



Abertay University

ANNUAL REPORT TO COURT ON THE COMPLAINTS HANDLING PROCEDURE FOR SESSION 2021-22

Introduction

The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) requires Scottish Universities to report on a variety of Key Performance Indicators, which have been considered in detail by the Scottish Universities' Complaints Forum and also by the Universities' Scotland Secretaries' Group. The SPSO recently revised the Model Complaints Handling Procedure and the University revised its Complaints Handling Procedure in turn, for implementation on 1 April 2021. Key changes relate to: resolution as alternative to upholding a complaint; improvements to supporting complainants; considering complaints made via social media; agreeing a complaint (stage 2) and; changes to recording, reporting and learning.

The University's Complaints Handling Procedure ("CHP") emphasises the quick resolution of complaints, at the point nearest to wherever they arise within the University. This is in preference to lengthy investigations. However, some complaints may either commence at the investigation stage (if complex, time-consuming, or special categories of) or alternatively may proceed to stage 2 investigation after stage 1 frontline response (for example, if the complainant is still dissatisfied; in effect as an internal appeal).

Note: in this report where figures less than 5 occur, neither numbers, nor (where the numbers involved are less than 10) percentages, have been included as a matter of policy. This applies where (i) arithmetic distortions in percentages/trends due to low numbers may occur and/or (ii) where there is a risk of identification of any individuals' personal data (and/or special categories of personal data) under data protection legislation.

Quarter 4 (June – August) 2021-22 data is not reported due to the low number received, which could have made cases identifiable.

Key Performance Indicators

Table 1: Number of complaints recorded in the academic year 2021-22 by quarter (totals received)

| Quarter | Number |
|------------------------|-----------|
| Quarter 1 (Sept - Nov) | 12 |
| Quarter 2 (Dec - Feb) | 33 |
| Quarter 3 (Mar - May) | 16 |
| Quarter 4 (June - Aug) | <5 |
| Overall Total | 61 |

Notes: please see footnote 1 regarding redaction and 2021-22 Quarter 4 data.

For the purposes of this report all complaint outcomes have been counted, including stage 1 frontline outcomes where the complaint was then escalated to stage 2 investigation.

Table 2: Total numbers of complaints recorded by academic year

| Academic year | Number |
|---------------|--------|
| 2016-17 | 30 |
| 2017-18 | 17 |
| 2018-19 | 30 |
| 2019-20 | 16 |
| 2020-21 | 35 |
| 2021-22 | 61 |

Note: please see footnote 1 regarding redaction and 2021-22 Quarter 4 data.

Table 2 above shows a sharp rise in the number of complaints being reported and recorded in the academic year 2021-22 compared with the previous five years. This rise was expected and coincides with increased complaints training opportunities for services staff. The Quality Assurance team has been promoting awareness of stage

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1 frontline complaints and how to report complaint responses through a series of interactive, live sessions. The aim of these workshops is to help staff members understand what should be reported, how to report it and the benefits of reporting all stage 1 frontline complaints. This training should ensure staff members have the confidence and ability to handle stage 1 frontline complaints, or that they know what to do when they cannot effectively handle a complaint themselves. The training has also been used to highlight the new “resolved” outcome for complaints, an outcome whereby an amicable solution to a complaint is reached between the university and the complainant (for more information on the new “resolved” outcome see Table 7 notes below).

Following positive feedback on the training, the opportunity will be rolled out to all staff (academic and services) in academic year 2022-23 via the university’s internal events pages, where any member of staff can sign up to participate.

Table 3: Frontline or investigation procedure: proportion of total complaints numbers (and percentages) by academic year

| Academic year | Frontline | Investigation |
|---------------|-----------|---------------|
| 2017-18 | 8 (47%) | 9 (53%) |
| 2018-19 | 17 (57%) | 13 (43%) |
| 2019-20 | 5 (31%) | 11 (69%) |
| 2020-21 | 23 (66%) | 12 (34%) |
| 2021-22 | 49 (80%) | 12 (20%) |

Note: please see footnote 2 regarding redaction and 2021-22 Quarter 4 data.

Table 3 above shows that the rise in complaints reported and recorded in academic year 2021-22 is specific to stage 1 frontline complaints, which was expected. As mentioned above (Table 2 notes) the rise in the number of complaints reported and recorded is thought to be the effect of an increased staff awareness campaign, highlighting stage 1 frontline complaints, what to report and how to report it, so that it can be appropriately recorded.

The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman’s view is that universities should address as many complaints as possible at stage 1 frontline response (this is the reason why

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the above percentages are provided). Frontline response is therefore performed wherever possible; this involves the complaint being addressed at the point in the University nearest to where it arose.

