



# UNIVERSITY OF PLYMOUTH

## Student Complaints Procedure

<b>Version number</b> 1.2	<b>Status (draft/final)</b> Final	<b>Owning Directorate / Faculty</b> Academic Registry		
<b>Summary of any amendments:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Definition of a complaint is provided</li> <li>• Advice to contact Complaints Team for guidance on group complaints</li> <li>• Clarity on how much notice a student is given where a meeting is required</li> <li>• Clarity that the 90 time limit is from the time the Formal Stage begins</li> <li>• Language updated to be consistent with regulations</li> </ul>				
<b>Document objectives:</b> To outline the internal stages a student can follow in the event of raising a complaint: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early resolution</li> <li>• Formal stage</li> <li>• Review</li> </ul>				
<b>Intended Recipients:</b> Students				
<b>Approving Body and Date Approved</b>			University Teaching, Learning & Quality Committee 25 <sup>th</sup> August 2020	
<b>Date of Issue</b>			August 2020	
<b>Review Date:</b>			June 2021	
<b>Contact for review:</b>			Head of Student Administration	
Version	Date	Author(s)	Replaces	Comment
1.1	July 19	Clerk to the Board of Governors/ Head of Student Administration	Former Student Complaints Procedure	
1.2	August 20	Head of Student Administration/ Academic Policy and Quality Manager	Version 1.1	

This procedure applies to students at University of Plymouth sites of delivery and in all UK and International partnerships unless exceptions to regulations have been formally approved

## 1. Introduction

The University is committed to ensuring that students have the opportunity to raise complaints without risk of disadvantage or recrimination. Each case will be considered on its own merits and in accordance with the University's policies and procedures, with regard to the evidence and circumstances presented. Complaints will be treated constructively and promptly with fairness and consistency. The University welcomes all feedback, both positive and negative, and considers complaints to be a valuable source of information enabling us to improve services and enhance the student experience. The University of Plymouth's Student Complaints Procedure is in keeping with *The good practice framework: handling student complaints and academic appeals* published by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) and *UK Quality Code for Higher Education – Advice and Guidance: Concerns, Complaints and Appeals* published by the QAA.

Students can obtain free, independent and confidential advice and support about a complaint from [Students' Union Advice Centre](#) or equivalent at partner institutions.

## 2. Should you raise a concern and make a complaint?

For the purpose of this procedure, a student complaint is defined as an expression of dissatisfaction by one or more students about the University's, or partner institution's, action or lack of action, or about the standard of service provided by or on behalf of the University. Raising a complaint under this procedure may not be the best, most appropriate or quickest way to deal with a problem. *Before* raising a concern or a complaint under this procedure please consider the questions below and the alternative routes available for raising a complaint.

### **Are you dissatisfied with aspects of your course?**

- Issues or problems can be raised directly with the module leader, your personal tutor, programme leader or Head of School or at Programme Committees, School/Faculty/partner institution committees (e.g. the Faculty Teaching, Learning & Quality Committee) and Staff/Student Liaison meetings by your course rep. If you are a postgraduate research (PGR) student, you may also raise issues with your Director of Studies (DoS) or other supervisor, your School PGR Coordinator, or via your representative at Faculty Doctoral Committee or Doctoral College Board.
- Consult with [Students' Union Advice Centre](#) (or equivalent at partner institutions) who can signpost and advise on who to raise your complaint with.

## **Are you dissatisfied with a decision made by an Award Assessment Board or PGR Examination/Milestone Assessment Outcome?**

- Dissatisfaction with Award Assessment Board decisions, including the Research Programme Taught Component Award Board, e.g. progression from stage to stage; withdrawal on academic grounds; degree classification; decisions of Academic Offences Panels, etc., should be submitted as an [academic appeal](#).
- For PGR students, dissatisfaction with the outcome of a thesis examination or assessed milestone (e.g. Confirmation of Route or Project Approval) should be submitted as an [academic appeal](#).
- If you submit an appeal which incorporates a complaint, your complaint will be investigated and concluded before your appeal is considered.

## **Is your complaint about alleged misconduct or harassment either by another student or a member of staff?**

You should normally approach your Head of School or, in their absence, another appropriate senior member of staff of your School or partner institution.

- If the complaint relates to the misconduct or behaviour of a student, or bullying and harassment by a student, then the matter will be investigated using the [Student Code of Conduct and Disciplinary Procedure](#).
- If the complaint relates to the misconduct or behaviour of a member of staff, or bullying and harassment by a member of staff, then the matter will be investigated using the University's Disciplinary Policy and Procedure for staff.

The University takes a zero tolerance approach to incidents of bullying and harassment, and the [Dignity and Respect Policy](#) outlines the approach to tackling any behaviours which undermine a person's dignity.

