

# Complaints Handling Procedure Annual Report 2023/24

## 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 slightly from 24% in 2022/23 to 21% in 2023/24.

## 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.

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.

4. Annex A provides key performance information on the volume and types of complaints received during 2023/24 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 2023/24.

## Summary Analysis

5. The University recorded 109 complaints during the 2023/34 academic year which is a decrease of 21% on 2022/23. The majority of complaints (86%) were received from students or former students at the University, which was a two percent decrease on 2022/23. The remainder of complaints received were from members of the public and applicants for study as well as one anonymous complaint which we were able to capture for the first time on the new Sharepoint site.
6. Complaints were received across all academic faculties with the biggest faculties of Engineering and HaSS recording the most complaints and accounting for 62% of complaints received, an increase of 2% compared with last year. 13% of complaints received related to areas within Professional Services, which is a 6% decrease in comparison to 2022/23.

7. The below table breaks down the total number of complaints received this year and the previous year for each Faculty.

Faculty	2023/24	2022/23	Change	% Change
HAAS	34	33	+1	+3%
Engineering	34	50	-16	-32%
Business	13	19	-6	-31%
Science	14	9	+5	+55%
Total	95	111	-16	-14%

8. The percentage of complaints closed at frontline was 81%, up from 71% the previous year and on the 61% closed at frontline in 2021/22. The time taken to close frontline complaints fluctuated throughout the year, averaging 8.2 days, which is an increase from 7.2 days in 2022/23. 52% percent of frontline complaints were closed within the 5 working day target, down from 59% in 2022/23.
9. Complaints investigated at stage 2 of the procedure were closed within an average of 37.5 days, an increase on the 2022/23 average of 31.7 days. This timeframe has always been considered to be very challenging, particularly for complex complaints and we have encountered more of these this year. 15% of complaints were completed within 20 working days, which is down from 22% in 2022/23.
10. Although the University recorded fewer total complaints than last year, the number of investigations increased from 30 in 2022/23 to 35 this year.
11. 19 of the Stage 2 complaints were escalated directly by the University to Stage 2 and 16 were escalated by the complainant following the Stage 1 outcome.
12. The most frequent types of complaints recorded were those relating to:
1. Staff Attitude and/or Conduct (25%)
  2. Teaching and/or assessment (15%)
  3. Academic Support (14%)
  4. Service Provision (14%)
  5. University Policies and Procedures (9%)
13. For the first time since 2020 Teaching and/or assessment was not the main source of complaints and was replaced by Staff Attitude and/or Conduct as the main reason for complaints. This is something we had anticipated as a result of Strathclyde Safe 360, the Community Commitment and students becoming more aware of what they deem acceptable behaviour and language within an educational setting. We conducted training with our Solicitors Andresen and Strathearn in January this year on staff complaints, which are often more complex and multifaceted and over 80 people attended over 5 separate sessions.
14. Complaints in relation to Teaching and/or Assessment, Academic Support, Service Provision and University Policies and Procedures reduced in line with the overall number of complaints. We also recorded zero complaints in relation to Accommodation, which is a substantial change from last year.
15. Staff Conduct and Teaching/Assessment have consistently remained the most prominent areas of complaint in the previous four years. All categories of complaints reduced this year as did the overall total, meaning that Staff Attitude and/or Conduct complaints were the only area that saw an increase.

16. Lessons learned and actions taken to improve services are recorded following each complaint, where appropriate, and examples of the learning points recorded during 2023/24 are included at Annex B.
17. Staff continue to engage well with the complaints process and work is continuing to encourage a greater focus on frontline resolution. Working alongside colleagues in the Scottish Higher Education Complaints Forum, we have produced Investigation Skills Training that we hope to make available to staff in the Autumn. We are also working on the development of the Sharepoint site and our Teams Groups with colleagues in IS and Student Experience to ensure that it remains a central hub for shared excellence, knowledge and skills.

### **SPSO Enquiries and Recommendations**

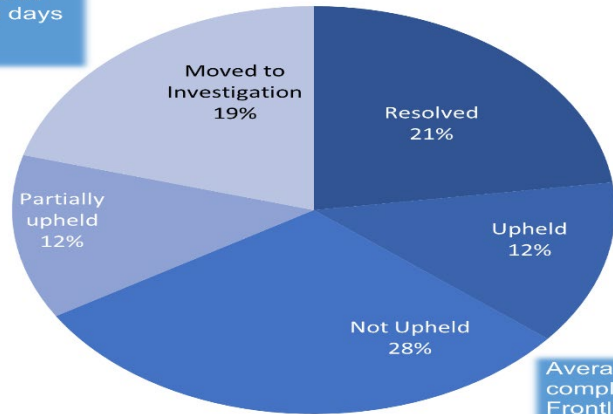
18. The SPSO approach to recommendations focuses on better outcomes in relation to services as well as for individuals. SPSO expects organisations to share their findings, to enable learning and improvement, with those responsible for the operational delivery of the service and across the organisation. 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.
19. The SPSO did not formally investigate any complaints against the University in 2024 and did not make any formal recommendations.