However, some complaints are too complex and/or lengthy to be considered as frontline response ones within the Ombudsman’s strict 5 working day target time-limit for this category of complaint. Any breach of this deadline requires to be authorised, recorded and reported on, even if the subject matter of the complaint is too lengthy and/or complex to be completed within that time-limit. Such cases may be dealt with initially as complaint investigations (stage 2), for which a 20-working day target time-limit applies. The University’s CHP envisages that a complaint may commence as an investigation, i.e., at stage 2, where appropriate.

Table 4: Percentage of all frontline response and of all investigations closed within target time-limit (5 and 20 working days respectively): by complaint quarter, in the academic year 2021-22

| Quarter | Frontline | Investigation |
|------------------------|-----------|---------------|
| Quarter 1 (Sept - Nov) | 70% | 50% |
| Quarter 2 (Dec - Feb) | 76% | 75% |
| Quarter 3 (Mar - May) | 50% | 50% |
| Quarter 4 (June - Aug) | <5 | <5 |

Notes: where low numbers are concerned, percentage information is misleading. Please also see footnote 3 regarding redactions and Quarter 4 data.

Complaints arising from members of staff are normally dealt with under the Grievance Procedure operated by People Services and complaints made against students are considered under the Student Conduct policies, so these data are not recorded here.

Table 4 above shows that for both stage 1 frontline and stage 2 investigations over half of all cases were closed within the set time-limit. Across the academic year 2021-22 this averages 65% of all stage 1 frontline and 58% of all stage 2 investigation complaints. The target time-limits for dealing with complaints, set down by the SPSO, are 5 working days for stage 1 frontline responses and 20 working days for stage 2 investigation complaint cases, which by nature are more complex.

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Table 5: Time taken to resolve complaints: frontline and investigation average duration (number of days) by complaint quarter, in the academic year 2021-22

| | Frontline (target = 5) | Investigation (target = 20) |
|------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Quarter 1 (Sept - Nov) | 7 | 24 |
| Quarter 2 (Dec - Feb) | 5 | 15 |
| Quarter 3 (Mar - May) | 7 | 19 |
| Quarter 4 (June - Aug) | <5 | <5 |

Note: please see footnote 4 regarding redaction and 2021-22 Quarter 4 data.

Table 5 above shows the average length of time to deal with complaints, in working days, by complaint quarter respectively. Although many of the complaints were dealt with within the SPSO time limits some did take longer than expected. The main reasons for cases taking longer than the target limit were:

- Staff absence (sickness and annual leave)
- Short staffing
- Complexity of case
- Lack of response from complainant
- Extra information/clarity required from the complainant
- Availability of complainant

Authorised extensions were requested and granted for approximately half of the above overdue cases. Those that did not request/receive extensions were a result of:

- staff absence or a service being short staffed
- a miscommunication
- the complaint handler awaiting further information from the complainant.

In all cases where an extension was not in place, if one had been sought it would have been granted. All complainants were kept informed and therefore no follow-up in regard to not meeting deadlines was required, however the newly implement complaints training, mentioned above, does include information on deadlines, the

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importance of meeting them and how to seek an extension if one is required. It is anticipated that this will reduce the number of unauthorised late responses.

Table 6: Type of complainant in the academic year 2021-22: numbers (and percentages)

| Type of complainant | Number (and percentage) |
|---------------------|-------------------------|
| Student | 45 (74%) |
| Member of staff | <5 |
| Applicant | <5 |
| Member of public | 8 (13%) |
| 3rd Party | 6 (10%) |
| Anonymous | <5 |

Note: please see footnote 5 regarding redaction and 2021-22 Quarter 4 data.

Table 6 above shows the number and percentage of complaints arising in the academic year 2021-22 from specific types of complainants. As shown a higher number of complaints was received from students, which was expected.

Table 7: Outcomes of complaints in the academic year 2021-22, closed at each stage

| Outcomes | Frontline | Investigation |
|---------------------|-----------|---------------|
| Upheld fully | <5 | <5 |
| Upheld partially | <5 | <5 |
| Not upheld | 18 | 5 |
| Resolved | 24 | <5 |
| Out of time | <5 | <5 |
| Withdrawn/abandoned | <5 | <5 |

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Notes: please see footnote 6 regarding redaction and 2021-22 Quarter 4 data.

