

Student Complaints Policy

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The University of Northampton is committed to the highest standards in the provision of courses, services and facilities for all its students. Occasionally there may be times when student expectations are not met and students wish to complain. This document sets out the policy for handling complaints internally, and how and when to contact the external independent body set up to review student complaints about Universities: the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education ([OIAHE](#)).
- 1.2 The principles underlying this Policy are in line with the OIAHE's Good Practice Framework: Handling Complaints and Academic Appeals and also complement the guidance on concerns, complaints and appeals from the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.
- 1.3 These principles are designed to improve the student experience by making our processes clear and accessible, fair, inclusive, independent, confidential, proportional, flexible and timely.
- 1.4 A complaint is defined as an oral or written expression of dissatisfaction about a material aspect of a student's experience in pursuing a course of study as a student of the University of Northampton. Complaints may cover academic and non-academic matters.

2. Purpose and scope

- 2.1 The purpose of this Policy is to address complaints arising from matters that have materially affected a student's university experience. These include:
 - An academic, administrative or pastoral service
 - Teaching and supervision
 - Information about University services
 - Facilities provision
- 2.2 This Policy does not cover complaints related to the following. The University has separate policies to cover these areas.

- All academic matters relating to assessment, progression and awards are dealt with through the **Academic Appeals Policy**;
 - All matters concerning admission to the University are covered through the **Applicant Complaints and Appeals Policy**;
 - Disciplinary issues are dealt with through the **Student Disciplinary Policy**;
 - All forms of harassment including those related to sexual harassment, or allegations of discrimination are dealt with through the **Misconduct Policy**;
 - Health and Safety issues should be referred to the Head of Health, Safety and Environment.
- 2.3 If the University feels that matters submitted originally as a complaint under this Policy are better suited to one of the above alternatives, then it reserves the right to deal with the matter under the alternative policy. In all cases the complainant will be notified.
- 2.4 This Policy applies either in full or partially to all registered students of the University, including undergraduate and postgraduate students, full-time and part-time students, and on-campus and distance learners. The Policy applies as follows:
- For students directly enrolled on the University's programmes of study, and studying at the University's campus or remotely, this Policy applies in full.
 - For students enrolled on University programmes of study, but directly registered with one of the University's partner institutions that is registered with the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education: the partner is responsible for the full complaints policy (including provision of a Completion of Procedures letter) unless the complaint relates to the process of awarding the degree. Note, however, that issues relating to the award itself, rather than the process, are subject to the Academic Appeals Policy. Where the complaint relates to the process of awarding the degree, the student has the right to refer a complaint to the University for consideration at Stage 1 or Stage 2 of this Policy if they are dissatisfied with the outcome of the initial consideration by the partner.
 - For students enrolled on University programmes of study, but directly registered with one of the University's partner institutions which is not registered with the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education, the partner is responsible for considering complaints related to the actions of the partner at the Local Level. The student then has the right to refer a complaint to the University for consideration at Stage 1 or Stage 2 of this policy if they are dissatisfied with the outcomes of the initial consideration.
- 2.5 The Student Complaints Policy is ultimately the responsibility of Senate, devolved to the Academic Registrar, or their nominee.
- 2.6 The process by which this policy is enacted is supported by the Student Conduct, Complaints and Appeals Team (SCCA@northampton.ac.uk) and is the main point of contact for complainants should they have concerns.

