

Student Complaints Policy: from September 2005

Introduction

1 This Policy has been revised in the light of advice from the Office of the Independent Adjudicator as to best practice in the consideration of complaints from students, and updates the previous Complaints Policy which was based upon the QAA's Code of Practice on *Academic Appeals and Student Complaints on Academic Matters*.

2 The emphasis is on informality, with the object of solving your problems quickly and simply. The majority of problems should be able to be solved at the first stage, with relatively few progressing to the third stage.

Principles

3 This Policy seeks to embody the following principles:

- transparency – it spells out who is responsible for dealing with your complaint at each stage of the process, and indicates what action you should take if you feel dissatisfied with the outcome;
- speed – there are target timescales set for each stage of the process. If for any reason it is not possible to meet the timescale, you will be informed of the reason for the delay;
- natural justice – the Policy follows the principles of natural justice, in that no person who has any direct interest in a complaint will be involved in deciding the outcome, and you will be guaranteed a fair hearing;
- confidentiality – your complaint will be dealt with confidentially, and only the person(s) responsible for dealing with the complaint, and those who are parties to it, will be informed;
- non-detriment – you will not be disadvantaged if you make a complaint in good faith;
- group action – if several of you have a problem, you can make a joint complaint;
- a friend – you have the right to be accompanied by a friend when you make a complaint, or at any subsequent meeting to deal with the complaint.

What this Policy covers

4 This Policy covers student concerns or complaints about the provision of a taught programme of study or related academic or administrative service. Please note

- There is a separate Policy covering 'appeals' – ie, requests for the review of an examination board decision relating to assessment, progression or the classification of a degree. These requests are considered under the provisions of the Regulations covering the Review of Examination Board Decisions. A copy of these Regulations can be found on the web by following the pointers: for Students> Conduct and Performance> Student Complaints Policy.
- There is a separate Complaints Policy covering students registered for research degrees, which covers issues such as problems with supervision, and complaints about non-upgrading from MPhil to PhD. This appears as Schedule 2 to the Regulations for the Degrees of MPhil and PhD, and is on the Graduate School web site.

5 The Policy is in two sections: the first covers complaints concerning academic departments, a programme of study, or a related academic service (paragraphs 6-19). The second covers complaints about an administrative service or a College facility (paragraphs 20-24).

COMPLAINTS ABOUT ACADEMIC ISSUES

Examples of Complaint

6 These are examples of how the College has responded to complaints about academic issues:

- 1 *overcrowded lecture theatre* – the lecture was moved to a larger lecture theatre, although at a different time (teaching rooms need to be allocated before students select their options at the start of term, and so temporary overcrowding occasionally occurs).
- 2 *unsatisfactory lecturing or teaching* – if this is just the teacher’s method of delivery, it may simply be a matter of asking him/her to speak more clearly or more slowly. If it involves the *style* of lecturing, you may find it easier to raise this with your head of department or adviser/tutor. Many departments operate a system of ‘peer review’ of teaching (one member of staff sits in on another’s lecture, and later comments upon it) in order to pick up any examples of poor delivery, and the College has a training programme for members of staff.
- 3 *the programme of study isn’t what you expected* – this is something you might ask your representative on the Student/Staff Liaison Committee to raise at the next meeting. The solution will depend very much on the nature of the problem.
- 4 *poor supervision* – for example, if you feel you are not getting sufficient help with your project. Raise this with your supervisor, or with the departmental Director of Studies. It may be that you are expecting too much support (we expect students to be largely self-motivating), but if there is a real problem, talking it through, or even making a change of supervisor, may help matters.
- 5 *the books you want are not available in the Library* – this may arise from one or more causes: books may not have been ordered because the Library does not know they are needed, or they may be waiting to be re-shelved, or is it simply that there are not sufficient copies of popular books. You should first of all raise the problem with the Library, but if a number of books are not held by the Library, raise the matter with your lecturer. If this is a common problem for your course, you may have to raise the matter with the Student/Staff Liaison Committee.
- 6 *poor feedback* – if you have problems with your tutor’s comments on your coursework (there is no feedback, or it is late, or the comments are too brief to be helpful), raise this with your tutor, or with your department’s Senior Tutor. Your tutor should be prepared to provide sufficient feedback so that you know where your strengths and weaknesses lie, and can take action to fill the gaps in your knowledge and understanding.

Sources of Help and Advice

7 If you feel that you have a legitimate complaint on an academic issue, there are a number of sources or help and advice available to you:

- your department – your adviser/tutor; the Senior Tutor; the Head of Department
- the Dean for Student Affairs, for undergraduate students in the School of Medicine & Dentistry
- the Students’ Union, particularly the Vice-President (Education, Welfare & Representation)
- the Advice & Counselling Service
- your Student/Staff Liaison Committee, particularly if the problem affects a number of students.

The Policy in detail

8 The Policy consists of several stages:

- 1 *Informal Complaint* – made at the departmental level
- 2 *Formal Complaint* – also at the departmental level
- 3 *Formal Complaint* – made at the institutional level
- 4 *Appeal* – at the institutional level
- 5 *Petition to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator*

Stage 1 – Informal Complaint

9 You should first of all raise the matter with the member of staff concerned: it may be possible to settle it there and then. If you do not feel able to approach the person concerned, or if you do not know who is responsible, talk to your adviser/tutor, who will guide you on how to proceed. If the problem affects several of you, you may find it helpful to raise it at the Student/Staff Liaison Committee.

10 The object of this informal first stage is to resolve problems quickly and easily with a minimum of formality. You should receive a response within a week. Departments are not required to keep a record of informal complaints.

