

# UWS Complaints Handling Procedure Session 2023-2024 - Annual Report

## 1. Introduction

This annual report covers the University of the West of Scotland (UWS) operation of its Complaints Handling Procedure (CHP) for the academic session 2023/2024 and provides statistics on the number of complaints considered under its CHP.

## 2. Reporting on Complaints

This is the 11<sup>th</sup> annual report on UWS complaints management using the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) Complaints Handling Procedure model. The SPSO oversees complaints management procedures for higher education and can also adjudicate on complaint outcomes after procedures have been completed within the University. The report covers the period from 1<sup>st</sup> August 2023 to 31<sup>st</sup> July 2024.

In accordance with SPSO procedures complaints are managed at:

- Stage 1 – Frontline resolution with a target resolution timescale of up to 5 working days, and/or;
- Stage 2 – Investigation with a target resolution timescale of up to 20 working days (while recognising that complex cases may take longer).

In addition, and at either stage, complaints may be resolved early without full completion of the procedure – where both the complainant and the University agree on an appropriate course of action in response to the concern raised without there being a determination of whether the complaint has been upheld or not upheld.

## 3. Overview of Standard Indicators

Statistics are reported on a quarterly basis in accordance with the four standard indicators set by the SPSO. An overview of the current annual totals and trends from previous years is set out below.

### Indicator One: The total number of complaints received per year over the last 5 years

Total number of complaints received	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Number of complaints at both Stage 1 and Stage 2)	24	42	45	61	<b>108</b>

Breakdown of complaints completed by Stage	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24*
Stage 1	17	31	31	48	<b>90</b>
Stage 2	7	11	14	13	<b>17</b>

*\*1 of the 108 complaints received were not completed (1 at Stage 1 was referred to another process)*

**Indicator Two: percentage of complaints at each stage closed in full within the set timescales of five and 20 working days – 2023/24**

<b>Quantitative Indicator 2</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
Number of complaints closed in full at <b>Stage 1</b> within five working days as % of all Stage 1 complaints responded to in full	51	56%
The number of complaints closed in full at <b>Stage 2</b> within 20 working days as % of all Stage 2 complaints responded to in full	13	76%

<b>Indicator 2: Previous years</b>	<b>2019/20</b>	<b>2020/21</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2022/23</b>
<b>Stage 1</b>	82%	55%	45%	48%
<b>Stage 2</b>	57%	n/a	86%	61%

**Indicator Three: Average time in working days for a full response to complaints at each stage – 2023/24**

<b>Quantitative Indicator 3</b>	<b>Average time in working days</b>
Average time in working days to respond to complaints at <b>Stage 1</b>	7 days
Average time in working days to respond to complaints at <b>Stage 2</b>	12 days

<b>Indicator 3: Previous years</b>	<b>2019/20</b>	<b>2020/21</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2022/23</b>
<b>Stage 1</b>	6 days	6.5 days	7 days	7 days
<b>Stage 2</b>	17 days	17 days	17 days	18 days

**Indicator Four: The outcome of complaints at each stage 2023/24**

<b>Quantitative Indicator</b>	<b>Upheld</b>	<b>Partially Upheld</b>	<b>Not Upheld</b>	<b>Resolved*</b>	<b>No outcome: Referred to another process or S2</b>	<b>Outstanding</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
Number of complaints as a % of all complaints closed at <b>Stage 1</b>	41	7	40	2	1	0	<b>91</b>
Number of complaints as a % of all complaints considered at <b>Stage 2</b>	2	2	13	0	0	0	<b>17</b>

\*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.

#### 4. Stage 1 Complaints

In session 2023/24 there were 91 Stage 1 complaints made. Two of which were group complaints, one involving 8 individuals and the other was anonymous and referred to HR due to the content. In total 98 individuals were involved across 91 complaints raised.

2023/24 has seen the number of Stage 1 complaints **increase by almost 90%** compared to last year (increasing to 91 cases compared to 48 in 2022/23) with an overall upward trend over the last five years (with only 17 Stage 1 complaints received in 2019/20).

The UWS CHP indicates that Stage 1 complaints should be completed within 5 days, and performance in 2023/24 has been comparatively strong with 56% of complaints completed within this period: the second best figure over the last five years, in the context of a significant uplift in case numbers. The average completion time taken overall for completion of Stage 1 complaints was 7 days, which is a more or less static figure over the last five years (values being consistently between 6 and 7 days in each year).

