

Complaints Handling Procedure Annual Report 2013/14

Background

1. The Public Services Reform (Scotland) Act 2010 gave the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) new responsibilities and powers, specifically, to oversee the development of model complaints handling procedures (CHP) 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 CHP on 27 August 2013. The University's Complaints Handling Procedure is available here: <http://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: complaints volumes, types 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 2013/14 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 2013/14. In parallel with the introduction of the CHP, the University has developed a central recording system enabling the production of the statistical reports at Annex A for the first time
5. This is the first year of operation for the CHP and it is a significant change from the University's previous complaints procedure. The most noticeable change is the requirement to record all complaints, including those resolved quickly by the member of staff who received the complaint. The previous procedure had no necessity to record such complaints, therefore it is not possible to make comparisons with data from previous years.
6. It should also be noted that the data provided relates to a period of significant change and transition as staff adapt to the new CHP. This has included the introduction of more challenging timescales for dealing with complaints and a reduced number of internal stages along with the new requirement to record all complaints received.
7. To date, very few other Scottish HEIs have published statistics. This means that comparison across the sector is not possible for 2013/14 but it is anticipated indicative benchmarking data should be available at the time of the second annual report to Court in 2015 and there will also be the opportunity to compare internal data after two years of operation.

Summary Analysis

8. The University has recorded 79 complaints since the implementation of the new CHP in August 2013. The majority of complaints were received from students or former students of the University. Additionally, a number of complaints were received from members of the public and prospective applicants, making up almost 19% of the total number of complaints.
9. Complaints were received in all Faculties and across key Professional Services areas with, unsurprisingly, the University's largest Faculty, Humanities and Social Sciences, receiving the highest number and its smallest, Science, the lowest. Similarly, the number of complaints received by the Faculty of Engineering and Strathclyde Business School matched the respective sizes of their student populations as the second and third largest Faculties respectively.
10. Twenty percent of the complaints received concerned Professional Services directorates focusing mainly in Estates, Information Services and Student Experience and Enhancement Services.
11. The percentage of complaints resolved at frontline (51% overall) steadily improved throughout the year with the percentage of complaints requiring investigation falling correspondingly. This was in line with the expectation that the majority of complaints could and would be resolved at frontline without the need for a full investigation and that complaints resolved at this level would increase with increasing staff confidence in handling complaints effectively under the new procedure.
12. The average time taken to resolve frontline complaints fell throughout the year averaging 4.5 days, within the 5 day maximum stipulated by the procedure. The average time taken to investigate complaints also dropped but averaged 22.8 days, slightly above the 20 working days anticipated.
13. The sector had raised concerns regarding the viability of the 20 working day timescale for investigating complaints given the aspiration to ensure a thorough, proportionate and fair investigation, during the consultation period on the model CHP. Complaints which require liaison with external partners (e.g. school placement providers) carry particular difficulties for meeting the new timescales and this is evident from experiences so far. The one complaint recorded as "no response" was affected by both a school closure and the long term absence of a member of placement staff. The University had progressed this as far as practicable.
14. Nevertheless, the majority (59%) of investigations were carried out within the 20 working day deadline and this number increased over the year as staff confidence and experience grew.
15. The most frequent types of complaints recorded were those relating to:
 1. Staff Attitude and/or Conduct (23%)
 2. Academic Support (16%)
 3. University Policy, Procedures or Administration (14%)
16. The proportion of staff recording learning and action taken to improve services in future has increased during the course of the year – a positive sign that staff engagement with the aims of the new procedure continues to grow. Some examples of this learning are included at Annex A.
17. Overall the procedure appears to be bedding in well. Confidence is growing among staff handling complaints and with that timescales are reducing and the number of complaints resolved at stage 1 is increasing.

