



Complaint Handling Procedure

**A guide for Glasgow Caledonian
University staff**

August 2013

Glasgow Caledonian University complaints handling procedure – a guide for staff

Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) is committed to providing an excellent education and high quality services to our students from enrolment to graduation and to anyone we interact with in our normal business. We value complaints and use information learnt from them to help us improve and enhance our services. If something goes wrong or or someone is dissatisfied with something we have done we want them to tell us about it so we can try and put it right.

This leaflet describes our Complaints Handling Procedure and how complaints may be made. Full information on the University's Complaints Handling Procedure is available at <http://www.gcu.ac.uk/gag>.

What is a complaint?

The University regards a complaint as any expression of dissatisfaction about our action or lack of action, or about the standard of service provided by us or on our behalf.

What can people complain about?

Students and members of the public can complain about things like:

- the quality and standard of service we provide
- failure to provide a service
- the quality of facilities or learning resources
- treatment by or attitude of a staff member, student or contractor
- inappropriate behaviour by a staff member, student or contractor
- the failure of the University to follow an appropriate administrative process
- dissatisfaction with the University's policies (although it should be recognised that policy is set at the discretion of the University)

A complaint may involve more than one aspect of the above, more than one department or be about someone working on our behalf.

What isn't a complaint?

There are some things we can't deal with through our complaints handling procedure. These include:

- a routine first-time request for a service
- a request for information or an explanation of policy or practice
- a request under freedom of information or data protection legislation
- requests for compensation from the University

- things that are covered by academic appeals, (such as Assessment Board decisions) about admission
- an issue which is being, or has been, considered by a court or tribunal
- an attempt to reopen a previously concluded complaint or to have a complaint reconsidered where we have already given our final decision following an investigation. If you are still not satisfied, you can ask the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) for an independent review of the complaint.

Information received through routine feedback mechanisms, such as responses to questionnaires, will not normally be dealt with as complaints.

In terms of interacting with students, if other procedures or rights of appeal exist to help them resolve any concerns they may have, we should give them appropriate information and tell them where they should go to get advice.

Who can complain?

Anyone who received, requests or is directly affected by the services of the University can make a complaint to us. We encourage anyone with a complaint to approach us directly, but we can accept a complaint made on behalf of someone else (eg through a GCUSA representative, friend or family member) provided we have clear written authority to act on their behalf.

How are complaints made?

People can complain in person, by phone, in writing or by email. It is easier for us to resolve complaints if they are raised as soon as the complainant becomes aware of the issue and are made directly to the service concerned. People who have a complaint should be advised to talk to a member of staff within the department they are complaining about and these staff should try and resolve any problems on the spot.

Is there a time limit for making a complaint?

Normally complaints should be made within six months of:-

- the issue arising, or
- finding out that there is a reason to complain.

In exceptional circumstances, we may be able to accept a complaint after the time limit. If a complainant feels that the time limit should not apply to their complaint, please ask them to tell us why.

What will happen if someone complains?

Our complaints procedure has two stages:

Stage 1: Frontline Resolution – to be completed within five working days

Anyone who has a complaint is encouraged to raise it initially at the point of, or as close to the point of becoming aware of it as possible and to raise it with the department, School or service area in which the issue arose. Complaints at this stage may be made face-to-face, by phone, in writing or by email.

The purpose of frontline resolution is to attempt to resolve as quickly as possible complaints which are straightforward and require little or no investigation. Complaints at this stage of the process may be addressed by any relevant member of the University's staff and may be handled by way of a face-to-face discussion with the complainant, or by asking an appropriate member of staff to take the complaint forward to resolution..

Members of staff to whom complaints are made should consider some key questions:

- Is this a complaint or should the individual be referred to another procedure?
- What specifically is the complaint (or complaints) about and which area(s) of the University is/are involved?
- What outcome is the complainant hoping for and can it be achieved?
- Is this complaint straightforward and likely to be resolved with little or no investigation?
- Can the complaint be resolved on the spot by providing an apology/explanation/alternative solution?
- If I cannot help, can another member of staff assist in seeking a frontline resolution?
- What assistance can be provided to the complainant in taking this forward?

