



Voice Study Centre Student Complaints Policy

What is a complaint?

From time to time, a student may feel dissatisfied with some aspect of their dealing with the University and, when that happens, it is important that the issue is dealt with constructively and as quickly as possible 'without risk of disadvantage or recrimination'. Each case will be considered on its own merit and in accordance with the evidence and circumstances presented.

In line with the QAA Quality Code, a complaint is defined as 'an expression of dissatisfaction by one or more students about a University's action or lack of action, or about the standard of service provided by or on behalf of the University'. Although the Voice Study Centre is not a University, it does form part of the university infrastructure through its partnership. We therefore aim to be consistent with university policies.

Some examples of concerns and complaints include:

- Failure by the Voice Study Centre to meet its obligations including those outlined in the course/student handbook
- Misleading or incorrect information provided by the Voice Study Centre in prospectuses or promotional material
- Concerns about the delivery of a programme, teaching or administration
- Poor quality facilities, learning resources or services provided directly by the Voice Study Centre

Raising a Complaint

Students wishing to raise a complaint, should follow each stage of the complaint procedure and would not normally be permitted to skip a stage. These are:

- a. **Early Resolution** - seeks to resolve concerns swiftly and effectively at the point at which the concern is raised, or as close to that point as possible. This includes:
 - A complaint directly to your personal tutor who will discuss the complaint with you and, if serious she will refer it to the Head of Student Support
 - If your complaint involves your personal tutor, you may choose to complain directly to the Head of Student Support who will invite you to an informal discussion and will seek a resolution

In all cases, students will be directed to the next stage of the procedure if they remain dissatisfied at the conclusion of the Early Resolution stage.

- b. **Formal Complaint** - is appropriate where a student is dissatisfied with the outcome of early resolution, or where early resolution is not possible. This will usually be investigated by The Head of Student Support. The H of S will liaise with the Senior Management Team. This stage may include mediation or conciliation where appropriate.



- c. **Internal Review** - provides an opportunity for a formal Internal Review, carried out by either the Managing Director or the Director of Operations.
- d. **External Review** - External Review (see Section 8) - where the complainant remains dissatisfied, they can submit a request for a review by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) within twelve months of the date of the Completion of Procedures letter provided by the Voice Study Centre.

All concerns or complaints should be submitted as soon as possible after the events or actions which have prompted them, and normally within the timeframes outlined in these procedures. Students should be prepared to provide evidence to support their concerns or complaint and where required, students should use the relevant Complaint Form available on Canvas VLE.

Advice Support and Guidance

The Voice Study Centre is a member of the Student Union. The SU Advice provides independent advice, support and guidance and representatives are permitted to accompany students to meetings at any stage of the procedure. The procedure is an internal process and does not have the same degree of formality as a court of law. The student may not normally bring anyone to a meeting that is not a member of the Voice Study Centre unless this has been agreed as a reasonable adjustment under the Equality Act 2010.

If a complainant appears unable to engage effectively with the procedure, it may be necessary to suspend consideration of their concern or complaint until they have accessed appropriate support.

The Voice Study Centre has a zero-tolerance approach to sexual violence, harassment and hate crime. Students that are the victim of harassment or bullying may submit a complaint, and are encouraged to seek support via the Voice Study Centre Student Mental Health service at the earliest opportunity.

Students may request reasonable adjustments to these procedures in line with the rights that students retain under the Equality Act 2010. Requests will be considered individually, and students will be notified of the adjustments that have been agreed in writing and at the earliest opportunity.

Roles and Responsibilities

The Head of Student Support co-ordinates all aspects of the administration and delivery of this procedure. Personal tutors may handle complaints that require an early resolution and Senior academic staff such as Senior Lecturers and other members of the Senior Management team may also be involved in the resolution of complaints where appropriate.



Complaints Investigators are trained senior staff members responsible for the conduct of investigations and the coordination of all aspects of the response to complainants.

The Managing Director and the Director of Operations conducts Internal Reviews. They will review the complaint, at the complainant's request, to consider whether any procedural irregularities occurred during the Formal Complaint, the reasonableness of the outcome and/or whether any further investigation is required.

