

Student Complaints Procedure

1. Introduction

1.1 The School is committed to providing a positive experience for its students and hopes that students will be satisfied with its provision. The School recognises, however, that there may be occasions when students are dissatisfied with an aspect of their student experience at SOAS. This procedure is part of the School's commitment to responding to students' complaints.

2. Raising concerns

2.1 The School takes students' concerns seriously and values their views in formal decision-making at all levels and expects that most concerns will be resolved satisfactorily on an informal basis at an early stage. Submitting a complaint is one option, but students are encouraged to consider all options, including other avenues to voice concerns. These include:

- Speaking directly to the relevant staff member/s
- Contacting academic advisors or supervisors
- By emailing the Student Experience team on studentfeedback@soas.ac.uk
- Completing termly [Student Evaluation Modules, end of year surveys, the National Student Survey \(for final year UG students\) or PTES/PRES.](#)
- Attending Department Feedback Committees
- Participating in the Student Experience Forums
- Speaking to Student Representatives, or engaging with [Student Voice](#) through Moodle
- Going to the all-student meeting with senior members of staff
- Talking to the [SOAS Students Union](#)

3. Principles

3.1 A complaint is a formal expression of dissatisfaction from one or more students about the provision of their course and/or the standard of service provided by the School, or on its behalf.

3.2 The procedure **does not** apply to complaints concerning:

- The Students' Union, its events or the conduct of its officers, including sabbaticals. Please utilise the [SU Complaints Procedure](#).
- [Admissions decisions](#)
- [Academic appeals](#) against assessment decisions
- A student's performance in any assessment, or other matters that involve Academic Judgement
- Matters that are currently subject to criminal investigation or proceedings
- Matters that ought to be more appropriately considered under another School procedure
- Minor or occasional lapses of good manners

- Disputes between students. These incidents normally fall under the [Student Disciplinary Procedure](#) and/or the Serious Cases Triage Panel
- Complaints about the conduct of SOAS staff. Complaints of this kind can be lodged under this procedure, however they will be referred to Human Resources for consideration under their procedures
- Concerns about School policies or governance of the institution. Students should raise issues of these kinds through the Students' Union, who have representation on SOAS committees, including Senate, the Teaching, Learning and Student Experience Committee (TELSOC) and the Board of Trustees. Academic Departments can help with concerns about any local policies. Each SOAS policy has a policy owner on the first page – students can contact the owner directly to make comments, or alternatively by contacting governance@soas.ac.uk

3.3 Complaints must be submitted as soon as possible, and no later than **20 working days** of the relevant event or circumstance.

3.4 This procedure applies to all students who are:

- a) currently registered at the School
- b) a student who has interrupted their studies
- c) a past student, but, subject to Section 3.3, any complaint must be lodged no later than 20 working days after the relevant event or circumstance.

3.5 The aim of this complaints procedure is to enable effective resolution of complaints at the earliest possible stage and for the School to be able to resolve student concerns before they escalate into formal complaints. Accordingly, great significance is placed on early and informal resolution, where appropriate.

4. Procedure

4.1 The procedure has the following stages:

- Stage 1: Informal Resolution
- Stage 2: Investigation and Determination
- Stage 3: Review

Stage 1: Informal Resolution

4.2 Students who have attempted unsuccessfully to resolve their concerns directly with the person(s) concerned, or for whom this is impractical, should engage in early resolution as soon as possible by making an informal complaint in writing to the relevant service or department. Students are encouraged to state their complaint in a clear, succinct and chronological order of events, appending any relevant evidence.

4.3 The Head of Department or nominee will then allocate the complaint to the correct departmental member of staff based on the perceived Risk Index within the Informal Resolution Guidance provided to departments.

4.4 The Head of Department or nominee should notify and inform the Student Casework Team via studentcomplaints@soas.ac.uk or the SID system within **2 working days** of receiving the complaint in order for the matter to be logged.

4.5 Complaints relating to harassment, Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) or discrimination will almost certainly not be amenable to informal resolution and must be referred to Stage 2 of this procedure.

4.6 The School aims to resolve issues as quickly and fully as possible. Students should receive a response in writing to their informal complaint **no later than one calendar month of the student contacting the member of staff**. Only in exceptional circumstances should the staff member consider extending the time limit. The relevant member of staff must inform the student in writing of the outcome.

4.7 The student must be kept informed by the department of the progress of their complaint. Students who are concerned about a lack of progress in resolving their complaint should contact the Student Casework Team on studentcomplaints@soas.ac.uk who will then follow the matter up with the relevant Head of Department or Director of Professional Services.

4.8 If the informal resolution stage has not been completed within one calendar month, the Student Casework Team will escalate the matter to the relevant Head of College.

4.9 Should the student be dissatisfied with the departmental response to their complaint, they should consider making a formal complaint under Stage 2 of this procedure.

Stage 2 – Investigation and Determination

4.10 Students who have not been able to resolve their concerns at Stage 1, or where informal resolution is not appropriate, can submit a formal complaint at Stage 2.

4.11 Formal complaints must be put in writing using the Student Complaints Form via the [Student Information Desk \(SID\)](#) within **20 working days** of the written Stage 1 response or, if the matter is escalated directly to Stage 2, 20 working days of the event or circumstance giving rise to it. Formal complaints that are not submitted on the relevant form will not be considered

4.12 In all complaints directly lodged at Stage 2 the Student Casework Team shall have discretion to refer the case back to Stage 1 for informal resolution, where appropriate.

4.13 Students are encouraged to state their complaint in a clear, succinct and chronological order of events. All relevant evidence in support of the complaint, and the informal steps taken to resolve the matter must be included.

