



## **'The University Student Complaints Procedure' – resource guide to accompany the online training**

This resource guide includes all the information included in the online course. As with the course, this guide includes links to useful web pages within the main body of the text. You can go straight to a particular page by clicking on the page name under the contents list below.

If you have any comments or feedback about this course and/or the resource guide, please email [supsup@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:supsup@sheffield.ac.uk).

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## Introduction

Most students will enjoy their University experience.

Some students may not have such a positive experience and may wish to raise issues with the University.

Whatever your role at the University, you may be approached by a student, or a group of students, who wish to complain about something.

This training offers relevant advice and guidance to assist you in feeling confident in dealing with such approaches.

Completing this course will enable you to:

- understand the University Student Complaints Procedure, and its different stages;
- be clear as to your responsibilities should you be involved in a student complaint; and
- be able to quickly and confidently signpost students to relevant information and/or support.

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## Complaint or Academic Appeal?

### How do you know if it's a Complaint or an Academic Appeal?

A **Complaint** allows students to complain about the delivery and quality of services received.

An **Academic Appeal** enables a student to apply for a grade or classification to be reconsidered in the light of new evidence that could not be placed before the Examiners.

Students can submit an academic appeal on the following grounds:

- procedural error by the Examiners
- new evidence of extenuating circumstances
- a failure of supervision
- representation in response to action taken by a department as a result of unfair means being identified.

The Appeal cannot question academic judgement.

More information on Academic Appeals is available at:

Students: [www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/complaints-and-appeals/appeals](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/complaints-and-appeals/appeals)

Staff: [www.sheffield.ac.uk/sss/sas/appeals](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/sss/sas/appeals)

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## What sort of complaint is it?

If you are approached by a student (or a group of students) who have a concern, and you can't resolve it on the spot, the following Services have their own complaints procedures. Students should be directed to one of the sites below if their complaint relates to one of these Services.

- Corporate Information and Computing Services (CiCS) [www.sheffield.ac.uk/cics/consultation/complaint](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/cics/consultation/complaint)
- Residences - Accommodation & Commercial Services (ACS) [www.sheffield.ac.uk/accommodation/policiesandprocedures/complaints](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/accommodation/policiesandprocedures/complaints)
- Admissions [www.sheffield.ac.uk/study/policies/appeals-complaints](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/study/policies/appeals-complaints)
- University Health Service [www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/health-service/feedback/index](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/health-service/feedback/index)
- The Student's Union <https://su.sheffield.ac.uk/about-us/complaints>

In all cases, we encourage you to also signpost students to the Student Advice Centre in the Students' Union Building <https://su.sheffield.ac.uk/student-advice-centre>. They provide professional, impartial, and confidential advice, as well as support and representation, to assist students in resolving their concerns.

The Student Advice Centre have a set of webpages relating to complaints <https://su.sheffield.ac.uk/student-advice-centre/academic/complaints/making-a-complaint-about-the-university> which guide the student through the process, and answer common queries.

This training course focusses on complaints raised by students under the University Student Complaints Procedure. This covers a student's academic studies, the quality of teaching, their supervision, and the service they experience – and includes services provided by professional services teams.

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## The University Student Complaints Procedure

Students may use the University Student Complaints Procedure for issues which relate to the quality of services they receive in connection with their studies: such as the teaching, their supervision, and services provided by professional services teams.

All Undergraduate, Postgraduate, and Research students can use this process.

It is not a legal process, but it aims to offer a fair, accessible, confidential, proportionate, and transparent process for students to have their concerns considered.

The University Student Complaints Procedure is administered by the [\*\*Student Engagement and Progress team\*\*](#) (SEP) in the [\*\*Student Administration Service\*\*](#) (SAS).

This process should not be used by a student to complain about the behaviour of another student. If a student has concerns about another student's behaviour they can contact Central Welfare and Guidance in the first instance: [www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/cwag](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/cwag)

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## What can a Complaint consist of?

