

# **Annual Report to Court on the Complaints Handling Procedure for Session 2024-25**



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### 1. 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.

### 2. Key Performance Indicators

Quarter	Number
Quarter 1 (Sept - Nov)	23
Quarter 2 (Dec - Feb)	22
Quarter 3 (Mar - May)	21
Quarter 4 (June – Aug)	26
<b>Overall Total</b>	<b>92</b>

**Table 1: Number of complaints recorded in the academic year 2024-25 by quarter (totals received)**

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.

Academic year	Number
2019-20	16
2020-21	35
2021-22	61
2022-23	64
2023-24	74
2024-25	92

**Table 2: Total numbers of complaints recorded by academic year.**

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, rising in 2023-24, and rising again in 2024-25, compared with the previous years.

This rise follows an awareness campaign and increased complaints training opportunities for services staff from 2021-22 through to 2024-25. The Quality Assurance team has promoted staff awareness of stage 1 frontline complaint recording and reporting, including complaints training in 2023-24 to staff at Higher Education Partners, who manage Abertay Online.

In 2024-25, a Frontline Complaints E-module was developed by the Quality Assurance Team and rolled out from February 2025 to staff at Abertay and Higher Education Partners. Through collaboration with People Services, this training was included for Development Discussions and as part of the onboarding process for new members of Abertay staff.

93 staff members across Abertay and Higher Education Partners have completed the training up until September 2025. Ongoing monitoring of this training will continue through the academic year.

The introduction of the e-module training has further increased staff awareness of stage 1 frontline complaint recording and reporting and may explain the rise in complaints recorded in 2024-25.

Academic year	Frontline	Investigation
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%)
2024-25	76 (83%)	16 (17%)

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

Table 3 above shows that the rise in complaints reported and recorded in academic year 2021-22, 2022-23, 2023-24 and 2024-25 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 and training. This training highlights 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 increase frontline response 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 from 27% in 2022-23 to 16% and 17% in 2023-24 and 2024-25 respectively.

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 faculty or service.

Quarter	Frontline		Investigation	
	2023-24	2024-25	2023-24	2024-25
Quarter 1 (Sept - Nov)	83%	<b>79%</b>	100%	<b>100%</b>
Quarter 2 (Dec - Feb)	86%	<b>78%</b>	-	<b>100%</b>
Quarter 3 (Mar - May)	73%	<b>89%</b>	100%	<b>100%</b>
Quarter 4 (June - Aug)	71%	<b>89%</b>	100%	<b>86%</b>
<b>Annual averages (of total)</b>	78%	<b>84%</b>	92%	<b>93%</b>

**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 2024-25, compared to 2023-24.**

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<sup>1</sup> 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 is 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 2024-25 these average 84% of all stage 1 and 92% of all stage 2 investigations complaints. When compared to 2023-24, this is a slight increase for stage 1 frontline complaints while stage 2 investigation complaints remain steady.

This is indicative of an improved understanding of stage 1 frontline complaints and when they should be escalated to stage 2 investigations, alongside the timely sharing of information and collaboration between University teams.

A decrease of percentage of stage 2 investigations closed within the time limit in Quarter 4 may be attributed to both staff and student leave during summer vacation, which can impact both the availability of stage 2 investigators, and the provision of required information and evidence required to complete investigations.

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Time period	Frontline (target = 5)		Investigation (target = 20)	
	2023-24	2024-25	2023-24	2024-25
Quarter 1 (Sept - Nov)	4	5	12	19
Quarter 2 (Dec - Feb)	3	4	16	17
Quarter 3 (Mar - May)	5	3	20	15
Quarter 4 (June - Aug)	5	4	13	18
<b>Annual averages (of total)</b>	4	4	15	17

**Table 5: Time taken to resolve complaints: frontline and investigation average duration (number of days) by complaint quarter, in the academic year 2024-25, compared to 2023-24.**

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' not acknowledging complaints within the SPSO time limits

An authorised extension was requested and granted for the one overdue investigation case. Authorised extensions were requested and granted for three quarters of overdue frontline complaints.

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

- Abertay Online complaint responders' not acknowledging and correctly reporting complaints
- Delays in staff reporting complaints

Further complaints training has been offered to Abertay Online complaints responders through the Frontline Complaints e-Module which includes information on deadlines, the importance of meeting them and how to seek an extension if one is required. To September 2025, 23 Higher Education Partner staff members have completed the e-module.

Abertay staff who experienced delays in reporting have been encouraged to complete the e-module to strengthen their understanding of SPSO expectations and improve future compliance.

Type of complainant	Number (and %)	
	2023-24	2024-25
Student	63 (85%)	72 (78%)
Member of staff	Under 5 (<10%)	-
Applicant	Under 5 (<10%)	8 (9%)
Member of public	Under 5 (<10%)	9 (10%)
3rd Party	5 (<10%)	Under 5 (<10%)
Anonymous	Under 5 (<10%)	Under 5 (<10%)

**Table 6: Type of complainant in the academic year 2024-25: numbers (and percentages) compared to 2023-24.**

Note: please see footnote<sup>2</sup> regarding redaction.

Table 6 above shows the number and percentage of complaints arising in the academic year 2024-25 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.

However, in 2024-25 there has been an increase in number of complaints received from applicants and members of public. This rise appears to correlate with a broader increase in international student applications for the September 2025–26 intake, suggesting that the volume of complaints may be driven more by heightened applicant activity than by any specific procedural issue.