Stage 2 – Formal Complaint at Departmental Level

11 If you cannot get the problem solved quickly through the informal policy, or if the matter is relatively serious, you should make a formal complaint to the Department in accordance with the policy in the Departmental Handbook. (For undergraduate students in the School of Medicine & Dentistry, this will be to the Dean for Student Affairs.) Your complaint will be investigated, and you will receive a written response, normally within 2 weeks. The Department keeps a record of all formal complaints, including a note of the substance of the complaint, and how the matter was resolved, and makes an annual report to the Academic Board.

Stage 3 – Formal Complaint at Institutional Level

12 If you do not feel that the problem has been solved at the departmental level, you may bring a complaint at institutional level by writing to the Academic Registrar, spelling out the details of your complaint, and the steps you have already taken to get the matter resolved. The Academic Registrar will not normally consider complaints that have not first been raised at the departmental level unless the problems are particularly severe and/or urgent.

13 The Academic Registrar will investigate the complaint, generally obtaining written reports from all those involved, and those who are likely to be able to shed light upon the problem. S/he will then send these reports to you, so that you have an opportunity to comment upon them, and to challenge them if you feel that they do not fairly reflect the circumstances. The Academic Registrar will then consider all the information, including your comments upon the evidence, and prepare a report for the College Assessor, summarising the facts and recommending a course of action. There are two Assessors, both senior members of academic staff with a legal background. The Assessor will consider all the facts, and confirm whether, taking all the circumstances into account, the proposed course of action is fair and equitable. The Academic Registrar and the Assessor discuss the issue, and agree on how to address the complaint.

14 The Assessor may convene an oral hearing at which s/he will preside – for example, if there appears to be a clear conflict of evidence that has not been resolved by the above procedure. After the hearing, the Assessor will come to a final decision. The decision to call an oral hearing is a matter for the Assessor, and the fact that the complaint has been dealt with without such a hearing does not constitute a breach of this Policy.

15 The Academic Registrar will then write to you, informing you of the decision on your complaint, and of any action that the College is taking. Normally this decision will be made within four weeks; if this is not practicable, the Academic Registrar will write to you, telling you of progress on the matter.

Stage 4 – Appeal

16 If you are not satisfied with the decision you receive in the letter from the Academic Registrar, you may appeal in writing to a Vice-Principal. Appeals will normally be considered by the Vice-Principal (Teaching & Learning) unless s/he has previously been involved in the case: in this event, the matter will be dealt with by another Vice-Principal.

17 The Vice-Principal will investigate the appeal. Whereas each of the first three stages of the Policy involve a full investigation of the matter, the Vice-Principal will only be concerned with two issues:

- was the immediately preceding stage of the Complaints Policy conducted in accordance with this Policy, and

- was the final decision reasonable and in accordance with the facts of the case.

18 Therefore the Vice-Principal will only take action if s/he feels that the correct procedures have not been followed, or if the outcome does not appear reasonable in the light of the facts of the case. The Vice-Principal will let you have a decision in writing, normally within two weeks.

Stage 5 – Petition to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator

19 The fifth and final stage involves a petition to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, which is an independent agency established to consider complaints from students. This is, in effect, a second appeal (as the OIA does not investigate the complaint in detail, but examines whether the College has followed its own policy; whether that policy is fair, and whether the outcome is reasonable in the light of all the information to hand). It is extremely rare for complaints to reach this stage. If you wish to appeal to the OIA, ask the Academic Registrar's Office for the relevant information, and for a formal certificate confirming that all the College's internal processes for considering complaints have been completed. The OIA will not normally consider submissions until a student has completed the internal procedures.

COMPLAINTS ABOUT NON-ACADEMIC ISSUES

Types of Complaint

20 Complaints about non-academic issues are those that do not relate directly to your programme of study. They may, for example, relate to your accommodation (if you are in the student residences); the quality of the food or the service in the cafeterias; problems with the computer you are using in one of the PC labs; delays in obtaining a standard letter or a transcript from the Registry; or the level of noise in the Library. The sources of help and advice are similar to those for academic issues (see paragraph 7). The policy is also very similar, consisting of five stages.

Stage 1 – Informal Complaint

21 You should first of all raise the matter with the manager of the relevant service (for example, the manager of the catering outlet, or the senior librarian in charge).

Stage 2 – Formal Complaint at Service Level

22 If you cannot get the problem solved quickly through the informal policy, or if the matter is relatively serious, you should make a formal complaint to the head of the relevant administrative service. One of the staff on duty will tell you how to make a complaint, and to whom the complaint should be addressed. The matter will be investigated by the head of the service concerned, and you will receive a written response, normally within 2 weeks. The head of service will keep a record of all formal complaints, including a note of the substance of the complaint, and how the matter was resolved, and will make an annual report.

Stage 3 – Formal Complaint at Institutional Level

23 If you do not feel that the problem has been solved at the service level, you may bring a complaint at institutional level by writing to the Academic Registrar, spelling out the details of your complaint, and the steps you have taken to get the matter solved at service level. If the complaint concerns the Registry, you should address the complaint to the Director of Human Resources, who will investigate it for you. The policy is almost identical to that mentioned in paragraphs 12-15.

Stage 4 – Appeal

23 If you are not satisfied with the decision you receive from the Academic Registrar or the Director of Human Resources, you may appeal in writing to a Vice-Principal, as described in paragraphs 16-18.

24 The fifth and final stage, petition to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, is covered in paragraph 19 above.

Approved by Council, 30.6.2005