Resolution may be achieved by providing an on-the-spot explanation of why the issue occurred and/or an apology and, where possible, what will be done to stop this happening in the future.

If responsibility for the issue being complained about lies in the staff member's area of work, every attempt will be made to resolve the problem at source. If responsibility lies elsewhere, the staff member receiving the complaint will liaise with the relevant area rather than simply passing the complainant on to another office.

Timelines

Frontline resolution should normally be completed within five working days, though a resolution may be achieved more quickly.

Extension to timeline

In exceptional circumstances a short extension of time may be necessary to increase the possibility of resolving the complaint at the frontline resolution stage (for example, by obtaining information from other areas where no single area of the University is responsible for the issue(s) being complaint about). Where an extension is required this must be signed off by an appropriate senior member of staff in the in the area where responsibility for the complaint lies. The complainant must be told the reasons for extending the deadline and advised of the new timescale for resolution. The maximum extension which can be granted is five working days (ie, not more than 10 working days in total from the date of receipt of the complaint).

Closing the complaint at the frontline resolution stage

The outcome will be communicated to the complainant either face-face, by phone, in writing or by email. There is no requirement to send out further written communication to the complainant, although you may decide to do so. The response to the complainant must address all topics for which University is responsible and explain the reasons for the decision.

Once a decision has been issued, the record of the complaint must be updated on the recording system, including details of the decision reached. The complaint should then be closed.

Stage 2: Complaint Investigation – to be carried out within 20 working days (administered by the Department of Governance)

These complaints may already have been considered at the frontline resolution stage, or they may be complaints identified upon receipt as appropriate for immediate investigation.

A complaint will be moved to the investigation stage when:

- frontline resolution was attempted, but the complainant remains dissatisfied. This may be after the case has been closed following the frontline resolution stage
- the complainant refused to recognise or engage with the frontline resolution process and is insistent that the issue be addressed by a more senior officer
- the issues raised are complex and will require detailed investigation
- the complaint relates to issues that have been identified by the GCU has high risk or high profile.

Special attention will be given to identifying complaints considered high risk/high profile as these may require particular action or may raise crucial issues requiring direct input from senior management. Potential high risk/high profile complaints may:

- Involve a death or terminal illness
- Involve serious service failure, for example major delays in service provision or repeated failures to provide a service
- Generate significant and on-going press interest
- Pose a serious operational risk to the University
- Present issues of a highly sensitive nature.

A person can make a complaint in writing, in person, by telephone, by email or online or by having someone complain on their behalf. Where it is clear that a complaint will need to be considered at the investigation stage rather than through frontline resolution, the complainant will be asked to complete the 'Request for Formal Investigation' proforma (see www.gcu.ac.uk/gaq) in order to provide full details of the complaint and the preferred resolution. Any other relevant documentation should also be appended to the proforma. If they choose not to write it down and would prefer to complain in person, the proforma can be completed with them and a letter to confirm the scope of the complaint issued to them thereafter.

Individuals who have completed a proforma for Stage 2 Investigation (or who are considering doing so) should contact the Department of Governance for information on how this should be submitted, and to whom.

The purpose of conducting an investigation is to establish all of the facts relevant to the the complaint and to provide a full, objective and proportionate response to the complainant that represents the University's definitive position.

What the University will do when it receives a complaint for formal investigation

The Department of Governance will allocate the complaint to a Complaint Investigator and will work closely with the complainant to agree from the start of the investigation stage exactly what is being investigated, and to ensure that both the complainant and the Complaint Investigator understand the scope of the investigation. In discussion with the complainant, three key questions will be considered:

- what specifically is the complaint (or complaints)?
- what does the complainant hope to achieve by complaining?
- do the complainant's expectations appear to be reasonable and achievable?