The percentage of Stage 1 complaints upheld/upheld in part has been steadily increasing as follows:

	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
<b>Stage 1 Complaints Upheld - %</b>	11%	26%	35%	54%

4.1 Stage 1 complaints - School/Department and Campus

<b>The School or Department the complaint relates to</b>	<b>Campus</b>	<b>No. of Complaints</b>
Admissions	N/A	6
Campus Services	Lanarkshire	1
Disability Services	Paisley	1
Doctoral College	Paisley	1
Finance Department	Dumfries	1
Finance Department	Paisley	10
Finance Department	Dumfries	1
Registry (Graduation)	Ayr	2
Residences	N/A	1
School of BCI	Ayrshire College	1
School of BCI	Ayr	1
School of BCI	Lanarkshire	1
School of BCI	London	26
School of BCI	Paisley	8
School of CEPS	London	1
School of CEPS	Paisley	6
School of ESS	Distance Learning	1
School of ESS	N/A (PG applicant)	1
School of ESS	London	5
School of ESS	Paisley	3
School of HLS	Ayr	4
School of HLS	Paisley	3
School of HLS	Lanarkshire	6

91

### 2023/24 Comparison to 2022/23

- The number of Stage 1 complaints received involving the School of ESS has decreased from 11 in 2022/23 to 10 in 2023/24
- The number of complaints involving more than one area or department has decreased from 5 in 2022/23 to zero in 2023/24
- The number of complaints received involving the School of BCI has increased from 17 in 2022/23 to 37 in 2023/24
- The number of complaints for both the School of CEPS and HLS remained the same over the two years (7 and 13 respectively)

### 4.2 Complainants at Stage 1

<b>Category of Complainant 2023/24</b>
7 x Applicant
1 x Member of the Public
83 x Student
<b>Total: 91</b>

In 2022/23 48 students raised Stage 1 complaints, in 2023/24 83 students raised complaints, this indicates that the increase in complaints, is largely being driven by students. Unlike complaints brought forward from other areas, the University is able to take proactive action to engage with this category of complainant.

<b>Home/International or Rest of UK</b>
41 x Home
34 x International
4 x Rest of UK
12 x N/A/ Unknown
<b>Total: 91</b>

<b>Age Group</b>
23 x 18-24
34 x 25-34
18 x 35-44
7 x 45-54
1 x 55-64
8 x n/a and unknown
<b>Total: 91</b>

<b>Gender</b>
55 x Female
36 x Male
<b>Total: 91</b>

<b>Disability</b>
89 x Not disclosed/Unknown/Not known
1 x ADHD and Autism
1 x various genetic issues
<b>Total: 91</b>

#### 4.3 Types of Stage 1 Complaint

<b>Category of Complaint</b>
5 x Application Process
1 x Application Process – timetabling misinformation
7 x Assessment Administration
9 x Assessment Administration/ Calculation
1 x Disability Service
3 x Discrimination
1 x Dissertation Support
7 x Failure to Follow an appropriate admin process
1 x Failure to provide a service
5 x Finance - Outstanding Debt
9 x Finance - Expenses
1 x Graduation Process – following non graduation attendance (parchment delivery)
1 x Graduation Process – delays with reassessment (School level)
1 x Graduation Process – delays in Change of Decision processing (School level)
1 x Graduation Service
25 x Lack of Support
2 x Lecturer's Conduct
2 x PhD Admin
1 x Placement Related
1 x Student Conduct
3 x Student Experience
2 x Student Experience – Course content and delivery
1 x Student Experience – Learning and Teaching
1 x Student Experience – Progression, Guidance and Support
<b>TOTAL: 91</b>

## For Noting:

In 2023/24 complaints were expressed in a broader range of categories than the previous year of 2022/23. This was in response to the Complaints Team seeking to explore complaints in greater detail and provide more detail to the category of “student experience”.

## 5 Stage 2 Complaints

In session 2023/24, 17 Stage 2 complaints were opened for investigation, one of them not due to be completed until Q1, Session 2024/25. Over the last five years there has been a steady increase in numbers, with the current year having the highest case numbers and 2021/22 being the second highest with 14 cases.

The UWS CHP indicates that Stage 2 complaints should be completed within 20 working days. A substantial 76% of cases were closed within this period, only second to 86% in 2021/22. In addition, the average time to resolve completed Stage 2 complaints was 12 days which is a significant reduction from the previous four years which all saw averages of 17 or 18 days. Colleagues are to be congratulated for achieving these timelines for completion of Stage 2 investigations.

The percentage of Stage 2 complaints upheld/upheld in part fluctuated over the last four years as follows:

	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
<b>Stage 2 Complaints Upheld - %</b>	20%	7%	33%	23%

### 5.1 Stage 2 complaints - School/Department and Campus

<b>The School or Department the complaint relates to</b>	<b>Campus</b>	<b>No. of complaints</b>
School of BCI	London	8
School of BCI	Paisley	1
School of BCI	Ayr	1
School of CEPS	Paisley	2
School of ESS	Paisley	1
School of ESS	London	1
School of ESS	N/A (PG applicant)	1
School of HLS	Ayr	1
School of HLS	Lanarkshire	1
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>17</b>

### 5.2 Complainants at Stage 2

<b>Category of Complainant</b>
1 x Applicant
16 x Students
<b>Total: 17</b>

<b>UG/PG</b>
6 x UG
11 x PG
<b>Total: 17</b>

<b>Home/International or Rest of UK</b>
5 x Home
8 x International
2 x Not Known
2 x Rest of UK
<b>Total: 17</b>

<b>Age Group</b>
5 x 18-24
6 x 25-34
2 x 35-44
3 x 45-54
1 x Not Disclosed/Unknown
<b>Total: 17</b>