### **Recommendation**

20. Court is invited to **note** the Complaints Handling Annual Report for 2023/24.

**Frontline (Stage 1) - 1 August 2023 to 31 July 2024**

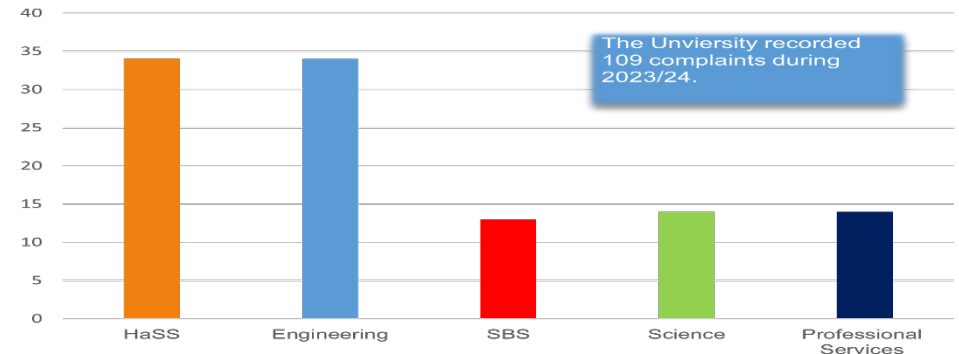
52% of complaints closed at Frontline stage were handled within 5 working days



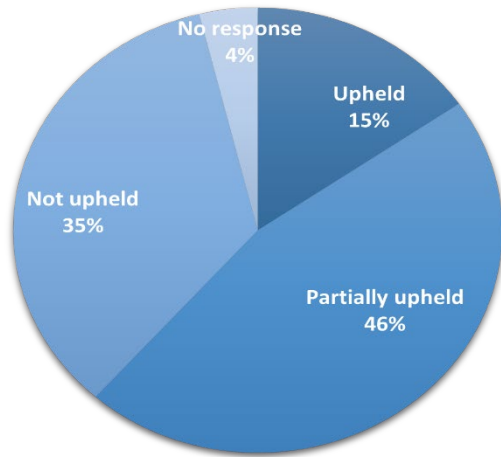
Average time for complaints closed at Frontline was 8.2 working days.

**Complaints Received by Area 1 August 2023 to 31 July 2024**

The University recorded 109 complaints during 2023/24.



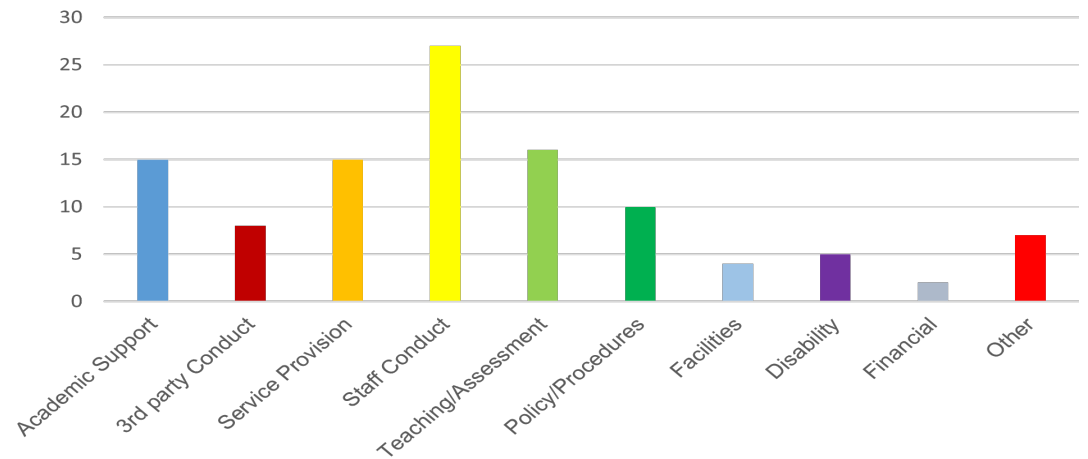
**Investigation (Stage 2) Outcomes 1 August 2023 to 31 July 2024**