A student may feel that:

- they have received a poor level of supervision;
- programme timetabled sessions are regularly cancelled and not rescheduled;
- facilities or services are regularly unavailable, such as access to Labs;
- they have been subject to inappropriate behaviour by a member of staff;
- they have lost property on University premises;
- they have queries and concerns about their fees, charges and payments.

These are just some examples of what can be covered by the University Student Complaints Procedure. Each case is different and represents a unique set of circumstances.

A student is expected to provide evidence to substantiate their claims.

The University also accepts 'group' complaints, and these are treated in the same way as an individual complaint. Groups are expected to nominate a *spokesperson*, who will act on the group's behalf, and is responsible for updating the rest of the group during the process.

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## Is there a time limit for a student to submit a complaint?

Yes, there is a time limit.

A student can start the complaints process whilst a registered student or up to six months after their registration has ended.

If a student left the University over six months ago, they need to write an explanation as to why they did not submit a complaint sooner (ie within 6 months). In such cases, it would still be acceptable for the University to consider their complaint, if it is felt that they have 'compelling reasons' for not submitting their complaint by the time limit. The [Student Engagement and Progress](#) team can advise on this if you are in this situation.

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## Finding out about the University Student Complaints Procedure

There are several ways a student is made aware of the University Student Complaints Procedure:

through the Terms and Conditions of Acceptance of an Offer

as part of the Registration process [www.sheffield.ac.uk/registration/newstudents/essential-reading](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/registration/newstudents/essential-reading)

by the Student Services Information Desk (SSID) staff (in person) and their web pages [www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/complaints-and-appeals/complaints](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/complaints-and-appeals/complaints)

by the Student Advice Centre web pages <https://su.sheffield.ac.uk/student-advice-centre/academic/complaints/making-a-complaint-about-the-university>

by the [Student Engagement and Progress](#) team

We encourage departments to add details of how a student can make a complaint to leaflets, introductory talks, programme handbooks, and their own web pages, where appropriate.

We also encourage departments to ensure all staff are aware of the complaints process, and how to respond to a student appropriately.

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## **So what do I do if a dissatisfied student approaches me?**

Departments are encouraged to investigate the complaint fully, and promptly, and to resolve the issue at the *local* level, if appropriate. It may not be possible to resolve locally; for example, if the complaint is about the Head of Department/Service.

We will now look at the stages, and possible points for resolution, within the University Student Complaints Procedure.

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## **The University Student Complaints Procedure**

There are four possible stages to the University Student Complaints Procedure:

- Informal Discussion with the Department/Service team.
- Informal Complaint to the Department/Service team.
- Formal Complaint to Faculty.
- Case Review Request.

Students also have recourse to the sector Ombudsman, should they remain dissatisfied after completing the University Procedures.

Each stage will be explained in more detail on the following pages.

### **Informal Discussion:**

Students are encouraged to approach the department at the earliest opportunity, to discuss their concerns.

They may not have formal evidence – but the department is encouraged to investigate the issues raised, and work with the student to try to resolve the issue.

Resolution at this stage might include an apology, and/or agreement to change arrangements, review policy, or the provision of new or additional information.

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### **Informal Complaint:**

If the student is not satisfied by the previous attempt at addressing their concerns, they might wish to submit an Informal Complaint to the Head of Department/Service (HoD/S), using the Complaint form. (If the complaint is about the HoD/S the student can move directly to the Formal Stage).

At this point, evidence should be submitted by the student to support their case. Acceptable evidence includes signed and dated medical documentation, learning support plans, and dated email correspondence. Evidence should be in English, or be an official translation.

The Department/Service should acknowledge this Informal Complaint within 5 working days.

The Department/Service should investigate it fully. This may include speaking to colleagues, collating documents, and noting anything already done to address the situation.

A student should get a full written response from the Department/Service within 30 calendar days.

If you need more time (say, because a member of staff is away), then you should contact the student to give an estimation of when they can expect a reply.