<b>Gender</b>
10 x Female
7 x Male
<b>Total: 17</b>

<b>Disability</b>
1 x various
16 x Not disclosed/Unknown
<b>Total: 17</b>

### 5.3 Types of Stage 2 Complaint

<b>Category of Complaint</b>
1 x Assessment Administration
2 x Assessment Administration/calculation
1 x Discrimination
1 x Failure to follow an appropriate admin process
2 x Finance – Outstanding Debt
1 x Graduation Service – Change of Decision not processed on time - delayed graduation
4 x Lack of Support
1 x Lecturer's Conduct
2x Student Experience
2 x Student Experience - Course content and delivery
<b>Total: 17</b>

## 6. Lessons learned as a result of the consideration of complaints

Where complaints are upheld in any element, or are resolved, the School or University Department involved will take specific action as identified in the complaint outcome. Examples of such actions have been included in quarterly reports throughout the year. In addition, through the review of case data more systemic causes of complaints can be identified and, where appropriate, these can be addressed in order to make improvements in our service to students and other stakeholders.

### Key Themes

Underlying causes of complaints have been identified around three themes:

1. Communication and information;
2. Support; and
3. Systems/ processing.

The cyber incident of July 2023 must be noted as a key factor due to its impact on University operations, and in turn the student experience, throughout AY 2023-24 and features particularly in the first and third themes. Issues within these themes cut across many aspects of the student experience.

### Communication and Information

**Welcome/Induction:** Enhancement of institutional procedures to ensure induction information is co-ordinated and provided systematically to late entrants, particularly with induction taking place at multiple points of the year.

**Assessment:** A number of areas were identified where improved information was needed for students:

- clarity of delivery, assessment requirements and for rubrics to be used as a guide as to mark allocation;
- timely access to assessment schedules and deadlines;
- ensure that all students are aware of and in receipt of exam board outcomes and information on how to appeal those decisions;
- ensure students understand visa implications if assessment submissions are missed.

**Academic Integrity:** Several issues arose from complaint cases indicating the need for development in the management of alleged academic integrity within Schools. These included:

- Correct application of University's Turnitin policy to allow students to check the similarity score for each assessment;
- Improvement in presenting cases (providing sufficient information and evidence) for review through formal procedures;
- Ensuring outcome communications for academic integrity cases include information for students on next steps and signposting to advice and guidance relating to actions and implications for students, for example those with international visas.

## **Support**

**Disability Support Plans:** Ensure plans are put in place at the beginning of relevant term or session for delivery of support measures and adjustments.

**Exchange Schemes:** Review and communicate statement of additional support arrangements for students participating in exchange schemes, ensuring information on additional support resources at partner institutions is provided.

**Availability of Personal Tutors/Year Support Leads:** Ensuring arrangements are in place to clarify to students the availability of tutors and contingencies for when such arrangements need to be altered.

**Programme Changes:** Ensure Schools make appropriate arrangements to support students who move programmes when their chosen programme is not running.

## **Systems/Processing**

**Banner:** Ensure accuracy of results input during the School Assessment Board process.

**Aula:** Ensure students are only allocated to one Aula Space per module

**Change of Decision:** Ensure assessment Change of Decision forms are processed to Registry timelines to allow students to be registered for graduation on time.

**Finance:** Due to severe disruption from the cyber incident there were multiple complaints regarding Finance systems which were operating on a manual basis. These included student travel expenses, and communications on various financial processes.

## **Actions**

There has been activity in a number of areas to support development and improvement aligned to the themes arising from complaints cases.

### **The following activities have been completed or are ongoing:**

There has been significant work to rebuild Finance systems to replace the interim emergency manual systems that were required following the cyber incident.

The Senate Disciplinary Committee (SDC) has taken action to embed the new School procedure for managing academic integrity, holding two workshops to focus on this area in Spring 2024. Colleagues from Schools, the Appeals, Complaints and Conduct team in QuEST, and the Co-chairs of the SDC met to discuss procedures and challenges, and a series of actions were agreed to provide advice and guidance to improve the operation of procedures and promote consistency across the University.

Furthermore, in relation to supporting colleagues in the use of Turnitin, various guides on the use of Turnitin in Aula have been published online, and a regular Webinar on Turnitin in Aula assignments is part of the UPLIFT programme of courses.

Work supporting colleagues' understanding of assessment includes the update and publication of the Assessment Handbook which includes information on Artificial Intelligence, assessment scheduling, examinations, and management and moderation of assessment instruments. In addition, Registry has offered workshops to support the functioning of exam boards and understanding of critical timelines in the assessment process.

Staff development activities will support themes raised through Complaints, for example the development in 2024 of the UPLIFT CPD framework and the new course: Introduction to Learning and Teaching at UWS for all colleagues new to learning, teaching and assessment activities at UWS.

The Complaints Annual Reporting will be utilised to inform and be explicitly considered within Institutional Enhancement and Annual Monitoring events going forward.

Helen Butcher  
**Head of QuEST**

12 November 2024