



Abertay University

ANNUAL REPORT TO COURT ON THE COMPLAINTS HANDLING PROCEDURE FOR SESSION 2023-24

Introduction

The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman requires Scottish Universities to report on a variety of Key Performance Indicators, which have been considered in detail by the Scottish Universities' Complaints Forum and also by the Universities' Scotland Secretaries' Group. These were updated in 2022 to align with the revised the 2021 Model Complaints Handling Procedure.

The University's Complaints Handling Procedure ("CHP") emphasises the quick resolution of complaints, at the point nearest to wherever they arise within the University. This is in preference to lengthy investigations. However, some complaints may either commence at the investigation stage (if complex, time-consuming, or special categories of) or alternatively may proceed to stage 2 investigation after stage 1 frontline resolution (for example, if the complainant is still dissatisfied; in effect as an internal appeal).

Note: in this report where figures less than 5 occur (or less than 10% where percentages have been used), neither numbers/ percentages (as applicable) have been included in tables as a matter of policy. This applies where:

- (i) arithmetic distortions in percentages/trends due to low numbers may occur and/or
- (ii) where there is a risk of identification of any individuals' personal data (and/or special categories of personal data) under data protection legislation.

Key Performance Indicators

Table 1: Number of complaints recorded in the academic year 2023-24 by quarter (totals received)

Quarter	Number
Quarter 1 (Sept - Nov)	23
Quarter 2 (Dec - Feb)	17
Quarter 3 (Mar - May)	12
Quarter 4 (June - Aug)	22
Overall Total	74

Note: For the purposes of this report all complaint outcomes have been counted, including stage 1 frontline outcomes where the complaint was then escalated to stage 2 investigation.

Table 2: Total numbers of complaints recorded by academic year

Academic year	Number
2018-19	30
2019-20	16
2020-21	35
2021-22	61
2022-23	64
2023-24	74

Table 2 above shows a sharp rise in the number of complaints being reported and recorded in the academic year 2021/22, steady in 2022/23, and rising slightly in 2023/24, compared with the previous years. This rise follows an awareness campaign and increased complaints training opportunities for services staff in 2021/22 and 2022/23. The Quality Assurance team promoted staff awareness of stage 1 frontline complaint recording and reporting via visits to services team meetings and tailored staff training through a series of interactive, live sessions. In 2023/24, complaints training was also extended to staff at Higher Education Partners, who manage Abertay Online.

Table 3: Frontline or investigation procedure: proportion of total complaints numbers (and percentages) by academic year

Academic year	Frontline	Investigation
2018-19	17 (57%)	13 (43%)
2019-20	5 (31%)	11 (69%)
2020-21	23 (66%)	12 (34%)
2021-22	49 (80%)	12 (20%)
2022-23	47 (73%)	17 (27%)
2023-24	62 (84%)	12 (16%)

Table 3 above shows that the rise in complaints reported and recorded in academic year 2021-22, 2022-23 and 2023-24 is largely specific to stage 1 frontline complaints, which was expected. As mentioned above (Table 2 notes) the rise in the number of frontline complaints reported and recorded demonstrates the effect of an increased staff awareness campaign, highlighting stage 1 frontline complaints, what to report and how to report it, so that it can be appropriately recorded.

The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman’s view is that universities should address as many complaints as possible at stage 1 frontline response (this is the reason why the above percentages are provided). Frontline response is therefore performed wherever possible; this involves the complaint being addressed at the point in the University nearest to where it arose.

It is hoped that this will in turn decrease the number of stage 2 investigations and this can generally be seen in Table 3 as the percentage share of stage 2 has decreased to 16% in 2023/24 (27% in 2022/23). However, some complaints are too complex and/or lengthy to be considered as frontline response ones within the Ombudsman’s strict 5 working day target time-limit for this category of complaint. These cases may be escalated directly to complaint investigations (stage 2), for which a 20-working day target time-limit applies. The University’s CHP envisages that a complaint may commence as an investigation, i.e., at stage 2, where appropriate. This is where a more complex investigation is required and may involve more than one school or service.

Table 4: Percentage of all frontline response and of all investigations closed within target time-limit (5 and 20 working days respectively): by complaint quarter, in the academic year 2023-24

Quarter	Frontline	Investigation
Quarter 1 (Sept - Nov)	83%	100%
Quarter 2 (Dec - Feb)	86%	-
Quarter 3 (Mar - May)	73%	100%
Quarter 4 (June - Aug)	71%	100%
Annual averages (of total)	78%	92%

Note: where low numbers are concerned, percentage information can be misleading. For Quarter 2 investigations, the data is severely distorted due to low figures and has therefore not been included. Please see footnote 1 regarding redaction.

Note: Complaints arising from members of staff are normally dealt with under the Grievance Procedure operated by People Services and complaints made against students are considered under the Student Conduct policies. These have different timescales, so the data are not recorded here.