The student should receive a full reasoned decision, and an indication of any resulting action.

If appropriate, it is good practice to admit that a mistake has occurred and to offer to try to put it right at the earliest opportunity.

Finally, the student should be pointed to the next stage of the University Student Complaints Procedure, in case they are not satisfied; and also to the Student Advice Centre, in the Students' Union Building <https://su.sheffield.ac.uk/student-advice-centre>

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### **Formal Complaint:**

If the student remains dissatisfied with the outcome of the Informal stage, or if their complaint relates to their Head of Department/Service, they can submit a Formal Complaint.

The student should complete a Complaint form, and send it to the [Student Engagement and Progress team](#) (SEP) within the [Student Administration Service](#), with their evidence. This escalates their case to the Faculty Officer or Director of Service level.

[SEP](#) will liaise with all parties, and will ask the Head of Department/Service to provide a response within 10 working days. Examples of responses are provided in the course Resource Guide; available from the Document downloads area. This response will be sent to the student with their outcome letter, so it's good to be mindful of the tone and language used (more about that in the Good Practice section, later).

Once [SEP](#) have the Department's response, a Faculty Officer/Director of Service is tasked with considering the case and making a decision.

The decisions open to the Faculty Officer/Director are:

- to uphold the complaint; or to uphold it in part.
- to reject the complaint.

For an upheld Complaint there are no standard recommendations. Outcomes may include an apology, compensation, or practical reparations/arrangements.

The Department will be informed of the decision at the same time as the student.

If you have any questions about the decision, please contact the [SEP](#) team.

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## **Case Review**

There is one final stage to the University Student Complaints Procedure if a student remains unhappy with the Formal Complaint outcome.

They can submit a request for a Case Review (referred to as a Case Review Request), within 10 working days, to the [Student Conduct and Appeals \(SCA\)](#) team in the [Student Administration Service](#).

For their Case Review Request to proceed, the request must be based upon at least one of the following grounds:

- there was a material procedural irregularity which rendered the process leading to the decision taken in respect of the formal complaint unfair;
- material which the student could not reasonably have been expected to produce at the time of the decision taken in respect of the formal complaint casts substantial doubt upon the appropriateness of that decision;
- the decision taken in respect of the formal complaint was manifestly unreasonable.

The Department/Service Head will be contacted for their response by [SCA](#), and thereafter the case is considered by the Vice-President for Education, or Research, or Deputy Vice-President for Education, or their delegate.

If a case is upheld, outcomes can include grade amendment, referral to a Case Review Panel, referral back to another University Procedure, or reconsideration of the complaint by the Faculty Officer/Director of Service due to the new evidence.

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## External Review

Once the consideration of a student complaint under the University Student Complaints Procedure has been fully completed, the student is issued with a Completion of Procedures letter.

The Complainant can use this letter, if they remain dissatisfied, to submit their case to the Sector Ombudsman - the [Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education \(OIA\)](#).

The OIA will examine whether the University followed its procedures, and made a reasonable decision.

The University's response to the OIA case is co-ordinated by the [Student Conduct and Appeals team](#).

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## Good Practice for staff dealing with Complaints:

Staff should consider the following when dealing with any stage of the Complaints Procedure:

DO:

- Keep good records of discussions with students; you may wish to refer to them if a complaint escalates.
- Be as objective as possible; focus on the facts and provide supporting evidence, such as emails.
- Focus on the key points raised by the student and seek to address these.
- Consider providing a timeline of key events.
- Have due regard for equality issues.
- Maintain confidentiality – details which could identify other students, and are unknown by the student, should not be included in your statement or evidence.
- Consider seeking support from [Human Resources](#) (for complaints against members of staff).
- Be consistent across student cohorts.
- Keep in mind response time limits, and contact [Student Engagement and Progress team](#) or [Student Conduct and Appeals team](#) if you will have difficulty meeting a deadline.
- Own up to mistakes – if appropriate to do so.