A complaint may cover several points. Where any of these are upheld or partially upheld, the outcome of the investigation as a whole is recorded as 'upheld partially'

Table 7 above shows the outcomes of both stage 1 frontline and stage 2 investigation complaints. As mentioned above, a new outcome, "resolved", was added to the CHP in academic year 2021-22. Part 3 of the Complaints Handling Procedure states "A complaint is resolved when both the University and the complainant agree what action (if any) will be taken to provide full and final resolution for the complainant, without making a decision about whether the complaint is upheld or not upheld", and further that we try to resolve complaints wherever possible.

A "resolved" outcome is therefore a desirable and amicable solution to a complaint, and it can be seen that a high number, 24 stage 1 frontline complaints (which is 49% of all stage 1 frontline complaints), reached a resolved outcome in the 2021-22 complaints cycle.

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Table 8: Category of the complaints made in the academic year 2021-22, by frontline or investigation

| Category | Frontline | Investigation |
|-------------------------|-----------|---------------|
| Service provision | <5 | <5 |
| Teaching/assessment | 15 | <5 |
| Pastoral support | <5 | <5 |
| Policy/procedures/admin | 10 | <5 |
| Staff attitude/conduct | 5 | <5 |
| Facilities | <5 | <5 |
| Student accommodation | <5 | <5 |
| Fees/funding | <5 | <5 |
| Special needs | <5 | <5 |
| Against student | <5 | <5 |
| Other | 5 | <5 |

Notes: please see footnote 7 regarding redaction and 2021-22 Quarter 4 data.

Complaints often overlap categories and therefore can be recorded against more than one category, so the numbers in the table may not tally with the total numbers of complaints

Table 8 above shows the categories under which a complaint can be made. The categories receiving the most stage 1 frontline complaints were teaching/assessment and policy/procedures/admin, which was again to be expected, as such a large part of university business revolves around teaching and assessment, and these (alongside many other processes in the university) are underpinned by policies, procedures and administration processes.

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Table 9: Schools/Services against which complaints were made in the academic year 2021-22

| School/Service | Frontline | Investigation |
|---|-----------|---------------|
| School of Design & Informatics | 7 | <5 |
| School of Applied Sciences | 6 | <5 |
| School of Business, Law & Social Sciences | 11 | 5 |
| Finance, Infrastructure & Corporate Services | 9 | <5 |
| Student & Academic Services | 23 | 7 |
| External & Corporate Relations | <5 | <5 |
| Governance | <5 | <5 |
| People Services | <5 | <5 |
| Executive Office | <5 | <5 |
| Abertay Learning Enhancement Academy | <5 | <5 |
| Graduate School | <5 | <5 |
| Alumni | <5 | <5 |
| Against student (i.e. rerouted to student disciplinary procedure) | <5 | <5 |
| Other | <5 | <5 |
| Not applicable | <5 | <5 |

Notes: please see footnote 8 regarding redaction and 2021-22 Quarter 4 data.

Complaints often overlap categories and therefore can be recorded against more than one category, so the numbers in the table may not tally with the total numbers of complaints.

Table 9 above shows the Schools and Services against which a complaint can be made. It can be seen that the category that received the most stage 1 frontline

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complaints was Student and Academic Services. Again, this was to be expected, as this Service permeates the student journey, and the majority of processes within the university. This ties in with the higher amount of complainants being made by students (see Table 6), and also teaching/assessment and policy/procedures/admin being the categories which most complaints were recorded under (see Table 7). Due to low numbers of complaints recorded in other areas, it is difficult to report any significant findings.

Lessons learned - You Said We Did 2021-22

We have listened to your suggestions and ideas that have arisen through our complaints process, and we have worked hard to provide new and better services. Find examples below of what we have done as a result of your input.

You Said

You complained that some lecture room electrical sockets were at inconvenient/inaccessible heights.

You complained about the withdrawal process and communication regarding non-attendance.

You complained about an administrative issue when booking Advisory Service appointments.

You complained about unmoderated grades being visible on My Learning Space (MLS) before the moderation process was complete.

You complained about the processes involved in changing a name on the student records system and previous names still appearing shortly after updates.

You complained that visa extension delays due to lack of clarity in the information received.

We Did

We have undertaken to cover or labelled sockets that are not for student use.

A review was conducted of the process and communication of student withdrawals due to non-engagement. New Student Success Officer roles have been created to improve student engagement and retention within each of the University's academic schools.

A new internal process was implemented to ensure the administrative issue does not occur again.

Processes have been put in place to ensure that pre-moderation results are not made available to students via My Learning Space (MLS) before the moderation process has been completed.

The name change form has been updated for clarity to include a nominal timeframe, which will help inform those wishing to change their name informed as to when the system is updated.

The relevant guidance and procedures have been reviewed to provide more clarity surrounding the visa extension process.