3. Key principles

- 3.1 The University will deal with all concerns and complaints without recrimination, and no student will be disadvantaged if they raise a complaint. If evidence to the contrary is found in this regard, the member of staff may be subject to disciplinary proceedings under the relevant University policy.
- 3.2 The University is committed to considering complaints objectively, and in a timely yet thorough manner.
- 3.3 Records will be kept of the nature and outcome of complaints, as well as the protected characteristics of complainants, so that recurring issues or issues related to equality and diversity are identified and addressed. All records will be managed in line with current data protection legislation.
- 3.4 Complaints will be handled with due consideration to confidentiality for both students and staff. Information contained in a complaint will be available only to those members of staff involved in its resolution. If confidentiality is perceived to be a particular issue, the complainant may discuss the approach to their complaint with the Academic Registrar or their nominee.
- 3.5 The complainant will be asked to provide evidence to support their complaint. This could be within any stage of the policy process. Evidence might include but is not limited to:
 - relevant emails from staff members/student;
 - photographs;
 - independent statements from witnesses;
 - contract/agreement;
 - assessment and tutor feedback
- 3.6 In order to progress the complaint, it may be necessary to obtain further information from the University or complainant. The evidence will be reviewed by appropriate trained staff (details of which are included within each process step, see below) to determine if any further information is required. The request for information from the complainant or the University, will either be in writing or in the form of a meeting.
- 3.7 Any person named in a complaint will be informed of the substance of the complaint and will have the right to respond as part of the investigation.
- 3.8 Staff responsible for all stages of the process will be appointed will be trained and supported, and appropriate support mechanisms will be in place for students making a complaint.
- 3.9 A complainant may choose to withdraw their complaint at any stage in this Policy.

4. Notes on specific types of complaint

- 4.1 *Anonymous complaints:* complaints require investigation to enable resolution. Where a complaint is made anonymously it will not be possible to undertake such an investigation. For such practical reasons, no action will normally be taken in respect of complaints made anonymously.
- 4.2 *Third Party complaints:* no investigation of a complaint made on behalf of a student will be undertaken without the student's written consent under Data Protection legislation. Additionally, for an investigation to be carried out, explicit written consent of the student is required, regardless of the relationship of the complainant to the student concerned.
- 4.3 *Complaints made to the Vice Chancellor, members of the University Leadership Team (ULT), or the Board of Governors:* any complaints received by the Vice Chancellor, ULT or Board of Governors will be forwarded to the Academic Registrar, who will acknowledge the complaint and ensure that it enters the policy at the appropriate point. If no attempt has been made by the complainant to resolve the matter using the Local Level procedure, the complainant may be advised to take up the issues raised with the Faculty or Directorate concerned.
- 4.4 *Complaints made by students under the age of 18:* all students, including those under the age of 18, are regarded by the University as understanding and able to exercise their own rights under Data Protection legislation. Therefore, as with any student, unless we have the express signed consent of a student under the age of 18 any information related to a student's complaint will not be shared with the parent or guardian of the student.
- 4.5 *Group complaints:* where a complaint is brought by a group of students, one of the complainants should be prepared to identify themselves as spokesperson and correspondent for the purposes of the formal procedure and each member of the group must be able to demonstrate that he/she has been personally affected by the matter which is the subject of the complaint. In addition, all complainants must agree in writing that the spokesperson acts on their behalf.
- 4.6 *Frivolous, vexatious or malicious complaints:* a vexatious or malicious complaint is defined as a complaint which is patently unsustainable, having been put forward to abuse the process of the Student Complaints Policy, or, for example, to attempt to defame the name or character of another person. If a complaint is considered by the Academic Registrar (or nominee) to be frivolous, vexatious or malicious, or otherwise unreasonable or not made in good faith, the complainant(s) may be subject to the University's Student Disciplinary Policy.
- 4.7 *Staff disciplinary matters:* if a complaint is justified, a member of staff may be subject to the University's Staff Disciplinary Policy if their behaviour is considered to have breached the Code of Conduct. Only relevant information relating to this action will be shared with the reporting students. 'Relevant' information is that which it is reasonably necessary to share to maintain the wellbeing and safety of the reporting party.

4.8 *Late complaints*: the University will not consider complaints that are made substantially after the occurrence that led to the complaint, unless a valid reason for the delay can be clearly demonstrated. To enable the University to investigate and resolve complaints in a timely manner, students should raise issues of complaint as soon as they occur and make reasonable attempts to resolve the matter informally at the local level. If the matter is not resolved and the student wishes to pursue a formal complaint, this should be raised no later than 3 months after a student has completed the year of study in which the complaint arose or within three months of the date of withdrawal, or beginning of an approved study break, whichever is earlier.