Remember that the student will receive a copy of the departmental response at the Formal Complaint and Case Review stages of the process, so the language and tone used should be measured.

DONT:

- Assume the Faculty Officer/Director knows anything about your department, the student's programme, the student, or the guidance, resources, or processes within your department.
- Offer your own opinions on the case, these could be perceived as inappropriate bias or attempts to influence the Faculty Officer/Director.
- Offer unconditional support to the student. This raises the expectations of the student in an unfair way, if the case is then rejected by the Faculty Officer/Director.

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## A Note about Confidentiality

When dealing with a complaint, you may wish to discuss issues raised with colleagues.

You can share relevant information about a case with staff within the University, where there is an appropriate need to do so. Care must be taken when sharing a student's personal information, and that it is sent to the correct person.

The default position is to NOT share data outside of the University unless there is a recognised and authorised process to do so. Even though it is unlikely that a complaint would require you to share information with persons outside the University, sometimes it may be necessary. In such cases, you may wish to seek advice from the University's [Data Protection Officer](#).

Our natural inclination is to be as helpful as possible, however we ask that you carefully consider the confidentiality and privacy of all students, when investigating and responding to complaints at any stage.

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## Resources and Contacts:

### Guidance for staff plus forms and downloads:

[www.sheffield.ac.uk/sss/sas/complaints](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/sss/sas/complaints)

### Student Engagement and Progress Team:

Email: [sas.acadappeal.complaints@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:sas.acadappeal.complaints@sheffield.ac.uk)

### Student Conduct and Appeals Team:

Email: [sca@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:sca@sheffield.ac.uk)

### Student Administration Service:

[www.sheffield.ac.uk/sss/sas/contacts](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/sss/sas/contacts)

### Student Advice Centre:

<https://su.sheffield.ac.uk/student-advice-centre>

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## Further training

There are a whole range of face-to-face training sessions available through the Supporting the Supporters programme, covering areas such as:

- disability
- equality
- student support
- international students

Please visit the [Supporting the Supporters Staff Development web page](#) for more information. Courses can be booked through the LMS, or bespoke or in-house sessions can be arranged by contacting [supsup@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:supsup@sheffield.ac.uk)

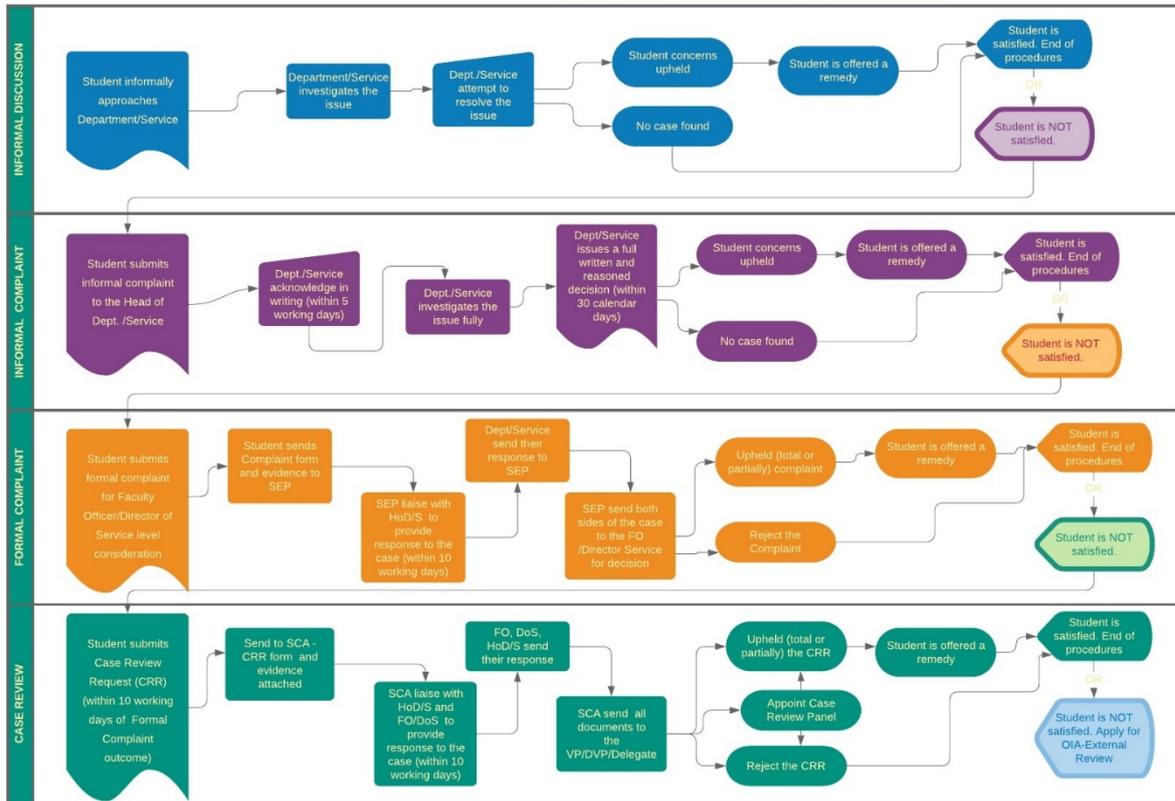
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# Additional Material