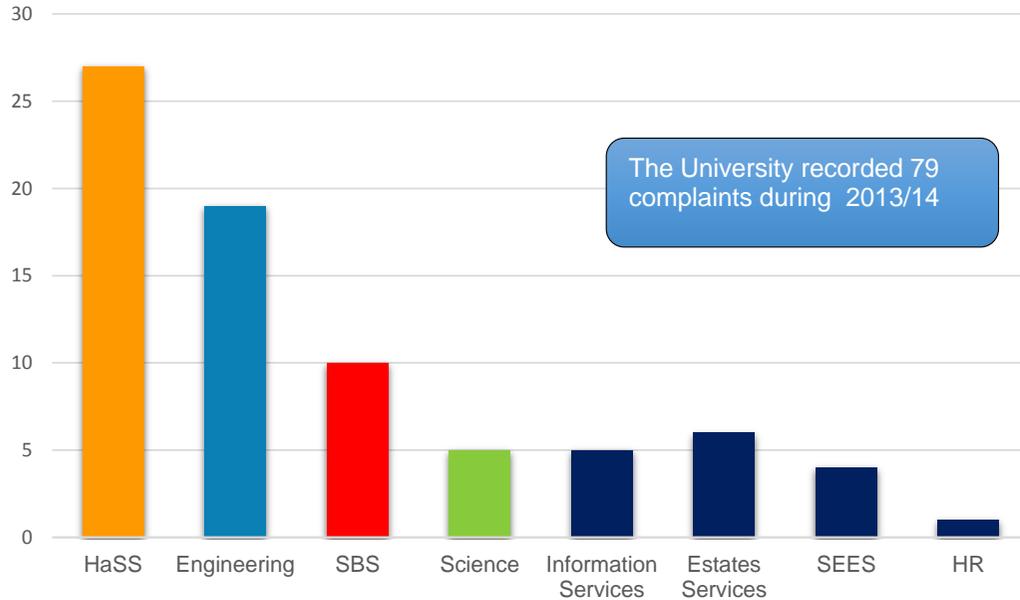
Recommendation

18. Court is invited to **note** the Complaints Handling Annual Report for 2013/14.

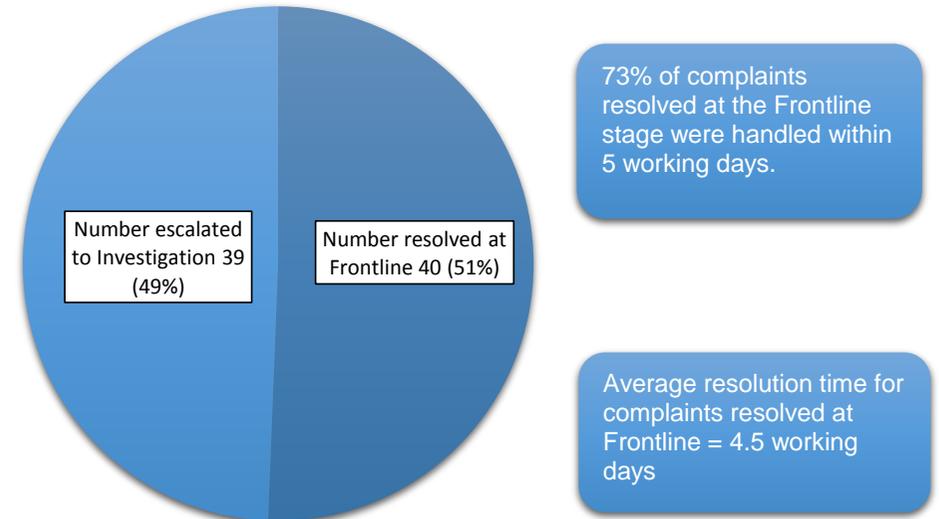
Complaints Recorded 2013-14

ANNEX A

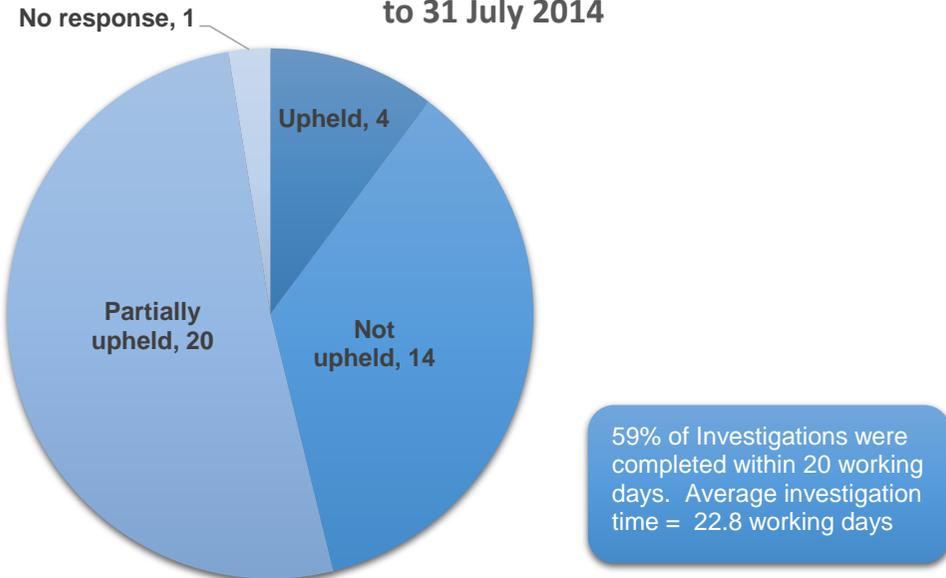
Complaints Received by Area 27 August 2013 to 31 July 2014