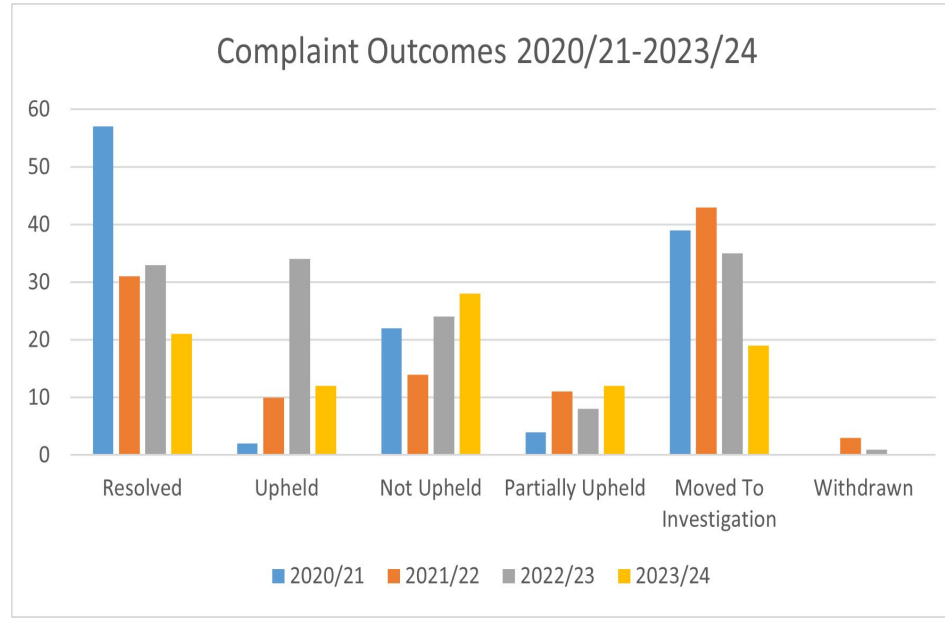
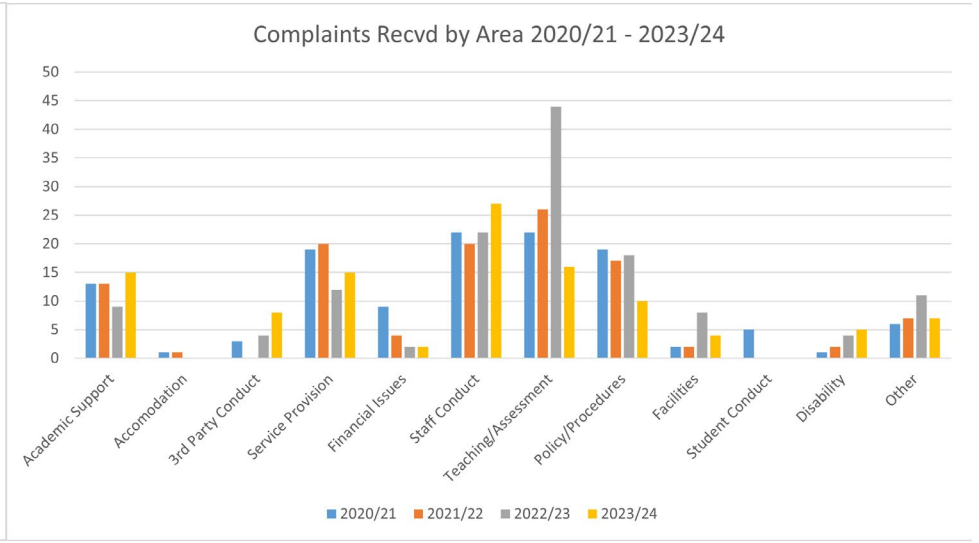
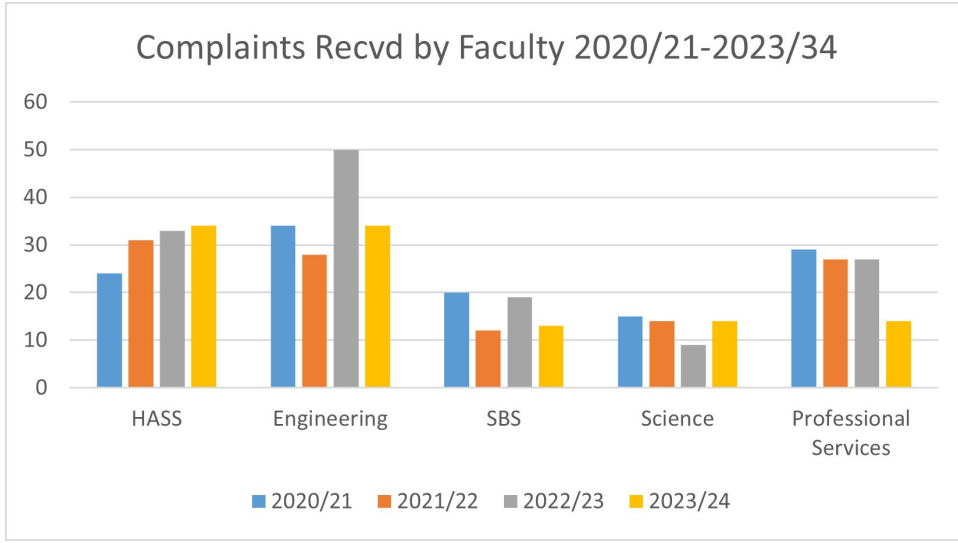