## COMPLAINTS - AN OVERVIEW OF THE MAIN PROCEDURES/STAGES

SEP = Student Engagement and Progress Team in Student Administration Service  
 SCA = Student Conduct and Appeals Team in Student Administration Service  
 OIA = Office of the Independent Adjudicator

FO = Faculty Officer  
 HoD/S = Head of Department / Service  
 DoS = Director of Service



# Example Head of Department/Services responses to Formal Stage Complaints:

## 1. can be taken forward

In the case of:

<b>Student Name:</b> Carolyn Lam	<b>Registration No.:</b> 423456789
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**Under the University's Complaints Regulations, I am responding as the Head of Department/Service, or their delegate:**

<p>Response:</p> <p>Thank you for providing the Department with the documentation in relation to the Complaint by Ms Lam.</p> <p>I note that she feels that she has experienced a failure of supervision when preparing, writing and submitting her dissertation. The student would like compensation for time "wasted" over the last year, and to move to another supervisor.</p> <p><b>A timeline is below.</b></p> <p>Copies of Ext Circs forms are supplied as Appendix 1:</p> <p>Nov 2016: 1 week extension granted,</p> <p>Jan 2017: module mark amended to Not Assessed Feb 2017: Ext Circs form received, and dept offered additional time for submission deadline of assignment,</p> <p>May 2017: module mark amended to Not Assessed,</p> <p>Mid Aug 2017: 3-week extension to project submission and presentation date granted – no EC submitted but dept was aware of two-day hospitalisation. Consideration was also given to her circumstances during the oral presentation, as evidenced by the feedback notes on page 4 of Appendix 2 Resits,</p> <p>In response to the Complaint the Department would like to make the following comments:</p> <p><b>i. In relation to health issues.</b></p> <p>Although not directly related to her supervision, the student raises the issue of "feeling unsupported" in terms of her health issues; so I would firstly like to comment on our dealings in that respect.</p> <p>On commencement of this programme, we were made aware that this student had ongoing medical/disability issues, and upon submission of extenuating circumstances</p>
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forms, when it had an impact on a module, the department were willing to extend deadlines and 'not assess' marks if needed.

**ii. In relation to supervision.**

The student was eligible to resit the two Not Assessed modules during our Sept 2016 PGT resit period. The student could also have chosen to wait until the January 2017 resit period, according to our dept policy.

Copies of the supervisor notes are attached to this response. The supervisor met her twice to discuss the possibility of deferring the resits to permit her to focus on her dissertation; however, the student felt that she had sufficient time to complete all elements by Sept 16.