Table 4 above shows that for both stage 1 frontline and stage 2 investigations over three-quarters of cases were closed within the time-limits set by SPSO. Across the academic year 2023-24 these average 78% of all stage 1 and 90% of all stage 2 investigations complaints. When compared to 2022/23, this is a slight decrease for stage 1 frontline complaints (83% in 2022/23) and a significant increase for stage 2 investigation complaints (76% in 2022/23). This is indicative of an improved understanding of often complex stage 2 investigations and timely sharing of information and collaboration between University teams.

¹ Where figures less than 5 occur (or less than 10% where percentages have been used), neither numbers/ percentages (as applicable) have been included in tables as a matter of policy.. This applies where (i) arithmetic distortions in percentages/trends due to low numbers may occur and/or (ii) where there is a risk of identification of any individuals' personal data (and/or special categories of personal data) under data protection legislation.

Table 5: Time taken to resolve complaints: frontline and investigation average duration (number of days) by complaint quarter, in the academic year 2023-24

	Frontline (target = 5)	Investigation (target = 20)
Quarter 1 (Sept - Nov)	4	12
Quarter 2 (Dec - Feb)	3	16
Quarter 3 (Mar - May)	5	20
Quarter 4 (June - Aug)	5	13

Note: This table is not redacted for figures under 5 as it relates to number of days and not complaints.

Table 5 above shows the average length of time to deal with complaints, in working days, by complaint quarter respectively. Although most of the complaints were dealt with within the SPSO time limits, some did take longer than expected (see table 4). The main reasons for cases taking longer than the target limit were:

- Investigator shortage during summer months (due to staff annual leave).
- Complexity of case/ high volume of evidence to review.
- Lack of response/ extra information required from the complainant.
- Abertay Online complaint responders' inexperience of Scottish complaints requirements.

Authorised extensions were requested and granted for all of the overdue investigation cases. Authorised extensions were requested and granted for two thirds of overdue frontline complaints.

Of the one third of overdue frontline cases that did not request/receive extensions were a result of:

- Abertay Online complaint responders' inexperience of Scottish complaints requirements resulting in frontline complaints being deemed as feedback.
- Delays in collating information from the complainant
- Complexity of complaint and staff availability
- An internal miscommunication as to whether Abertay Online or a frontline team at Abertay should respond to a complaint.

With the exception of Abertay Online cases, all complainants were kept informed and therefore no follow-up in regard to not meeting deadlines was required. Further complaints training has been offered to Abertay Online complaints responders, which

includes information on deadlines, the importance of meeting them and how to seek an extension if one is required.

Table 6: Type of complainant in the academic year 2023-24: numbers (and percentages)

Type of complainant	Number (and percentage)
Student	63 (85%)
Member of staff	Under 5 (<10%)
Applicant	Under 5 (<10%)
Member of public	Under 5 (<10%)
3rd Party	5 (<10%)
Anonymous	Under 5 (<10%)

Note: please see footnote 2 regarding redaction.

Table 6 above shows the number and percentage of complaints arising in the academic year 2023-24 from specific types of complainants. As shown, the majority of complaints were received from students, which is to be expected. Third party complaints are also typically made on behalf of students, e.g. parents. Staff complaints are typically much lower as these tend to either be reports of student misconduct or grievances, both of which have separate documented processes.

² Where figures less than 5 occur (or less than 10% where percentages have been used), neither numbers/ percentages (as applicable) have been included in tables as a matter of policy. This applies where (i) arithmetic distortions in percentages/trends due to low numbers may occur and/or (ii) where there is a risk of identification of any individuals' personal data (and/or special categories of personal data) under data protection legislation.

Table 7: Outcomes of complaints in the academic year 2023-24, closed at each stage

Outcomes	Frontline	Investigation
Upheld fully	-	Under 5
Upheld partially	Under 5	Under 5
Not upheld	12	5
Resolved	46	Under 5
Out of time	-	-
Withdrawn/abandoned	Under 5	Under 5

Notes: please see footnote 3 regarding redaction.

A complaint may cover several points. Where any of these are upheld or partially upheld, the outcome of the investigation as a whole is recorded as ‘upheld partially’.

Table 7 above shows the outcomes of both stage 1 frontline and stage 2 investigation complaints. Part 3 of the Complaints Handling Procedure states “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”, and further states that we should try to resolve complaints wherever possible.

A “resolved” outcome is therefore a desirable and amicable solution to a complaint, and it can be seen that a high number, 46 stage 1 frontline complaints (which is 74% of all stage 1 frontline complaints), reached a resolved outcome in the 2023-24 complaints cycle. This is an increase on the previous year data (63% in 2022-23).

³ Where figures less than 5 occur (or less than 10% where percentages have been used), neither numbers/ percentages (as applicable) have been included in tables as a matter of policy. This applies where (i) arithmetic distortions in percentages/trends due to low numbers may occur and/or (ii) where there is a risk of identification of any individuals’ personal data (and/or special categories of personal data) under data protection legislation.