Core Principles

This procedure will:

- Be fair and impartial
- Be transparent and easy to access
- Be flexible and timely, ensuring that concerns and complaints are dealt with as quickly as possible
- Clearly communicate processes, decisions and the reasons behind decisions
- Ensure that decisions are taken without actual or perceived conflicts of interest
- Ensure an appropriate level of confidentiality
- Include support for students
- Use the information gathered to improve services for students and the student experience
- Expect all involved to behave appropriately and not allow our procedures to be misused

Confidentiality

Complainants may expect concerns and complaints to be dealt with confidentially and that their privacy will be respected. However, any person who is the subject of a concern or a complaint will be advised, and an appropriately redacted copy of the concern or complaint and any associated evidence will normally be copied to them, in order that they are given the opportunity to respond. It may also be necessary to disclose information to others in order to deal with the concern or complaint and, in these circumstances, the parties concerned will be informed of such a disclosure. An appropriately redacted copy of the investigator's report may be provided to the person who is the subject of a concern or complaint.

Where a concern or complaint has been raised against a member of staff and has been upheld, the student will be advised of this. However, specific details affecting individual staff members will not normally be shared, particularly where disciplinary action is subsequently taken.

Managing unacceptable behaviour

All individuals involved in a complaint are expected to act reasonably and fairly towards each other, treat the process itself with respect and not abuse it. It is recognised that people may act out of character in times of trouble or distress, however, the Voice Study Centre also recognises its duty to ensure the safety and welfare of its staff and students. Consequently, the Voice Study Centre has a zero tolerance towards complainants whose behaviour is deemed to be unacceptable and action will



be taken to protect staff. The term 'complainant' also includes anyone appointed as a third party to act on the complainant's behalf or anyone who contacts the Voice Study Centre in connection with a complaint.

The Voice Study Centre's definition of 'unacceptable behaviour' might include, but is not necessarily restricted to, cases in which there is clear evidence that the complainant has behaved in one or more of the following inappropriate ways or the complaint itself is considered to be frivolous, vexatious or motivated by malice:

- Complaints which are obsessive, harassing or repetitive
- Communicating with the Voice Study Centre in an abusive, offensive, defamatory, distressing, aggressive, threatening, coercive or intimidating manner
- Submitting a complaint containing materially inaccurate or false information or evidence
- Insistence on pursuing non-meritorious complaints and/or unrealistic, unreasonable outcomes
- Insistence on pursuing meritorious complaints in an unreasonable manner
- Complaints which are designed to cause disruption or annoyance
- Demands for redress which lack any serious purpose or value

When a complainant's behaviour, or the complaint itself, is considered to be unacceptable, as a first step, the Voice Study Centre will normally tell the complainant why their behaviour or complaint is considered to be unacceptable and will ask them to desist. If the unacceptable behaviour continues, the Voice Study Centre will take action to restrict contact with the Voice Study Centre.

Any decision to restrict a student's access will be communicated to the student in writing by the Director of Operations and will be appropriate and proportionate.

The options the Voice Study Centre is most likely to consider are:

- Requesting contact in a particular form
- Requiring contact to take place with a named officer of the University
- Restricting telephone calls or emails to specified days and times
- Asking the complainant to appoint a representative to correspond with the University and/or
- asking the complainant to enter into an agreement about their conduct

Should the complainant not agree with the restriction, they should contest the decision in writing to the Director of Operations within ten working days of its communication. The Director of Operations will consider the student's representations and, where the restriction is considered unavoidable and reasonable, the Registrar and Secretary (or nominee) will confirm the terms of the restricted access to the student in writing.

In instances where a complaint is considered to be frivolous and/or vexatious, or where a complainant continues to behave in a way that is considered to be unacceptable, the Academic Registrar (or nominee) may decide whether the Voice Study Centre's disciplinary proceedings should be initiated in accordance with the Code of Student Conduct or whether to terminate contact with the complainant. In exceptional circumstances, this may mean that consideration of the complaint is also terminated and a Completion of Procedures letter issued.