It is noted that her email to her supervisor dated 1 Jun17 included the text *"if I feel that things are slipping in a month or so, I may revisit this decision (and I hope I can change my mind if necessary); however, your supervision has been so supportive and encouraging that I feel if I can still have our meetings until September, then I will get it all done"*

Statement from Project Supervisor: *"I was made aware of the student's health problems at the outset of the project period and agreed to allow her to work from home when necessary, because she suggested that this would enable her better to manage her condition during flare-ups.*

*We agreed that she would come into the University when she could and, as is the case for all my project students, email me for assistance at any time. I also put into place an open arrangement of a meeting every two weeks to "catch-up" (which she could cancel at the time if she wished) – literally for her to ask me about anything to do with her project, her research, or her workload. I also asked Carolyn to submit pieces of text regularly so we could work through and quickly adjust any misdirection happening – this was more to maintain her confidence in her own work, as I realised quite early on in my contact with Carolyn that she is a very motivated and productive student – but is held back by her confidence, as well as her health flare-ups.*

*Only once, in early August, did she mention that she could not attend our planned meeting due to ECs or difficulties. She was not specific and the issue did not come up again.*

*There was therefore no indication that I should be making allowance over and above that which was already afforded through her LSP plan.*

*To be honest, I probably did go over and above the support I have offered to most other students, because I could see the academic skill was there, but her own limitations might have prevented her succeeding – I thought that gaining an MSC was achievable and would give her so much benefit, that it was worthwhile doing what I could to support her.*

*I am disappointed that Carolyn has chosen to Complain, and claims that her supervision was insufficient.*

*I have calculated that we had 8 one-to-one meetings, plus two formal reviews of her draft submissions. we exchanged over 30 emails, and her supervision continued even during times when I was away from the University”*

Student was marked as a fail at the first submission of her Dissertation but has another opportunity to submit. It appears that she wishes to swap supervisor, and be compensated for what she sees was a failure of supervision leading up to her first submission.

E) Departmental Evidence

**Appendix 1**

Ext circs forms –

4/11/16 ongoing –depression - worsened requesting extension for assignment

20/1/17 - ongoing - requesting NA if low mark achieved in exam – illness flare-up

4/2/17 – email from Dept offering extra time for assignments/orals

17/5/17 - ongoing - deterioration of existing disability/long term condition

23/08/17 – ongoing – see Learning support plan, also going through divorce/financial difficulties

02/10/16 – ongoing – wishes to redo any work failed – see medical record

**Appendix 2:**

Project Mark sheets: overall mark is 48 & 46 (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> marker)

Examiner comments:

*“The dissertation reports some aspects of the project quite well, i.e. the background, optimisation, but is rather vague when describing what the student has actually done. The level of understanding of the concepts demonstrated is uneven, sometimes clear but sometimes mistaken.*

*Overall the work is reasonably well organised and diagrams and other objects are to a high standard. There is some inconsistency in referencing and a few repeated references. The work is not of pass standard at present.”*

*“Nerves seemed to affect speed of delivery. Responded well to detailed questioning.”*

Continue on separate sheets if required.

Dept Economics

Representative Name: T May

Date: December 15

Signature:

Please attach evidence, or other supporting documents, and return by email to [sas.acadappeals.complaints@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:sas.acadappeals.complaints@sheffield.ac.uk)

## 2. can be taken forward

### In the case of:

**Student Name: Rodney McKay**

**Registration No.:223456789**

### Under the University's Complaints Regulations, I am responding as the Head of Department/Service, or their delegate:

Response:

Student claims that their supervisor didn't tell him to submit EC forms, and so he has struggled throughout his course to access support. This has meant that the student has been disadvantaged against other students – and wishes to receive a refund of fees proportionate to 25% of the programme.

#### **Timeline:**

December 2015 – student discussed some personal problems with his tutor and it was agreed that he could defer one exam until August, to lessen his workload. No formal forms submitted, however the PT was very sympathetic.

