

University of Birmingham

Revisions to the Student Complaints Procedure

Topic and purpose of the paper

1. To submit for APRC's approval a number of revisions to the Student Complaints Procedure, to take effect from the academic session 2010/11.
2. Appendix 1 to this paper shows the proposed revisions as tracked changes. Appendix 2 shows the same version of the document, but the tracked changes have been accepted for ease of reference.

Proposal

3. APRC is requested to **consider** and, if thought appropriate, **approve** the revisions proposed for 2010/11 as summarised in section 6 below and set out in full in Appendices 1 and 2.

Background and consultation

4. A commitment is made in the Student Complaints Procedure that "the operation of the Procedure will be kept under review and any necessary changes made in light of experience". During the 2009/10 session, a number of procedural issues have arisen from individual complaints and feedback from staff and students which have prompted the proposed revisions summarised below.
5. Consultation has taken place with Legal Services and with colleagues within Academic and Student Administration involved in the management of complaints. Comments have been sought from the Guild of Students on proposals 6a and 6b, and discussions are ongoing with Human Resources regarding proposal 6c.

Proposed revisions and supporting arguments

6. Excluding minor textual and formatting changes, the key revisions proposed are as follows:
 - (a) Renaming the 'informal' stage of the Procedure the 'local' stage

The current informal stage of the Student Complaints Procedure is the point at which a full investigation of the complaint is carried out and a detailed response provided to the complainant by the Head of School/Corporate Service. The paperwork generated at this stage forms the basis of later

stages in the process, and it is therefore crucial that the importance of the informal stage is recognised by staff and students.

However, feedback has suggested that the term 'informal' could be considered misleading and could create the impression that complaints are not taken seriously at this stage of the process. It is hoped that renaming the stage 'local' rather than 'informal' will give a more accurate picture of this first stage of the Student Complaints Procedure, and will reassure students that their complaints are being considered with due care and attention at the level of the relevant School/Corporate Service.

During 2009/10, AQU has already taken steps to strengthen the informal/local stage of the Procedure, including the preparation of extra guidance for Schools/Corporate Services and a poster which has been displayed across campus. To supplement this, informal meetings of 'complaints contacts' within Schools and Colleges are planned for 2010/11.

(b) Requiring students to complete a complaints form at the local stage of the Procedure

Students may currently choose to submit a complaint to the Head of School/Corporate Service using the University's complaints form or by writing a letter or an email. Feedback from Schools and Colleges has indicated that it is not always clear from a letter or an email that the student wishes to raise a complaint. Requiring students to use the complaints form will help to ensure that complaints are recognised as such at an early stage, and that Schools and Corporate Services are prompted to handle them in accordance with the Student Complaints Procedure.

(c) Revisions to the process for dealing with complaints against staff (subject to ongoing consultation with Human Resources)

Issues relating to the professional conduct of staff are currently excluded from the Student Complaints Procedure. However, experience has shown that complaints do on occasion arise from the actions or behaviour of an individual member of staff, and that lack of clarity about how such issues should be handled can cause delays in investigating and resolving the complaint.

It is proposed that complaints which fall into this category are first considered by the Head of School/Corporate Service to establish whether there is a case to answer, mirroring the local stage of the Student Complaints Procedure. Consultation is currently taking place with Human Resources and the final wording will be submitted to the Committee for approval via Chair's action.

(d) Clarification that Schools / Corporate Services are expected to record and monitor local-level complaints

The Academic Quality Unit (AQU) records and monitors all formal complaints, and reports an anonymised annual summary to the University Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee. AQU also records and monitors any local-level complaints which are brought to its attention, but many cases are addressed and resolved without the involvement of AQU. Schools and Corporate Services have been asked to ensure that they have local systems in place for monitoring complaints (for example, during the preparation for Institutional Audit in 2009) but this has not previously been set out in the

Student Complaints Procedure. Given that only a small minority of cases become formal complaints, it is considered important for Schools and Corporate Services to record and monitor local-level complaints so that any trends can be identified and follow-up action taken as appropriate. AQU intends to provide further guidance on this issue during 2010/11.

- (e) Clarification of the role of the Student Complaints Officer (or nominee) at the formal stage of the Student Complaints Procedure

In order to manage students' expectations, and in response to student concerns, it is proposed that the Procedure be amended to clarify that the Student Complaints Officer (or nominee) does not carry out a re-investigation of the complaint at the formal stage of the process.

- (f) Addition of a timeframe for communicating to complainants the outcome of Complaints Review Panels

and

- (g) Addition of a 'School / Corporate Service Response Form' at the Complaints Review Panel stage

The Complaints Review Panel was introduced into the formal stage of the Student Complaints Procedure in 2009. In light of experience, it is proposed that two minor amendments be made to this stage. Firstly, it is recommended that the School/Corporate Service should have a formalised opportunity to respond to the complaint (as with academic appeals). Secondly, the addition of a timeframe within which students can expect to receive notification of the outcome of their complaint is consistent with earlier stages of the process.

- (h) Reference to the revised criteria for pursuing a Grievance to Council which came into effect in January 2009

It is proposed that the Procedure be amended to include information about the criteria for submission of a Grievance to Council as the final stage in the University's internal processes, so that students may take an informed decision as to how they might pursue their complaint should they remain dissatisfied.

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