Should the complainant wish to appeal a decision to terminate contact or to dismiss a complaint, they should contest the decision in writing to the Managing Director within ten working days of its communication. The Managing Director will consider the student's representations and, where the restriction is considered reasonable, the Managing Director will confirm the dismissal and issue the student with a Completion of Procedures letter within 28 days. Where the restriction is considered unreasonable the Managing Director may amend or rescind the restrictions.

Where a complainant submits multiple complaints on substantially the same issue, the Voice Study Centre reserves the right to treat the matter as a single complaint and to decline to respond to each separate subsequent complaint.

Eligibility

This procedure is available to students registered on a programme of study at the Voice Study Centre, wishing to raise a concern or complaint regarding an issue by which they have been materially affected. The term 'student' includes those registered to study with the Voice Study Centre or registered for its awards and those who have recently left the Voice Study Centre. Those students who have recently left a programme of study may only raise issues of concern or complaint within three months after the conferral of an award or withdrawal from their programme. The Director of Operations has discretion to extend this three-month period where they consider that there are compelling reasons to do so.

Some issues may be more appropriately considered under processes other than this procedure. As such, this procedure will not normally cover:

- Appeals relating to examinations or assessments or to academic progress or against a finding of guilt in relation to an academic offence (see the Academic Appeals Procedure, Academic Offences Procedure).
- Complaints involving an allegation that a student has failed to meet their academic commitments (see the Academic Appeals Procedure)
- A concern about a decision made under other specific regulations such as Fitness to Practise or DBS (see the Fitness to Practise Procedure / DBS)
- Complaints regarding an admissions or readmission decision
- Complaints regarding the behaviour of another student, which should be submitted in accordance with the Code of Student Conduct.

Students who are affected by a policy outcome but do not have the right to appeal may submit their concern or complaint through this procedure.

Concerns and complaints by third parties

Concerns and complaints submitted via a third party will not normally be accepted. However, it is recognised that some individuals may be unable to raise a concern or make a complaint on their own. In these circumstances, concerns or complaints brought by permitted third parties (for



example, a Students' Union representative or family member) will only be accepted when the individual affected has completed a third-party authority form and the Director of Operations has approved the request.

Collective concerns and complaints

Where the issues raised affect a number of students, those students can submit a concern or complaint as a 'group concern/complaint'. In such circumstances, in order to manage the progression of the concern or complaint, the Voice Study Centre will normally ask the group to nominate one student to act as group representative. The Voice Study Centre will deal with the nominated representative only and will expect them to liaise with the other students.

Anonymous concerns and complaints

Concerns and complaints received anonymously will not normally be accepted, except where there are compelling reasons, supported by evidence, for the matter to be investigated.

The Complaints Procedure: Early Resolution

The purpose of the early resolution stage is to attempt to resolve concerns and complaints as quickly as possible. Concerns at this stage may be made, in writing or at a meeting with the relevant member of staff.

Students who experience a problem with their course or any other Voice Study Centre service, should normally raise this with a relevant member of the Voice Study Centre staff involved with the service or matter, providing relevant details of the complaint and any remedy sought. This may be the member of staff whose actions have caused the concern or a personal tutor or programme director. Issues of a general nature relating to the teaching and learning provision in a department/school or centre may alternatively be raised via the departmental Student Voice Groups representative.

Complaints submitted for Early Resolution should normally be raised within three months of the event(s) complained about unless there is good reason for the delay.

Where the student is uncomfortable about approaching the appropriate contact, or where they have not previously received a satisfactory response, they should contact the Head of Student Support.

Staff investigating concerns at this stage should, if possible, have a face-to-face discussion with the parties concerned, to come to an understanding of the exact nature of the student's dissatisfaction and to explore appropriate resolutions. These meetings are designed to clearly establish facts, not to apportion blame, and are not disciplinary investigations.

If a concern or complaint relates to the actions of two or more departments/schools/centres or services, the staff member or office receiving the concern or complaint will confer with the other



areas and decide who will take the lead on the concern or complaint. The complainant should be informed to whom the matter has been passed and given their contact details.