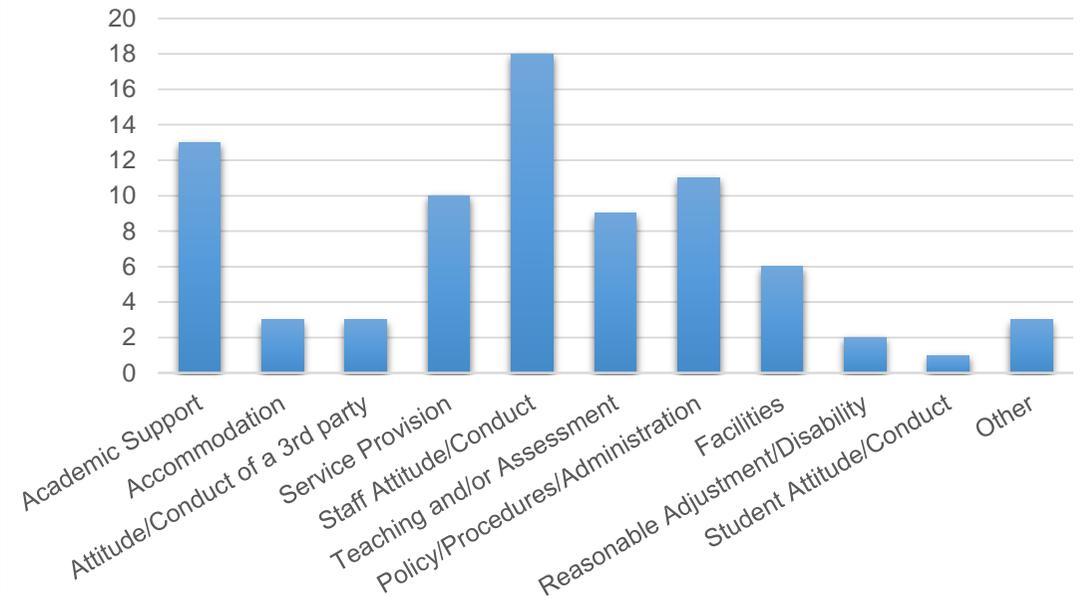
Frontline (Stage 1) - 27 August 2013 to 31 July 2014



Investigation (Stage 2) Outcomes - 27 August 2013 to 31 July 2014



Complaints Received by Category 27 August 2013 to 31 July 2014



ANNEX A

Learning from Complaints – Examples

Complaint Category	Complainant	Complaint	Learning/Recommendations
Facilities	Student	Lack of toilet facilities in the Library in the early morning.	Liaison with cleaning staff to ensure that Library toilets are available at all times during Library opening hours and only closed when being cleaned.
University Policy, Procedures or Administration	Member of Public	Complaint regarding UCAS application procedure for the Professional Graduate Diploma in Education.	Proposals for change now being drafted in discussions with other HEIs and UCAS.
Staff Attitude and/or Conduct	Student	Complaint against a member of catering staff regarding the level of customer service provided.	Member of staff required to attend customer care training. Introduction of new coaching/observation training programme and higher level of manager presence within catering outlets.
Teaching and/or Assessment	Student	Delay in receiving examination results	Spreadsheet created with checklist of markers and returns
Service Provision	Student	Delayed visa application	Team will examine checking procedures for visa extension applications.
University Policy, Procedures or Administration	Applicant for Study	Given impression that an application would be welcomed after previously having to withdraw from the course	Department advised to ensure that an applicant requesting feedback on a rejected application should be able to speak to the Academic Selector.
Facilities	Student	Attitude of security guard and of clear rules shown in the library. Signs were contradictory on types of food permitted.	Contradictory signage updated. Staff advised to direct students with hot food to cafe area.
Service Provision	Students	Complaint relating to exchanges process	Review of exchange process and improved communication to students.
University Policy, Procedures or Administration	Member of Public	Interviewee unable to attend interview on date given and could not be offered alternative.	Definite date for interview given in advert where possible.
Reasonable Adjustment/Disability-related	Student	Lack of support. Inaccessibility of materials. Discrimination.	Faculty policy developed to clarify the rationale and structure of take-home examinations set to fulfil the requirement for reasonable adjustments identified by Disability Services.
Teaching and/or Assessment	Student	That the notes provided on Myplace for a class were poorly organised and did not have clear file names	Immediate remedial action taken to resolve the issue and make the available notes clearer.