

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 2011/12.

**Proposal**

2. APRC is requested to **consider** and, if thought appropriate, **approve** the proposed revisions to the Procedure as summarised in section 8 below and set out in full in Appendix 1.

**Background and consultation**

3. During 2009/10, procedural issues arising from individual complaints and feedback from staff and students prompted the proposal of a number of revisions to the Student Complaints Procedure, which were presented to the Committee on 20 May 2010 (paper QAE.10.05.07).
4. Following consideration of the proposed revisions, the Committee's decision is recorded in minute 10/18 as follows:

*That, in terms of the proposed amendments, a revised Student Complaints Procedure be circulated to members by correspondence in order for approval to be given to the following changes:*

- (a) *That the 'informal' stage of the procedure be replaced by the following stages:*
  - *"Issues", which would be considered within the relevant School/Department with the aim of resolving the matter informally;*
  - *"Head of School Review", which would be initiated if the complainant remained dissatisfied and wished to pursue the matter. At this stage the complainant would be required to fill in a form to be developed by the Academic Quality Unit.*
- (b) *That, following consultation with the Director of Legal Services, paragraph 22 of the procedure be re-drafted to incorporate the revised stages as detailed above.*
- (c) *That, in consultation with the Director of Legal Services, further consideration be given to the implications of recording and monitoring 'Head of School Review' cases, in light of the Freedom of Information Act and quality assurance and enhancement requirements.*
- (d) *That consideration be given to how best to keep College Directors of Education and Heads of College informed of the progress and outcomes of formal complaints.*

5. Following consultation within Academic and Student Administration and with Legal Services, further amendments were made to the Procedure to reflect the comments made by the Committee, together with formatting changes for the purposes of clarity and accessibility. The Procedure was circulated to the Committee during summer 2010, but not all members were available to comment. The Chair therefore determined that the revisions should be considered at the next meeting of the Committee.
6. Comments that were received from members during summer 2010 have been incorporated into the attached version of the Procedure.

### **Timing**

7. It had originally been intended that the revised Procedure would take effect in the academic session 2010/11. Given that the need for further consultation has delayed its resubmission to the Committee, it is anticipated that the revisions will not now take effect until 1 August 2011, for the academic session 2011/12.

### **Proposed revisions and supporting arguments**

8. Excluding minor textual and formatting changes, the key revisions proposed are as follows:

- (a) **Renaming informal complaints 'concerns'**

As noted above, the Committee resolved that informal complaints should be renamed 'issues' in order to encourage informal resolution and to differentiate more clearly between informal and formal cases. However, it is proposed that the term 'concerns' is adopted instead for clarity. In view of this, it is considered unnecessary to rename the informal stage the 'local' stage (which had been proposed previously). It is therefore proposed that the Procedure itself be renamed accordingly as the 'Student Concerns and Complaints Procedure'.

- (b) **Requiring students to complete a form at the informal stage of the Procedure**

As proposed previously, students are advised to complete a specified form in order to escalate their concern to the Head of School or Corporate Service at the informal stage of the Procedure (paragraphs 3.3 – 3.4 of the Procedure). This will help to ensure that concerns are recognised as such at an early stage, and that Schools and Corporate Services are prompted to handle them in accordance with the Procedure.

- (c) **Revisions to the process for dealing with concerns about staff members (subject to ongoing consultation with Human Resources)**

As proposed previously, it is intended that concerns relating to the professional conduct of a member of staff, together with allegations of harassment and bullying against a member of staff, will first be considered by the Head of School/Corporate Service to establish whether there is a case to answer, mirroring the informal stage of the Student Concerns and Complaints Procedure. Consultation is ongoing with Human Resources and any further amendments to the wording of this section of the Procedure (paragraphs A2.9 – A2.14) will be resubmitted to the Committee for approval.

(d) Revisions to the process for monitoring concerns and formal complaints

It had previously been proposed that Schools/Corporate Services be required to record and monitor concerns raised at the informal stage of the Procedure. Following consultation with Legal Services regarding the University's obligations under the Freedom of Information Act (2000), it has been agreed that recording cases should not be a requirement at the informal stage. However, it is proposed that any themes or trends emerging from concerns considered informally by the Head of School/Corporate Service (or nominee) be followed up locally as appropriate for the purposes of quality assurance and enhancement (paragraph A3.4).

Additionally, it is proposed that written responses from the Head of School/Corporate Service (or nominee) be copied to the College Director of Education as well as to the College Director of Quality Assurance and Enhancement (paragraph A3.2); and that formal complaint submissions and outcomes be copied to the Head of College for information (paragraph A.3.6).

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

As proposed previously in order to manage students' expectations and in response to student concerns, the Procedure has been 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

As proposed previously in light of experience of managing the Complaints Review Panel stage of the Procedure, it is proposed 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

As proposed previously, the Procedure has been 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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