Students studying in partner institutions should refer to the partner equivalent policies and procedures, for investigation by the partner institution.

## What issues can and cannot be considered under the University's Complaints Procedure?

### Issues that can be considered under the Student Complaints Procedure

- Aspects of your learning and teaching experience, including PGR supervision
- Service issues (if you are a student at a partner institution then complaints about partner service issues should be directed to the partner institution)
- Facilities issues
- Issues with University-managed accommodation

### Issues that cannot be considered under the Student Complaints Procedure

- Any academic decision taken by an assessment board or the examiners of PGR theses or assessed milestones
- Admissions decisions
- Complaints about bullying and harassment (see above)
- Private accommodation arrangements
- Student conduct (see above)

Please note, these lists are not exhaustive

### 3. Who can raise a complaint using this procedure?

- All students currently registered on a University of Plymouth award can make a complaint under this procedure. Former students may raise a complaint under this policy within 40 University working days after they ceased to be a registered student at the University or partner institution<sup>1</sup>. The University expects students to raise the complaint themselves and only in exceptional situations, can you ask a supporter or relative to raise a complaint on your behalf. In such cases you must give your express written consent for someone to raise a complaint on your behalf. Students can submit a group concern or complaint and for more information on how to do this please contact the Complaints Team by emailing [complaints@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:complaints@plymouth.ac.uk) . For degree apprentices also refer to your commitment statements received upon enrolment.
- If you are studying for an award at a partner institution, you should follow the University's Student Complaints Procedure if you have a complaint about teaching and learning of your programme. You should ensure that you fully engage with the Early Resolution Stage of this procedure as the University will require evidence that you have done this if you escalate to the Formal Stage. Please note that under Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) rules, the University cannot consider complaints about service issues (facilities, resources

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<sup>1</sup> Defined as 40 University working days from the End Date field on the University's student records system.

etc.) in partner institutions. Complaints about service issues in partner institutions should be raised through the partner institution's internal complaints procedure.

- You cannot normally make an anonymous complaint as doing so can impede the investigation and communication of the outcome. The University may exceptionally decide to consider an anonymous complaint if there is a compelling case, supported by evidence, for the matter to be investigated.

The University will always treat your concern or complaint with appropriate sensitivity. The personal information we ask you to provide will enable us to fully investigate your complaint. All personal data collected in this way will be processed in accordance with current data protection legislation and will normally only be used for this purpose. Information will normally be disclosed only to those who need to see it for the purposes of dealing with your complaint. Further information can be found in the University's full [Student Privacy Notice](#).

If you are still uncertain about how to raise a concern or whether you can make a complaint, please contact the Complaints and Appeals Team for advice [complaints@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:complaints@plymouth.ac.uk).

#### **4. How to raise a complaint**

There are three stages to the University's Student Complaints Procedure:

- The first thing you should do is raise your complaint at the Early Resolution Stage – your complaint can often be dealt with quickly and informally.
- If we cannot resolve your complaint informally, you can submit it as a formal complaint.
- Once you have received the University's response to your formal complaint, in specific circumstances, you can ask for a review.

#### **5. Early Resolution Stage**

##### **What you need to do**

- Decide who it would be best to raise your complaint with – that could be your module leader, personal tutor, programme leader, Director of Studies or other supervisor, School PGR co-ordinator, Head of School, Disability Services, or Hall Officer or alternatively;
- Raise your concern, preferably in writing, with your Faculty Registrar, Doctoral College Manager or with Accommodation Services via the emails below:

Accommodation Services: [residentcomplaints@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:residentcomplaints@plymouth.ac.uk)

Doctoral College Manager: [doctoralcollege@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:doctoralcollege@plymouth.ac.uk)

Faculty Registrar, Arts and Humanities: [artshumregistry@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:artshumregistry@plymouth.ac.uk)

Faculty Registrar, Health: [FOHComplaints@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:FOHComplaints@plymouth.ac.uk)

Faculty Registrar, Science and Engineering:  
[science.engineering@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:science.engineering@plymouth.ac.uk)

The complaint will then be referred to the appropriate member of staff (for example, a Programme Lead or School PGR Coordinator). Please note that you will be required to provide evidence of completing the Early Resolution Stage if you want to make a *formal* complaint.

- Your concern may relate to a service or facility not directly provided by any of the above i.e. Estates, Student Services or the Library. In such circumstances, please raise your concern via [complaints@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:complaints@plymouth.ac.uk)

Your email will be directed to the appropriate area for a response.

- Raise the complaint as soon as your concern arises (and no later than 40 University working days of the concern arising).
- When raising your complaint make clear your preferred outcome.
- You may be asked to attend a face-to-face meeting, which may take place as an online meeting, with the person considering your complaint, where the circumstances make this appropriate. You are entitled to bring a member of the University community or representative of the University of Plymouth's Students' Union (UPSU) to the meeting for support. You will not be entitled to bring a legal representative to the meeting. Normally, consideration of your complaint will be by correspondence and written evidence only.
- You can take advice from the [Students' Union Advice Centre](#), or an equivalent at a partner institution, at any stage of the process.