5. Local level resolution

5.1 Any concern or dissatisfaction is best dealt with at the level at which the matter arose. Complaints can often be resolved readily by raising the matter as soon as it arises and no later than 8 weeks after the matter arose. Where a student has a complaint, they should first seek resolution from the part of the University (or the partner organisation) where the issues causing the complaint arose. Students may wish to seek the advice of the:

- Student Conduct, Complaints and Appeals Team scca@northampton.ac.uk
- Student Support and Advice Team studentsupportofficers@northampton.ac.uk
- Officials of the Students' Union su.advice@northampton.ac.uk

5.2 Staff within service department, faculty or partner are responsible for managing the local level resolution and for providing the student with an outcome.

5.3 In the case of a student currently enrolled, normally a mediation meeting will be held in order to resolve issues of concern. The mediation process will normally involve someone independent of either party. It may involve separate meetings with each party prior to a meeting with both (or all) parties. The mediation process will be managed by the lead faculty, service department or partner. It is noted that a mediation meeting will not be appropriate in some cases, and that in others it may not be necessary, e.g. where the complaint is simply accepted and resolved. The student and any affected staff members will be advised of the proposed course of action arising out of the Local Level resolution stage.

5.4 The details of the complaint and the outcome of the Local Level resolution stage will be recorded so that the volume and nature of complaints can be effectively monitored. The local level resolution will normally be concluded within 3 weeks of receipt. This timescale may need to be extended, for example due to the complexity of the complaint, or the availability of relevant staff, to ensure that those involved can contribute and the complaint is given full consideration. In such cases the complainant will be kept informed

6. Formal procedure Stage 1

- 6.1 After conclusion of the Local Level resolution stage, if the complainant is not satisfied with the response, they may take the complaint to Stage 1 of the formal procedure by submitting a completed [Student Complaint Form](#). The form requires details of the nature of the complaint, the steps taken to resolve the matter at Local Level resolution, and the resolution being sought.
- 6.2 Where a student wishes to take a complaint to Stage 1 of the formal procedure, they should do so as soon as possible, and no later than 3 months from the conclusion of the Local Level resolution stage.
- 6.3 The Academic Registrar (or nominee) will acknowledge receipt of the form and initiate an investigation of the issues raised. This will be conducted by an appropriately trained member of staff, who has not been involved at the Local Level stage, as Investigator. In cases where a Dean or Head of Service has investigated the complaint at the Local Level resolution stage, the Academic Registrar will appoint an appropriately trained member of staff from outside the Faculty or Service.
- 6.4 The investigator will consider documentary evidence and will routinely interview the complainant and any member of staff who has been named in the complaint. Any student or member of staff invited for interview as part of the investigation may be accompanied by a friend, colleague or Student Union representative.
- 6.5 The investigation will normally be concluded within 6 weeks of receipt of the complaint by the Academic Registrar. This timescale may need to be extended, for example due to the complexity of the complaint, or the availability of relevant staff, to ensure that those involved can contribute and the complaint is given full consideration. In such cases the complainant will be kept informed.
- 6.6 The investigator will submit a written report to the Academic Registrar, giving their opinion on whether or not the complaint is justified or not justified. If it is justified then the investigator will recommend a resolution, which may or may not be that requested by the complainant. The report may also include recommendations to prevent similar problems arising in the future.
- 6.7 The investigator may recommend to the Academic Registrar that the complaint be considered vexatious, malicious, or frivolous.
- 6.8 Any recommended resolution must be approved by the Academic Registrar before the complainant is notified.
- 6.9 The Academic Registrar (or nominee) will communicate the outcome to the complainant. Where a member of staff has been named in the complaint or involved in the investigation, they will also be informed of the outcome. Subject to any confidentiality considerations, the complainant will be given a summary of the investigator's report.