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Outcomes	Frontline		Investigation	
	2023-24	2024-25	2023-24	2024-25
Upheld fully	-	-	Under 5	<b>Under 5</b>
Upheld partially	Under 5	<b>Under 5</b>	Under 5	<b>Under 5</b>
Not upheld	12	<b>20</b>	5	<b>9</b>
Resolved	46	<b>52</b>	Under 5	<b>Under 5</b>
Out of time	-	<b>Under 5</b>	-	-
Withdrawn/abandoned	Under 5	<b>Under 5</b>	Under 5	<b>Under 5</b>

**Table 7: Outcomes of complaints in academic year 2024-25, closed at each stage, compared to 2023-24.**

Notes: please see footnote<sup>3</sup> 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 of stage 1 frontline complaints reached a resolved outcome in the 2024-25 complaints cycle.

However, the percentage of stage 1 complaints with a resolved outcome decreased from 74% in 2023-24 to 68% in 2024-25. Conversely, the percentage of stage 1 frontline complaints that reached a not upheld outcome increased from 19% in 2023-24 to 26% in 2024-25.

This may be due to the type of complainant, for example, complaints from applicants and members of the public may involve a broader range of issues or involve procedural misunderstandings or expectations that are harder to resolve.

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Category	Frontline		Investigation	
	2023-24	2024-25	2023-24	2024-25
Service provision	9	<b>13</b>	Under 5	<b>Under 5</b>
Teaching/assessment	23	<b>22</b>	7	<b>5</b>
Pastoral support	-	-	-	-
Policy/procedures/admin	10	<b>12</b>	Under 5	<b>Under 5</b>
Staff attitude/conduct	Under 5	<b>12</b>	Under 5	<b>Under 5</b>
Facilities	Under 5	<b>Under 5</b>	-	-
Fees/funding	6	<b>7</b>	Under 5	<b>Under 5</b>
Special needs	5	<b>Under 5</b>	Under 5	-
Other	Under 5	<b>5</b>	-	-

**Table 8: Category of the complaints made in the academic year 2024-25, by frontline or investigation, compared to 2023-24.**

Notes: please see footnote<sup>4</sup> 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 category that received the most stage 1 frontline complaints was teaching/assessment, which is consistent to previous years, as such a large part of university business revolves around teaching and assessment.

The number of complaints received related to staff attitude/conduct has increased from under 5 in 2023-24 to 12 in 2024-25. 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.

While it is difficult to establish a direct correlation, the increase in complaints related to staff conduct may reflect a growing sense of empowerment among students to voice their experiences, which could be attributed to improved visibility and accessibility of complaint channels at Abertay i.e. You Said We Did.

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Faculty/Service	Frontline	Investigation
Faculty of Design, Informatics and Business	19	Under 5
Faculty of Social and Applied Sciences	15	Under 5
Finance, Infrastructure and Corporate Services	7	Under 5
Student and Academic Services	9	Under 5
Strategy, Governance and External Relations	12	Under 5
People Services	-	
Abertay Learning Enhancement Academy	-	
Graduate School	Under 5	Under 5
Alumni	-	
Abertay Online	11	Under 5
Partner Provision	-	Under 5
Other	Under 5	Under 5
Not applicable	-	-

**Table 9: Faculties/Services against which complaints were made in the academic year 2024-25.**

Notes: please see footnote<sup>5</sup> regarding redaction.

Note: 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 Faculties and Services against which a complaint can be made.

In 2024-25, these categories were updated to reflect the new University structure. As such, it is not possible to provide a direct comparison. However, 2024-25 has seen a decrease in stage 1 frontline complaints against Student and Academic Services with 9 compared to 17 in 2023-24.

Stage 1 frontline complaints relating to Abertay Online remained relatively stable, with 12 recorded in 2023–24 and 11 in 2024–25. It is important to clarify that this category captures complaints specifically about Abertay Online services, rather than complaints submitted by Abertay Online students, which may be more appropriately classified under their respective Faculty.

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The highest number of stage 1 frontline complaints in 2024–25 were recorded within the Faculty of Design, Informatics and Business, and the Faculty of Social and Applied Sciences. This aligns with the data which shows that the majority of complaints were submitted by students (Table 6), and with data showing teaching/assessment remains the most frequently cited complaint category (Table 8). Given that these faculties deliver a substantial volume of teaching activity, the correlation between student-led complaints and academic-related concerns is consistent with previous years.

Stage 1 frontline complaints relating to Strategy, Governance and External Relations was the next highest area for receiving stage 1 frontline complaints. Due to the change in the University's structure, it's not possible to provide a comparison to previous years. However, it may tie in with the increased number of complaints being made by applicants in 2024-25 (see Table 6).

With the exception of the Faculty of Design, Informatics and Business, the Faculty of Social and Applied Sciences and Strategy, Governance and External Relations, 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 continue to promote the Frontline Complaints e-Module and offer drop in sessions to ensure all members of staff are aware of complaints response and reporting requirements.

## Annex: Lessons learned - You Said We Did 2024-25

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 2024-25.

You Said	We Did
➤ You complained about unclear assessment feedback.	✓ A meeting was arranged to explain grading feedback and clarify the key factors influencing assessment outcomes.
➤ You complained about lack of academic support and guidance for assessments in modules outside your main subject area.	✓ Additional academic guidance and tailored support will be provided going forward for students taking interdisciplinary modules.
➤ You complained about printing fees on campus.	✓ Minimum charges for printing will be reviewed, and signage improved detailing costs.
➤ You complained about unclear information regarding student finance.	✓ Information regarding the payment of tuition fees has been updated to be clearer.