35 investigations were completed. Average investigation = 37.5 working days

15% of Investigations were completed within 20 working days

**Complaints Received by Category 1 August 2023 to 31 July 2024**





Complaint Category	Complainant	Complaint Summary	Outcome	Learning
Attitude and/or Conduct of a Third Party Contract or University Partner	Student	The student let the department know that she was unhappy with the supervision that she received whilst on industrial placement. She submitted an account. We have offered her support and to complete a complaints form. She is meeting colleagues 5 September.	Resolved	Currently we recommend that placement providers conduct a mid-placement skills matrix mark to guide progress. This will become a mandatory aspect of the supervision to ensure that students are clear about performance expectations before a final mark is issued.
University Policy, Procedures or Administration	Student	The complainant voluntarily withdrew from his course of study after two consecutive periods of voluntary suspension. His withdrawal request was processed, but he has subsequently emailed to say that he wanted a further period of voluntary suspension. He was advised that students cannot have more than two consecutive periods of voluntary suspension and that withdrawal and reapplication to his course was his only option. The complainant complained that he was not properly informed of the limitations of voluntary suspension. However, the voluntary suspension guidance had been sent to him at the time he enquired about applying for his second round of VS. I have responded to reiterate University policy on this matter.	Partially Upheld	Whilst the University followed the correct policy in this case, they could have followed up on the voluntary withdrawal request to check directly with the student that this was, in fact, the intended course of action. This may not have changed the overall action/decision on his study, but it may have allowed the student to get further information on his status earlier.
Academic Support	Student	The complaint was submitted as an appeal around lack of support during preparation for resit including a lack of response to the student queries by email.	Upheld	The Head of Department must instigate a module review to put in place appropriate methods of feedback, support and marking scheme.
Staff Attitude and/or Conduct	Student	The complainant raised concerns about language referenced by a tutor during an		Staff must be conscious of the language that they are using and there must be clarity in both face to face and written

		example of inappropriate behaviour in class.	Upheld	communication so that ambiguous statements are not misconstrued. The use of offensive words should be avoided but in instances where this is not possible, the use of them should be prefaced with a warning to the class that they may find some of the language offensive.
Teaching and/or assessment	Student	Complainant raised concerns about the lack of clarity around an assessment and the impact this may have on their overall result. The student had tried to raise these concerns with their class leader but there had been a lack of contact from them	Partially Upheld	These concerns had been raised at the beginning of the year but had not been addressed to the student's satisfaction. In those instances, exam boards will be notified of non-engagement so as to ensure this is taken into consideration when marking takes place.
Staff Attitude and/or Conduct and University Policies and Procedures	Student	Student complaint relating to the Postgraduate Independent Prescribing programme in Strathclyde Institute of Pharmacy and Biomedical Sciences	Partially Upheld	A Review of the Programme handbook will take place to ensure that all the information pertaining to the teaching reporting structure is present.
Reasonable Adjustment/ Disability Related	Student	Lecturer emailed a class list about a test which contained students' additional arrangements.	Upheld	Staff to be reminded to review the appropriate MyPlace pages to obtain the list of students requiring adjustments for tests
Staff Attitude and/or Conduct	Student	Complaint was raised as a result of an appeal submitted by the claimant. This was on the understanding that the method of marking was not in accordance with standard practice and the weightings/criteria was changed	Partially Upheld	Members of staff should be careful not to offer opinions regarding methods of marking or marks awarded by others without first discussing with the Tutor and year leader/Course Director involved. A response, if required, should be carried out following discussion and with the knowledge and agreement of the Tutor, year leader/Course Director.
Service Provision	Student	A student raised a complaint regarding unclear instruction about art materials needed for a class.	Upheld	Review of the art material information visible to students on both the intranet and website would take place.
Academic Support	Member of Public	Parent of a student complained about the processes in place to support their child	Partially Upheld	Additional administrative checkpoint will be implemented to ensure support mechanisms are used effectively
Other	Student	Complaint around outdated information on MyPlace.	Partially Upheld	Old information to be routinely removed from MyPlace and a reminder sent to staff that information around assessments and deadlines that are communicated verbally, should also be communicated via other methods i.e. MyPlace, email etc.