Resolving the concern at Early Resolution

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 prevent this from happening in the future. It is important to remember that complaints may not always produce the outcome preferred by the complainant. There may be a number of reasons for this, including lack of evidence to substantiate the complaint or the fact that circumstances beyond the Voice Study Centre's control may affect the level of service provided.

The outcome of an early resolution, including the reasons for the outcome, should be communicated to the complainant. Where proportionate to do so this will be in writing

The Complaints Procedure: Formal Complaint

Where it has not been possible to resolve the matter by Early Resolution, the complainant may initiate a Formal Complaint by completing a Formal Student Complaint Form and submitting it to the Head of Student Support

Complaints submitted as a Formal Complaint should normally be raised after attempts at Early Resolution have been completed, and no later than three months after the event/s complained about OR after one month after the attempts of the Early Resolution have concluded (whichever is later) unless there is good reason for the delay.

The Head of Student Support has absolute discretion to extend this deadline, providing that the complainant is able to demonstrate to the satisfaction of the Academic Registrar (or nominee) that circumstances beyond their control prevented the standard time limit being adhered to.

Students are required to set out their complaint clearly and succinctly and to provide evidence to substantiate the issues raised where it is reasonable to expect them to have gathered and provided it. This may include medical evidence such as letters confirming attendance or treatment at a GP surgery or hospital or counselling service, reports by professionals such as psychologists or disability advisors, police crime numbers in the case of reported incidents, financial information such as evidence of lost income (where relevant to the complaint), bank statements or receipts or statements of witnesses to incidents where it is safe and helpful to provide these.

Complainants should take care to raise all matters of complaint and put forward all supporting evidence, as they will not be able to raise new matters or provide any additional evidence to an Internal Review unless they can show good reason why the new evidence/information was not available to them to put forward as part of the Formal Complaint and it is essential to the complaint.



Complainants are encouraged to consider resolutions and are able to suggest an appropriate resolution. If at any time the complainant's expectations appear to be beyond what the Voice Study Centre can reasonably provide or are not within the Voice Study Centre's power to provide, they will be advised of this as soon as possible in writing.

What will the Voice Study Centre do when it receives a Formal Complaint?

The Head of Student Support will acknowledge the receipt of a complaint within five working days. All submitted complaint forms will be reviewed initially to establish whether they are eligible for consideration under this procedure.

The Voice Study Centre will endeavour to complete the processing of a formal complaint within 40 working days. The 40 working day timeframe requires students to meet any university deadlines for the submission of material. There will occasionally be circumstances when, for good reason, the University will need to extend the timeframe. Where this is the case the University will notify the student and keep the student regularly informed of progress. While every effort will be made to comply with the time limits set out above if a time limit is exceeded it shall not invalidate the outcome of the complaint proceedings.

Where a formal complaint has been received, the Head of Student Support will inform the relevant Head of Department/Section and thereafter keep them informed of progress.

Investigating the Formal Complaint

Eligible complaints will be forwarded to a Complaints Investigator who will be independent of the source of the complaint and a member of the Senior Management Team. The purpose of conducting an investigation is to establish all of the facts relevant to the points made in the complaint and to provide a full, objective and proportionate response to the complainant which represents the Voice Study Centre's clear position.

Within five working days, the appointed investigator will write to the complainant, clarifying how the complaint is to be investigated. The Complaints Investigator will usually consult the relevant staff or their nominee and also seek to gather information as necessary from anyone else likely to be helpful in resolving the matter, including the complainant and the subject/s of the complaint. Information may be sought in writing, via oral interview or both.

The Complaint Investigator will contact complainants and staff members directly to ask them to attend investigative meetings and it is important that these take place quickly and at a mutually convenient time and location. Investigative meetings are designed to clearly establish facts, not to apportion blame and are not disciplinary interviews. In any meeting involving the complainant or a member of staff, they have the right to be accompanied by a student, an employee of the Voice Study Centre or an advisor from the SU Advice or a trade union representative.