January 2016 - This student submitted an Appeal, claiming extenuating circumstances that he was unable to put before examiners.

January 2016 - Appeal was upheld by Faculty, as he had been given incorrect advice regarding the submission of ECs – namely, he needn't.

May 2016 – student approached PT (notes attached), to explain he was very worried about his upcoming exams and that he may fail. PT asked if there was any ECs affecting him, and student explained that it was just exam-stress. No ECs submitted.

July/Aug 2016 – student passed all modules, with low pass grades.

Jan 17 – exams taken, student passed all modules and was awarded a degree, albeit with a low 2:2 classification.

Feb 17 – this Complaint received.

#### **This Complaint:**

The department has acted upon all of the circumstances which the student has raised with them (for eg by deferring exam); and clearly the student should have been aware of the EC process.

All new students are provided with a handbook, which refers students to how to report special circumstances.

In his Complaint he states that he was under serious stress and that no one in the Department *told* him to submit ECs, and as such he did worse on his degree than he might

have done had we supported him properly. He therefore feels that a refund of some of his fees would be appropriate compensation.

The Dept would like to highlight that it is Dep approach that students are given plenty of information about how to submit ECs; and it is the responsibility of students to submit them when appropriate, and not the responsibility of the dept to direct students to do so.

E) Departmental Evidence:

**Earlier appeal**, and associated medical notes from over a year prior to this current Complaint.

**Student handbook excerpt** covering Special circs and Appeal processes

**Copy of notes from student record** – shows PT discussed the EC policy with student.

Continue on separate sheets if required.

Department/Service: ACSE

Representative Name:  
Jim Spenser

Date:27 Feb 2017

Signature:

**3. cannot be taken forward – multiple issues of confidentiality breach, attempts to steer Faculty Officer/ Director of Service, and mis-naming of student.**

**In the case of:**

<b>Student Name:</b> Janet Frasier	<b>Registration No.:</b> 323456789
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**Under the University's Complaints Regulations, I am responding as the Head of Department/Service, or their delegate:**

**Response:**

Department feel they have supported the student well throughout – Susan's claims that she asked for another supervisor and was ignored are just not-founded. We have the policy that requests for Supervision swaps must be emailed to the HOD – Janet didn't do this. Susan has the opportunity to resubmit the work this year, and has another supervisor, so we don't feel that the University should refund her fees for last year just because the supervisor this year is providing more regular contact and commenting on her drafts.

The Dept policy is to communicate through email, and although it said in her LSP that she may have difficulty understanding written instruction, she didn't tell us this was a problem for her last year.

In our view she chose not to make anyone in the Department aware of her situation. We don't keep copies of every email sent, so cant provide them here.

The Department offered extra dissertation preparation sessions to this student and 4 others (Paul Smith, Jemima Jones, Tom Callaghan and Leonora Duvall) – but Janet did not attend. She did not even reply to the invite email.

I have enclosed a number of emails from other students on this programme which demonstrate that they knew about how to report dissatisfaction with supervision – one even refers to this supervisor, which shows other students knew what to do about it.

At various points in the course, all students are reminded of the policy on problems in the supervisory relationship.

Student handbooks give plenty of guidance about personal support.

We think the student had plenty of opportunity to tell us about her problems reading emails, her personal issues, and the events occurring with her supervision during her first year; and we are sure the Faculty Officer would agree with us and reject this Complaint.

E) Departmental Evidence

**Our handbook** – amongst the 175 pages are some which explain how to ask for another supervisor.

**Copies of emails** from Carrie Baker, Mark Hicks, and Paul Thompson – demonstrates that information is easy to find and submit, and if nothing else, that complaining about the supervisor is possible, but Janet didnt even do that.

Continue on separate sheets if required.

Department/Service: Film Studies

Representative Name: K Beater

Date:28 July 2018

Signature:

Please attach evidence, or other supporting documents, and return by email to [sas.acadappeals.complaints@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:sas.acadappeals.complaints@sheffield.ac.uk)

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