## **What you can expect**

- If you raise your complaint via email you will receive an acknowledgment normally within 5 University working days with details of who will be dealing with your complaint.
- The member of staff dealing with your complaint will either provide a written response to your email or offer to meet you to discuss your complaint normally within 10 University working days of your receipt of the acknowledgment. You can request a meeting to discuss the complaint further following a written response.
- If the response is likely to be delayed, you will be told why.
- If you attend a meeting to discuss your complaint, the member of staff dealing with your complaint will send you a brief summary of the discussion, including the proposed resolution, normally within 5 University working days of the meeting. If you don't agree with the summary, you can submit your own summary of the meeting, within 5 University working days of receiving the summary, to be included in the case file.
- If you are a PGR student raising a complaint about supervision, it may be appropriate and possible to make changes to your supervisory team. Please note, this is dependent on the availability of relevant expertise and regulatory requirements; A period of interruption, may be appropriate while your complaint is being considered and/or negotiated. Students in receipt of University Research Studentships will not be penalised or financially disadvantaged during the period of interruption.

## **6. The Formal Stage**

If you are dissatisfied with the proposed resolution at the Early Resolution Stage, you can escalate to the Formal Stage. You must provide evidence confirming that the matter has been raised via the Early Resolution stage. A formal complaint will not normally be accepted without evidence of completion of the Early Resolution Stage, unless you can either demonstrate exceptional reasons as to why you have been unable to engage with the Early Resolution Stage of the process, or where early resolution is not possible or suitable due to the character, complexity or seriousness of the case.

## **What you need to do**

- You must complete the [Formal Complaint Form](#) and submit it, with all supporting evidence, within 10 working days of receiving the response following the Early Resolution Stage. Please contact [complaints@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:complaints@plymouth.ac.uk) if you feel you need to submit your complaint in an alternative format. The University will consider on a case by case basis whether reasonable adjustments can be made to take account of the individual needs of students.
- You must explain how you have attempted to resolve your complaint at the Early Resolution Stage and why you remain dissatisfied.
- You must raise all matters of complaint and submit all supporting evidence at this stage, as you will not be able to raise new matters at the Review Stage. Additional evidence will not be permitted at the Review Stage unless you can demonstrate exceptional reasons why the evidence/information was not available at the Formal Complaint Stage.
- You can take advice from the [Students' Union Advice Centre](#), or an equivalent at a partner institution, at any stage of the process.

## **What you can expect**

- You will receive an acknowledgement of your complaint from the Complaints and Appeals Team within 5 University working days.
- Your complaint will be directed to the relevant area of the University and an appropriate member of staff will be identified to investigate your complaint. If you are studying at a partner institution, your complaint will be directed to the Partnerships Operations Manager in Academic Partnerships, who will send it to an appropriate member of staff in the partner institution.
- The member of staff investigating your formal complaint will not normally have been involved in your complaint at the Early Resolution Stage.
- You will receive an acknowledgement from the member of staff investigating your complaint normally within 5 University working days of them receiving it.
- The person investigating your complaint will consider your formal complaint form, any supporting evidence you have included with it and gather any further information they require. This may include discussing your complaint with any individual directly concerned with the complaint you have raised.



- Normally, consideration of your complaint will be by correspondence and written evidence only. You may, however, be asked to attend a face-to-face meeting, which may be an online meeting, with the member of staff investigating your complaint where issues are particularly complex and a meeting would provide a better understanding of the issues being raised. You are entitled to bring a member of the University community or representative of UPSU to the meeting for support. You will not be entitled to bring a legal representative to the meeting. You will normally receive 5 working days' notice of the date of the meeting.
- Where you attend a meeting to discuss your complaint you will receive a summary of the meeting normally within 5 University working days. If you don't agree with the summary you can submit your own summary of the meeting within 5 University working days of receiving the summary, to be included in the case file.
- You will receive the University's written response to your formal complaint via email, normally within 20 University working days from the acknowledgement from the member of staff investigating your complaint. This will include the outcome of the investigation and what, if any, action will be taken.

If you submit your complaint directly to the Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, other senior manager or a member of the Board of Governors, it will be referred back to the University's Complaints and Appeals Team so the University's procedure, as detailed above, can be followed. This will likely lead to a delay in your complaint being considered by the appropriate member of staff.

## **7. Review Stage**

If you are dissatisfied with the response at the Formal Stage, you may submit a request for review to the University's Complaints and Appeals Team.