The Complaint Investigator will be responsible for keeping records of their investigation. During discussions and meetings, a note of the main points of discussion will be taken and shared with interviewees after each meeting. Any factual inaccuracies should be highlighted immediately.

If at any time the complainant's expectations appear to be beyond what the Voice Study Centre can reasonably provide or are not within the Voice Study Centre power to provide, they will be advised of this as soon as possible in writing.

Mediation

The Complaints Investigator may consider whether the complaint or appeal is amenable to mediation at this stage.

Mediation and conciliation are voluntary processes where an impartial independent third party helps parties involved in a dispute to resolve issues confidentially. Using mediation can help both parties to understand what is driving the complaint, and may be more likely to result in a swift and mutually satisfactory conclusion being reached. Mediation and conciliation can be used to 'stop the clock' on the formal process which may be restarted if agreement cannot be reached.

Where both the Voice Study Centre and the student agree to mediation or conciliation, revised timescales will be agreed between the parties and confirmed in writing. All parties should understand how the arrangement fits with more formal procedures, the scope of the mediation or conciliation process and whether its use is subject to the parties agreeing in advance to accept the solution offered and the findings reached.

Resolving a Formal Complaint

Where both the Voice Study Centre and the student agree to mediation or conciliation, revised timescales will be agreed between the parties and confirmed in writing. All parties should understand how the arrangement fits with more formal procedures, the scope of the mediation or conciliation process and whether its use is subject to the parties agreeing in advance to accept the solution offered and the findings reached.

The Complaint Investigator will provide a written report at the end of the investigation, setting out clearly the process followed, the information gathered, the conclusions drawn and any recommendations. This will be shared with the complainant, the subject of the complaint and the relevant members of staff. Any factual inaccuracies should be highlighted immediately.

Where a complaint is upheld or partially upheld, the outcome letter will also detail how and when the Voice Study Centre will implement any remedy. It is important to remember that complaints may not always produce the outcome preferred by the complainant. There may be a number of reasons for this, including lack of evidence to substantiate the complaint or the fact that circumstances beyond the University's control may affect the level of service provided.



If a complaint about a member of staff is upheld or partially upheld it might be recommended that the Voice Study Centre considers whether any disciplinary action needs to be taken against the staff member. In these cases, the staff member's line manager and Human Resources will also receive a copy of the report for their joint consideration. Details affecting individual staff members will not be shared with complainants, particularly where they relate to any subsequent disciplinary action that is taken.

Complaints about members of staff

A student's complaint may be in relation to the actions of a member of staff employed by the Voice Study Centre that the student is dissatisfied with. As with all complaints, it is important that students have the opportunity to raise concerns without risk of disadvantage or recrimination, whilst members of staff should have the opportunity to respond to the concerns raised.

Should the student remain dissatisfied with the outcome of their complaint, they should submit a request for Internal Review within one month of communication of the outcome of the formal stage.

If a student is satisfied with the outcome of the formal stage or does not submit a request for Internal Review within four weeks, the Voice Study Centre will close the matter.

Where a student feels unable to approach the relevant member of staff they should submit a complaint to The Head of Student Support, Tracy@voicestudycentre in the first instance. An early resolution response will be negotiated with a view to resolving the matter. If the student remains dissatisfied, they may submit a formal complaint.

The Head of Student Support is also responsible for ensuring that the relevant staff (such as the employee and their line manager) are made aware of the complaint and kept informed of the progress of the case.

Complaints of Staff Misconduct

All complaints of staff misconduct will be taken seriously by the Voice Study Centre. The Director of Operations, Managing Director and Head of Student Support will consider whether staff disciplinary procedures are relevant. If the Voice study Centre deems that Disciplinary Procedures are not to be initiated against a member of staff then a student's formal complaint will be considered in line with the Student Concerns and Complaint Procedures as normal. If the Voice Study Centre does decide to initiate the Disciplinary Procedures for Staff, members should be aware that the Disciplinary Procedures for Staff will be undertaken first.

As such, students may be asked to provide more information to assist the Voice Study Centre in applying its staffing procedures, and may be accompanied by another member of the University or Students' Union during any discussions that take place.