If the complainant's expectations appear to exceed what the University can reasonably provide or are not within the University's power to provide, the complainant will be advised of this as soon as possible in order to manage expectations about possible outcomes.

Details of the complaint will be recorded on the University's Complaints Record Management system. Where the complaint has been through the frontline resolution stage, this will also be recorded on the records management system. At the conclusion of the investigation

records will be updated to reflect the final outcome and any action in response to the complaint.

Timelines

The following deadlines will be used for cases at the Formal Investigation stage:

- complaints will be acknowledged in writing within three working days of receipt
- the University will provide a full response to the complaint as soon as possible but not later than 20 working days from the time that the complaint was received for investigation.

Extension to the timeline

Not all investigations will be able to meet this deadline; for example some complaints are so complex that they will require careful consideration and detailed investigation beyond the 20 working days timeline. Where there are clear and justifiable reasons for extending the timescale, the Assistant Head of Governance will exercise judgement and will set time limits on any extended investigation, with the agreement of the complainant. If the complainant does not agree to an extension but it is unavoidable and reasonable, then the Assistant Head of Governance will consider and confirm the extension. In such circumstances, the complainant will be kept updated on the reason for the delay and given a revised timescale for bringing the investigation to a conclusion. It is expected, however, that this will be the exception and that the University will always strive to deliver a definitive response to the complainant within 20 working days.

Where an extension has been agreed, this will be recorded appropriately and the proportion of complaints that exceed the 20 working-day limit will be evident from reported statistics.

Mediation and other dispute resolution options

Some complex complaints (where, for example, the complainant and/or other involved parties have become entrenched in their position) may benefit from a different approach to resolving the complaint. Using mediation can help both parties to understand what is driving the complaint, and may be more likely to result in a mutually satisfactory conclusion being reached. Whilst the University does not have a formal mediation service, parties wishing to consider alternatives to complaint investigation should enquire about this with the Complaint Investigator. Where other means of dispute resolution are attempted, the complaint investigation will be suspended pending the outcome. If the complaint is not resolved by alternative resolution techniques, complaint investigation will be resumed.

Closing the complaint at the Complaint Investigation stage

The outcome of the investigation will be communicated to the complainant in writing. The decision, and details of how and when it was communicated to the complainant together with, if relevant, details of the resolution offered, will be recorded on the University's Complaint Record Management system for recording complaints. The decision will also advise the complainant about:-

- their right to ask the SPSO to review the complaint
- the time limit for doing so
- how to contact the SPSO

Independent external review by the SPSO

Role of the SPSO

Once the investigation stage has been completed, the complainant is entitled to ask the SPSO to look at their complaint. The SPSO considers complaints from people who remain dissatisfied at the conclusion of the University's CHP. The SPSO looks at issues such as service failure and maladministration (administrative fault as well as how the University has handled the complaint).

For a quick guide to our complaints procedure, please see the diagrams overleaf.

Quick guide to our complaints procedure

Complaints procedure

You can make your complaint in person, by phone, by e-mail or in writing.

We have a **two-stage complaints procedure**. We will always try to deal with your complaint quickly. But if it is clear that the matter will need a detailed investigation, we will tell you and keep you updated on our progress.

Stage 1: frontline resolution

We will always try to resolve your complaint quickly, within **five working days** if we can.

If you are dissatisfied with our response, you can ask us to consider your complaint at Stage 2.

Stage 2: investigation

We will look at your complaint at this stage if you are dissatisfied with our response at Stage 1. We also look at some complaints immediately at this stage, if it is clear that they are complex or need detailed investigation.

We will acknowledge your complaint within **three working days**. We will give you our decision as soon as possible. This will be after no more than **20 working days** *unless* there is clearly a good reason for needing more time.

The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman

If, after receiving our final decision on your complaint, you remain dissatisfied with our decision or the way we have handled your complaint, you can ask the SPSO to consider it.

We will tell you how to do this when we send you our final decision.