- 6.10 This concludes the stage 1 process, and it is expected that the majority of formal complaints will be resolved at this stage.
- 6.11 SCCA is responsible for maintaining documents and outcomes information, as well as directing cases and supporting students and staff through the process.

7. Formal procedure Stage 2

- 7.1 In certain limited circumstances, a complainant may submit a request to the Academic Registrar to refer their complaint to Stage 2. Such requests must be submitted to the Academic Registrar by email within two weeks of the date of the letter communicating the outcome of Stage 1.
- 7.2 A request for referral to Stage 2 must clearly indicate which of the grounds for referral is relevant. The permitted grounds are:
 - (a) that the processes in Stage 1 were demonstrably biased or not sufficiently independent;
 - (b) that the outcome of Stage 1 did not address all the relevant issues;
 - (c) that new evidence can be presented that could not reasonably have been made available at the time of the stage 1 submission;
 - (d) that while the Stage 1 investigation found in favour of the student, the proposed outcome is unacceptable.
- 7.3 The decision to allow the matter to proceed to Stage 2 will be taken by the University's Chief Operating Officer (COO) or the Academic Registrar. If Stage 2 is evoked, then the matters raised will be put to a Complaints Panel.
- 7.4 If the COO or Academic Registrar finds that the above grounds are not met, the decision of the Stage 1 procedure will stand and the complainant will be advised accordingly. This decision marks the end of the University's internal Student Complaints Procedure. All complainants reaching this stage will be issued with a 'Completion of Procedure letter', which details their right to apply for a review by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education.
- 7.5 SCCA is responsible for maintaining documents and outcomes information, as well as directing cases and supporting students and staff through the process.
- 7.6 The Stage 2 process will normally be concluded within 3 weeks of receipt. This timescale may need to be extended, for example due to the complexity of the complaint, or the availability of relevant staff, to ensure that those involved can contribute and the complaint is given full consideration. In such cases the complainant will be kept informed.

8. Complaints Panel

- 8.1 Where, in the opinion of the COO or the Academic Registrar, the grounds for referral have been met, the matters raised will be referred to a Complaints Panel. The Complaints Panel will be required only to review the decision from Stage 1 insofar as the grounds for referral affect the previous judgment.
- 8.2 The Complaints Panel will be chaired by an appropriately trained member of staff and will comprise of two other fully trained staff members (excluding all staff of the complainant's subject area). All members will be independent of the matter in hand. The Academic Registrar will appoint an Officer to the Panel to minute the panel and provide guidance on policy and procedure.
- 8.3 The composition of the panel will, so far as possible, reflect a balance of gender, race or disability appropriate to the case.
- 8.4 The Complaints Panel will conduct a formal hearing. All parties required to attend will be given reasonable notice of the hearing, normally ten working days; additionally they will be supplied with all the papers relevant to the hearing including the agenda for the meeting, names and role titles of all panel members, an outline of how the meeting will proceed and a copy of this Policy.
- 8.5 If the complainant is unavailable at the time of the hearing, they may submit a written statement. The panel will decide whether it is able to reach a determination or whether further consideration is necessary.
- 8.6 Any student or member of staff invited to attend the Panel may be accompanied by a friend, colleague or Student Union representative. Legal representation or proxies will not be permitted.
- 8.7 The Panel will usually convene online, unless the student has requested an in-person Panel. All parties are required to have cameras switched on during the Panel.
- 8.8 Recording of the Panel meeting is not permitted.
- 8.9 All parties are required to confirm their attendance to the Academic Registrar and provide notification at least three days before the hearing if they intend to bring a friend, colleague or Student Union representative.
- 8.10 The Panel will conduct the meeting in a sensitive manner, following the agenda provided to attendees.
- 8.11 The Panel may agree to the complainant and any person who is the subject of the complaint being interviewed separately.

- 8.12 The complainant and any person named in the complaint will have the opportunity to put their case in person or online to the Panel, and will normally be given a further opportunity to address the Panel at the conclusion of evidence before the Panel makes its decision.
- 8.13 SCCA is responsible for maintaining documents and outcomes information, as well as directing cases and supporting students and staff through the process.