Due to an employee's right to confidentiality, the student(s) that has raised the concerns will not be provided with details of any action taken under the Disciplinary Procedures for Staff.



Students do not have a right to appeal against any decision taken under the Voice Study Centre's Disciplinary Procedures for Staff.

The Disciplinary Procedures for Staff do not prevent the student from having their concerns responded to, investigated or reviewed under the Student Concerns and Complaints Procedures. However, members should be aware that:

- i. Consideration of the Formal Complaint will normally be postponed until after the staff procedures are completed, however Departments can continue to organise and implement any interim arrangements that are deemed appropriate for the student.
- ii. Any subsequent consideration or review under the Student Concerns and Complaint Procedures will not reconsider the conduct of individual members of staff. However, the findings from the Disciplinary Procedures for Staff may be made available to the Complaint Investigator or relevant member of the senior management team, on a case-by-case basis, who can consider alternative resolutions for the student(s).

When it is deemed appropriate for safeguarding our members and for respecting our members' right to confidentiality, student(s) and employee(s) may be asked to refrain from contacting each other whilst the Student Concerns and Complaint Procedures are ongoing.

Representation for Staff

Any member of staff directly affected by a concern or a complaint from a student may seek support from their trade union and they may be accompanied by a work colleague to meetings.

Internal Review

If the student believes their complaint has not been handled properly or fairly according to these procedures, they may request an Internal Review of the complaint within four weeks of the date of the letter containing the outcome of the Formal Complaint.

Students may request an Internal Review of the outcome of a Formal Complaint investigation on the following grounds:

- The Voice Study Centre did not follow the Student Concerns and Complaint Procedures properly which disadvantaged the student's case
- Consideration of whether the outcome was reasonable in all the circumstances
- There is new evidence, which for good reason was not previously submitted as part of the complaint, which might have materially affected the outcome

The Internal Review will not usually consider the issues afresh or involve a further investigation. The complaint must have been considered as a Formal Complaint before it is eligible for Internal Review.



In order to request an Internal Review of the complaint, students must complete an Internal Review Form. The form can be completed and submitted by a third party where appropriate written consent is provided. Students are expected to set out their complaint clearly and succinctly and provide evidence to substantiate the issues raised where possible.

What the Voice Study Centre will do when it receives a request for an Internal Review

Students can expect to receive written acknowledgment of the request for an Internal Review within five working days. The Voice Study Centre will then pass the request for review to the Managing Director for consideration.

The Voice Study Centre will endeavour to complete the processing of an Internal Review within 20 working days. The 20 working day timeframe requires students to meet any university deadlines for the submission of material. There will occasionally be circumstances when, for good reason, the Voice Study Centre will need to extend the timeframe. Where this is the case the Voice Study Centre will notify the student and keep the student regularly informed of progress. While every effort will be made to comply with the time limits set out above if a time limit is exceeded it shall not invalidate the outcome of the complaint proceedings.

The decision of the Managing Director will be final. If the Managing Director determines that the request for an Internal Review is not well-founded, then s/he will dismiss the case and will formally issue the student with a Completion of Procedures letter, explaining the reasons for their findings.

If the Managing Director determines that the request for an Internal Review is well-founded, then they will initiate a review of the case and then issue the student with an outcome letter, containing details of their findings and what the outcome will be. Where a complaint is upheld, the letter will also detail how and when the Voice Study Centre will implement any remedy.

External Review

If the Managing Director determines that the request for an Internal Review is well-founded, then they will initiate a review of the case and then issue the student with an outcome letter, containing details of their findings and what the outcome will be. Where a complaint is upheld, the letter will also detail how and when the Voice Study Centre will implement any remedy.

The OIA considers complaints from people who remain dissatisfied at the conclusion of the University's internal Student Concerns and Complaints Procedure. The OIA looks at issues such as whether the University followed its procedures, whether these procedures were reasonable, and whether the University's final decision was reasonable in all the circumstances.

The OIA's Scheme Rules and guidelines are available on its website, www.oiahe.org.uk