Requests for review will only be accepted if you are able to demonstrate at least one of the following criteria;

- That the University's response to your formal complaint failed to address all of the issues raised.
- That the University's response to your formal complaint failed to consider all of the evidence submitted.
- That there is evidence of bias and/or prejudice in the consideration of the complaint.

- That a procedural irregularity occurred in the consideration of your formal complaint.
- That any remedy offered is unreasonable in all the circumstances.

Being unhappy with the University's response at the Formal Stage is not sufficient grounds for the matter to be considered for review.

You will not be able to raise new matters at the Review Stage. Additional evidence will not be permitted at this Stage unless you can demonstrate exceptional reasons why the evidence/information was not available at the Formal Stage.

### **What you need to do**

- Consider whether your request meets the criteria for review as detailed above.

Complete a [Request for Review Form](#) within 10 University working days of the date of the University's response to your complaint. Please contact [complaints@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:complaints@plymouth.ac.uk) if you feel you need to submit your complaint in an alternative format. The University will consider on a case by case basis whether reasonable adjustments can be made to take account of the individual needs of students.

### **What you can expect**

- The Complaints and Appeals Team will assess your request for review using the criteria detailed above. Their decision as to whether or not to accept your request for review is the University's final decision.
- You will receive a response to your request for review normally within 10 University working days of submitting your form to the Complaints and Appeals Team.
- If your request for review is accepted, your complaint will return to the Formal Stage and be considered by a member of staff not involved in the investigation of your formal complaint. If you remain dissatisfied, you may not request a second review of the same complaint. You should request a Completion of Procedures letter from the Complaints and Appeals Team within 10 University working days of the final response to your complaint. This means that the University's internal procedures for dealing with your complaint have been exhausted and as set out in 9 below may refer your complaint to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator.

- If your request for review is rejected, you will receive a Completion of Procedures letter (within 10 University working days of submitting your Request for Review Form). This means that the University's internal procedures for dealing with your complaint have been exhausted and as set out in 9 below may refer your complaint to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator.

## **8. What are the timeframes for making complaints?**

- You should raise a complaint under the Early Resolution Stage as soon as the issue arises, and normally within 40 University working days.
- Complaints submitted more than 40 University working days after the issue(s) occurred will be considered only in exceptional circumstances. Exceptional circumstances are those in which you are able to demonstrate good reason for not submitting the complaint earlier. The decision not to accept a late complaint is the final decision of the University.
- A series of issues may compound themselves resulting in a complaint, the first of which may have taken place more than 40 University working days before the complaint is submitted. In instances such as these, the investigating staff member will only consider matters which are relevant to the complaint being made.
- If you wish to escalate your complaint to the Formal Stage, you must submit your [formal complaint form](#) within 10 University working days of receiving a response at the Early Resolution Stage.
- Requests for review must be submitted within 10 University working days of receiving a response at the Formal Stage.

### **How long does the complaint process take?**

The University endeavours to respond to all complaints as soon as possible. Normally the Student Complaints Procedure will be completed within 90 calendar days from the date that a formal complaint is submitted, in accordance with guidance from the Office of the Independent Adjudicator. If a complaint is complex it may take longer than 90 days and in these circumstances you will be advised accordingly and provided with updates on the progress of the complaint.

## 9. External Review - Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education

Once you have completed the University's internal procedures, if you remain dissatisfied with the outcome you may refer your complaint to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA). This must be done within 12 months of the date of the Completion of Procedures letter you will receive once you have completed the University's internal procedures.

Further information is available via [the OIA](#).

## 10. Vexatious Complaints

The University understands that if a student makes a complaint, then it is a concern to them, whatever others might think. We are committed to dealing with all complaints transparently, fairly, and in line with our published procedures. However, we may terminate consideration of your complaint if we consider it to be vexatious or frivolous. Examples of such complaints are:

- complaints which are obsessive, harassing, or repetitive
- insistence on pursuing non-meritorious complaints and/or unrealistic, unreasonable outcomes
- insistence on pursuing complaints in an unreasonable manner
- complaints which are designed to cause disruption or annoyance
- demands for redress which lack any serious purpose or value

Should we deem your complaint to be vexatious or frivolous we will write to you and explain why we are terminating consideration of your complaint.

If you wish to challenge the decision then you should email [complaints@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:complaints@plymouth.ac.uk) within 10 University working days of us terminating your complaint to request the decision is reconsidered and explain why the decision should be reconsidered.

The Complaints and Appeals Team will then arrange for a Deputy Vice Chancellor, or nominee, to consider your request.

Should your request be accepted, the Deputy Vice Chancellor, or nominee, will instruct that your complaint is reviewed by a different University department or Faculty.

Should your request not be accepted you will be issued with a Completion of Procedures letter. The decision of the Deputy Vice Chancellor, or nominee, is final.