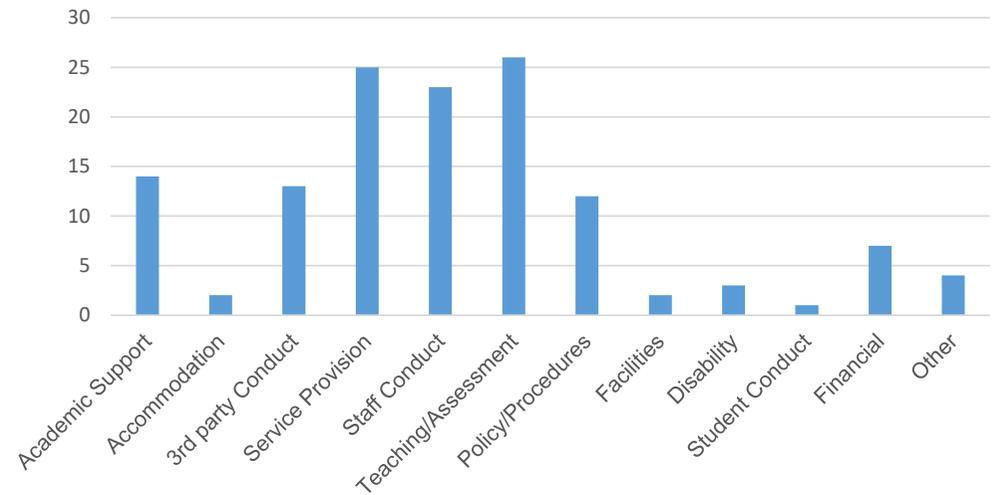
Frontline (Stage 1) - 1 August 2017 to 31 July 2018



Investigations (Stage 2) 1 August 2017 - 31 July 2018



Complaints Received by Category 1 August 2017 to 31 July 2018



Learning from Complaints 2017/18 – Examples

Complaint Category	Complainant	Complaint	Outcome	Actions
University Policy, Procedures or Administration	Student	Delay in approval and publication of August result/progress decision impacted on registration for new academic year.	Resolved at Frontline	Identify alternative members of staff to action formal approvals in the absence of VDA.
University Policy, Procedures or Administration	Student	A complaint was made about the non-funding of a distance learning course and the way in which notification of same was handled.	Resolved at Frontline	Student Business Team will develop a comprehensive SOP for uploading PG course information on the SLC portal. Information provided to Student Business regarding the delivery of the course to be clarified.
Teaching and/or Assessment	Student	A series of disruptions occurred during an examination.	Resolved	Department/Faculty to review procedures for the appointment of invigilators and management of the conduct of examinations.
Facilities	Member of Public	A talk was delayed by 40 minutes because PC updates prevented the speaker from logging on to deliver a presentation.	Resolved	A check list is in place with named responsibility for room checks and PC checks.
Teaching and/or Assessment	Student	Student complained that there was no mechanism for reporting group members who do not participate fully in a project.	Resolved	Department to review policy on marking group work.
Other	Student	Complex complaint covering the handling of concerns, alleged discrimination, implementation of University procedures.	Partially Upheld	Disability Service to review support for research students and clarify where responsibility lies for ensuring reasonable adjustments implemented.
Teaching and/or Assessment	Student	Complaint about DL course. Inaccurate information, IT issues, outdated lectures, lack of professionalism and organisation.	Resolved	Issues will be discussed with course leader; remedial action has been put in place to ensure Myplace information and guidance is correct.
Accommodation	Student	Interview with a participant for a dissertation project interrupted by staff member opening the door from the lab side without knocking.	Resolved	Move to lock the double entry booths from the teaching room side so that entry is only possible from the corridor.

ANNEX B

Complaint Category	Complainant	Complaint	Outcome	Actions
Teaching and/or Assessment	Student	There was an error in an exam, which meant that students wasted time trying to do a calculation which wasn't possible.	Withdrawn by Complainant	A special meeting with third year class reps has been organised to discuss the exam and how the marks will be handled so that students are not disadvantaged.
Teaching and/or Assessment	Student	Lack of clarity on how the exam would be marked. Errors in the exam paper.	Resolved	Exam paper checking process to be reviewed and style of questions changed.
Teaching and/or Assessment	Student	Questions in the exam were identical to those 2 years' earlier.	Resolved	Staff asked to ensure and confirm that the questions set in an exam are not identical to recent past papers.
Service Provision	Student	CLL Student not happy with the length of time taken to inform him of his results or return feedback	Resolved	MyCLL close to being functional for recording and relaying results. Students will be notified of the results ratification process within the brochure, website and MyCLL.
Reasonable Adjustment/Disability-related	Student	Student complained about poor disabled access to placement, communication procedures were inadequate and disability services did not engage with him.	Upheld	The Unit and School will work with Disability Services to develop enhanced training for DDCs. Ensure students are clear that they can make direct contact with Disability Services.
University Policy, Procedures or Administration	Student	Student dissatisfied with the dates of his retrieval placement.	Partially Upheld	It should be made clear to students how the length of a retrieval placement is calculated and the negotiations involved with providers. Placement 3 and Placement 4 should be renamed, Placements 3 a and b.
Service Provision	Student	Student alleging unfair treatment on placement	Partially Upheld	The School should review the Placement Handbook and compare it with the guidance commonly issued to students by providers to ensure as much consistency as possible.

SPSO Recommendations and Feedback

During 2017/18, one recommendation was made by the SPSO following investigation into complaints raised against the University by a former student.

Complaint	Outcome	Recommendation	University Response
The University unreasonably failed to curate a student's thesis into the University Library, contrary to University Regulations.	Not Upheld	Apologise to the complainant for the shortcomings identified. The SPSO considered that, by agreeing to the mark the thesis, the University may have raised the student's expectations with regard to having it curated. There were unacceptable delays in communication.	An apology was sent to the complainant on 6 March 2018.

Feedback was provided by the SPSO, following investigation into complaints raised against the University by two ex-students, during 2017/18. These were not formal recommendations and no confirmation to SPSO was required.

Complaint	Outcome	Feedback	University Response
The university unreasonably failed to support the student during the course	Not Upheld	Given the importance of communication to university email addresses, the university may wish to consider asking students to check that, where it has been used, the email forwarding rule has worked and, if it has not, to contact the IT Helpdesk for assistance until the matter is resolved. In the light of this complaint and the complainant's reported experience, the university may wish to reflect on possible issues around course administration for students with relevant disabilities who experience difficulties with organisation, and the expectations of the Postgraduate Diploma in Counselling as set out in the handbook.	This feedback has been forwarded to the Faculty and Course Team for consideration when communicating the policy on use of email to students and when reviewing the content of the Course Handbook. It should, however, be noted that the Counselling Unit has reviewed and changed its offering and that the complainant's experience relates to a discontinued course.
The university unreasonably failed to provide agreed additional learning needs support to the student during the course	Not Upheld	The university may also wish to reflect on whether disability advisers should keep records of the issues they consider and dismiss while assessing a student's needs and compiling their adjustment report.	This feedback has been forwarded to Disability Services for review.
The University unreasonably failed to curate a student's thesis into the University Library, contrary to University Regulations.	Not Upheld	Relevant members of staff should give consideration to how such a situation could be avoided in future, for example by clarifying at the earliest stage that the marking of a thesis does not guarantee curation in the Library.	The Library will consider appropriate clarification of its rules/regulations on the acceptance of thesis. However, it is recognised that this case was exceptional and it is not expected that a similar situation will arise again.