9. Decision of the Panel

- 9.1 The Panel will determine whether the complaint is, or is not, justified. If the complaint is justified, the Panel will determine an appropriate resolution. This may include but is not limited to: re-running a process that was flawed or biased, offering a fresh assessment opportunity, compensation in line with University guidelines, or an apology. If relevant, the panel may recommend that disciplinary proceedings be initiated concerning a person or persons named in the complaint.
- 9.2 A formal report of the Panel meeting will be written by the Officer to the Panel and will be retained by the Academic Registrar.
- 9.3 The decision of the Panel, together with the reasons for the decision, will be communicated to all parties to the complaint within 7 working days of the Panel meeting. The decision of the Panel is final and not subject to review by any other University body.
- 9.4 Communication of the Panel's decision concludes Stage 2. At this point, the University's internal Complaints Procedure will have been exhausted, and the complainant will be issued with a 'Completion of Procedure' letter.
- 9.5 Further information on procedures for external and independent review can be obtained from the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education oiahe.org.uk. This is a free service offered to students by an independent body set up to review student complaints about Universities. The OIAHE will usually ask for a Completion of Procedures letter to prove all internal processes have been exhausted.

10. Support for students

- 10.1 Throughout the various stages of the Complaints process students can seek help and guidance from the Students' Union su.advice@northampton.ac.uk the Students' Union su.advice@northampton.ac.uk
- 10.2 Students are also encouraged to contact the Student Support and Advice Team on studentsupportofficers@northampton.ac.uk where colleagues are available to offer support and signpost any other help that may prove useful e.g. wellbeing services, disability services.
- 10.3 The University's Student Conduct, Complaints and Appeals (SCCA) is responsible for maintaining documents and outcomes information, as well as directing cases and

supporting students on any aspect of this policy and related procedures
scca@northampton.ac.uk.

- 10.4 Students are also encouraged to seek support from external service providers as relevant to the student e.g. mental health services and GPs.
- 10.5 For both stages 1 and 2 of the formal Complaints process, the complainant may choose to have a SU representative or friend accompany them to the meetings. This could be a friend on their course or a friend from outside of the University, whose role is to provide moral support for the student. They cannot answer questions on behalf of the student or ask questions, but the student may confer with them during the course of the interview or meeting, for example, before responding to any question from the investigator or the Panel.
- 10.6 The complainant may not be represented in their absence by a third party. In such cases the Panel will normally consider the case in their absence. Where, through reasons of disability, the complainant is unable to represent themselves, appropriate adjustments will be made by the Academic Registrar (or nominee).
- 10.7 As the Complaint Policy is part of University's internal arrangements, and is not a legal process, formal legal representation is not helpful or appropriate.
- 10.8 If a complaint is justified, the University will, on production of receipts, reimburse any reasonable out of pocket expenses connected with attendance at the University for the formal stages of the policy. This may include travel and subsistence costs in connection with the complainant's attendance at a hearing.

11. [Links to related University Policy and Guidance](#)

[Applicant Complaint and Appeals Policy](#)

[Student Disciplinary Policy](#)

[Academic Appeals Policy](#)

[University Guidance on Compensation and Refunds](#)

12. [Links to related external documents](#)

[UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#)

[Handling Complaints and Academic Appeals](#)

13. Governance

- 13.1 This table shows who is responsible for keeping this Policy updated, and the timeline for doing so.

Policy Owner	Academic Registrar
Principal Contact	Academic Registrar
Date of initial committee approval	June 2014 (SEC)
Date of Senate approval	July 2014
Date of last annual update	June 2021
Proposed date of next annual update	June 2023
Date of last full review	March 2023
Proposed date of next full review	March 2025
Version number and date	5.0 March 2023

14. Process diagram

This flow chart summarises the student complaints procedure. The University of Northampton aims to work within the timescales below. Depending upon the complexity and each individual case, then timescales may vary. The complainant will be kept informed.