Table 8: Category of the complaints made in the academic year 2023-24, by frontline or investigation

Category	Frontline	Investigation
Service provision	9	Under 5
Teaching/assessment	23	7
Pastoral support	-	-
Policy/procedures/admin	10	Under 5
Staff attitude/conduct	Under 5	Under 5
Facilities	Under 5	-
Student accommodation	-	-
Fees/funding	6	Under 5
Special needs	5	Under 5
Other	Under 5	-

Notes: please see footnote 4 regarding redaction.

Notes: complaints often overlap categories and therefore can be recorded against more than one category, so the numbers in the table may not tally with the total numbers of complaints.

Table 8 above shows the categories under which a complaint can be made. The categories that received the most stage 1 frontline complaints was teaching/assessment and policy/procedures/admin, which is consistent with previous years, as such a large part of university business revolves around teaching and assessment, and these (alongside many other processes in the university) are underpinned by policies, procedures and administration processes.

A number of complaints received related to staff attitude/conduct. Where complaints may constitute staff misconduct, investigations are supported by People Services and outcomes not recorded centrally by Complaints Handling, as per the University's data protection policy. However, in reviewing the available complaint data, there were no repeated complaints against particular individuals or trends in specific schools/services related to staff attitude. These were isolated complaints. The figure is a slight decrease on 2022/23 (7 complaints at frontline; under 5 for stage 2 investigations).

⁴ Where figures less than 5 occur (or less than 10% where percentages have been used), neither numbers/ percentages (as applicable) have been included in tables as a matter of policy. This applies where (i) arithmetic distortions in percentages/trends due to low numbers may occur and/or (ii) where there is a risk of identification of any individuals' personal data (and/or special categories of personal data) under data protection legislation.

Table 9: Schools/Services against which complaints were made in the academic year 2023-24

School/Service	Frontline	Investigation
School of Design & Informatics	9	Under 5
School of Applied Sciences	Under 5	-
School of Business, Law & Social Sciences	6	-
Finance, Infrastructure & Corporate Services	Under 5	-
Student & Academic Services	17	Under 5
External & Corporate Relations	-	-
Governance	-	-
People Services	Under 5	-
Executive Office	-	-
Abertay Learning Enhancement Academy	-	-
Graduate School	Under 5	-
Alumni	-	-
Abertay Online	12	Under 5
Partner Provision	-	Under 5
Other	9	Under 5
Not applicable	-	-

Notes: please see footnote 5 regarding redaction.

Notes: Complaints often overlap categories and therefore can be recorded against more than one category, so the numbers in the table may not tally with the total numbers of complaints.

Table 9 above shows the Schools and Services against which a complaint can be made. The category that received the most stage 1 frontline complaints was Student

⁵ Where figures less than 5 occur (or less than 10% where percentages have been used), neither numbers/ percentages (as applicable) have been included in tables as a matter of policy. This applies where (i) arithmetic distortions in percentages/trends due to low numbers may occur and/or (ii) where there is a risk of identification of any individuals' personal data (and/or special categories of personal data) under data protection legislation.

and Academic Services. Again, this was to be expected, as this Service permeates the student journey, student communication, and most processes within the University. This ties in with the majority complaints being made by students (see Table 6), and also teaching/assessment and policy/procedures/admin being the categories which most complaints were recorded under (see Table 7).

Stage 1 frontline complaints relating to Abertay online have increased from under 5 in 2022/23 to 12 in 2023/24 making it the second highest area against which complaints were made. Despite additional training provided to Abertay online complaints handlers at the end of Q1, the majority of Abertay online complaints throughout the year (Q1-Q4) continued to be received directly from students rather than being resolved at the frontline by Abertay online responders. This indicates that complainants may have attempted to resolve the issues directly with Abertay online but have not received an adequate response. This highlights a continuing gap in the understanding of Scottish complaints requirements training and points to a need for further training in 2024/25, especially as the number of Abertay online students continues to grow.

With the exception of Abertay online and Student and Academic Services, low numbers of complaints recorded in other service areas make it difficult to report any significant findings. Extremely low reporting in some service areas with a high volume of frontline interactions with members of the public/ applicants/ students/ staff may indicate that more work is required in raising awareness of complaint response and reporting by staff. The Quality Assurance team intends to offer a Complaints Training E-module for Abertay staff to ensure all members of staff are aware of complaints response and reporting requirements.

Lessons learned - You Said We Did 2023-24

We have listened to your suggestions and ideas that have arisen through our complaints process, and we have worked hard to provide new and better services. Find examples below of what we have done as a result of your input during academic session 2023/24.

You Said

- You complained about the availability of PC equipment.
- You complained about consistency of support for Abertay Online learners.
- You complained about potential dangers of harmful equipment in public spaces.
- You complained about problems encountered in accessing Canvas.
- You complained about processing issues in requesting extensions.

We Did

- ✓ We have reviewed allocation of equipment in PC labs to ensure sufficient availability.
- ✓ We have reviewed processes to ensure support for online students is consistent and equal to the support for on-campus learners.
- ✓ We have adapted risk assessments and installed signage to help prevent risk.
- ✓ We have reviewed the service to ensure that improvements are implemented so students receive the service level expected.
- ✓ We have worked to make the submit button more prominent to students when requesting extensions.