4.14 On receipt of the complaint form, the Student Casework Team will assess whether the complaint satisfies the conditions for a valid complaint, and has been submitted by the correct deadlines. An acknowledgement will be sent by email within **2 working days**.

4.15 The School will normally only consider a complaint that has been lodged out of time if there is demonstrable and compelling evidence from the student that they were unable to submit the complaint within the correct deadlines.

4.16 The student will be notified in writing if a complaint is not accepted for any reason. The student will receive a Completion of Procedures (COP) letter explaining the decision.

4.17 If deemed valid, an investigator with no conflict of interest with/involving the student will be appointed to carry out an investigation of the complaint.

4.18 The investigator shall have discretion on how they conduct the investigation, subject to following the relevant guidance and this procedure.

4.19 The investigator may decide to have a meeting with the student if they require additional information from the student. However, this is not mandatory, and the Complaints Procedure is primarily a paper-based process.

4.20 In line with Section 7, a student may be accompanied to any meeting by a representative. A representative is present in a purely supportive capacity, and may not present evidence on behalf of the student, unless to allow them to do so would constitute a reasonable adjustment under the Equality Act 2010.

4.21 Where, after reasonable attempts, it proves impossible to schedule an arranged meeting with the student in attendance, the investigator may decide to continue in their absence.

4.22 Advice can be sought from the Student Casework Team at any stage in the procedure by any party regarding the investigation process or any aspect of the procedure. Prior to deciding on a proposed resolution, the investigator must seek advice and guidance from the Student Casework Team.

4.23 The investigator will normally complete the investigation and provide their determination in writing within **25 working days** of the receipt of the Stage 2 complaint. The decision will usually be within a report outlining how they carried out the investigation, what evidence they have considered, and whether they **uphold, partly uphold** or **reject** the matters raised in the complaint.

4.24 Once the report is finalised it must be sent to the Student Casework Team with any related correspondence and any evidence gathered during the investigation.

4.25 The Student Casework Team will provide the final report to the student within **5 working days** of the receipt of the report from the investigator.

Stage 3 – Review

4.26 A student dissatisfied with the outcome of the Stage 2 investigation may request a review of the decision.

4.27 The grounds for a review are as follows:

- There was a failure to follow procedures at stages 1 or 2 or both, and this would have changed the result of the investigation
- The Stage 2 formal decision was clearly unreasonable, meaning that the decision could not have been reached by a rational person based on the evidence.
- New evidence which the student was unable, for valid reasons, to provide earlier in the process. The student will need to provide evidence of exceptional circumstances that prevented earlier disclosure.

4.28 A request for review must be made in writing using the Stage 3 Student Complaint Request for Review Form via the [Student Information Desk \(SID\)](#), with the student stating under which of the above grounds they are requesting the review.

4.29 The request for review must be received by the Student Casework Team within **7 working days** of the student being sent the response to their complaint at Stage 2. If no response is received by the student within this period, a Completion of Procedures letter will be issued to the student.

4.30 On receiving the request, the Student Complaint Team will decide whether the review is valid, and has been submitted by the correct deadlines. An acknowledgement will be sent by email within **2 working days**.

4.31 If the request is not deemed to be valid, the student will receive a Completion of Procedures (COP) letter explaining the decision.

4.32 If in the assessment of the Student Casework Team one or more grounds for review apply to the case, and the review has been submitted in time, a Reviewer who has not previously been involved in Stages 1 or 2 of the complaint, or in the case itself, will be appointed.

4.33 The purpose of conducting a Stage 3 Review is to consider whether the ground(s) relied on by the student has merit. Stage 3 will not normally involve a fresh, full investigation of the matters complained about.

4.34 The Review may:

- Uphold the original Stage 2 complaint investigation outcome i.e. dismiss the review
- Propose an amendment to the resolution of the Stage 2 investigation based on new evidence provided and/or after reviewing the case.
- Consider a full reinvestigation if it is deemed that serious procedural errors had occurred during the Stage 2 investigation.

4.35 Following the Review, the Reviewer will draft a report of their conclusions and any recommendations. The Report shall normally be provided to the student within **20 working days** of submitting the review request.

5. Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA)

5.1 After the Stage 3 outcome, the School's internal procedures are complete. The Student has the right, if they so wish, to submit a request for the School's decision to be reviewed by the OIA. The OIA is an independent body that provides a scheme for the review of student complaints. In order to lodge a case with the OIA, the student should request a Completion of Procedures (COP) letter from the School.

6. Support for students

6.1 The School recognises that raising a complaint can be stressful. Students who wish to do so can seek assistance from the [SOAS Students Union](#), who can provide independent advice, guidance and representation. The [SOAS Student Advice and Wellbeing](#) team is also available to students who require its services, or signposting to external bodies.

7. Representation

7.1 A student may appoint another person to represent them in their complaint, for example, a Students' Union representative, a fellow student or a member of the SOAS wellbeing team.

7.2 The student should provide consent in writing to studentcomplaints@soas.ac.uk with the name and email address of the representative.

7.3 The student must ensure that their representative knows enough about their complaint, understands their wishes, can act in their best interests, and will endeavour to keep them fully informed throughout the process.

7.4 Students can amend and revoke their consent at any time. Where this is the case, it is the responsibility of the student to update the Student Casework Team.

7.5 Legal representation is not required and will not be permitted.

7.6 The School reserves the right to unappoint a representative in exceptional circumstances where it deems that the representative is in breach of School policies, or is not acting in the student's best interests. In such a scenario, the School will advise the student of their right to appoint a fresh representative.

8. Burden of Proof

8.1 When making a complaint or a request for review under this procedure, it is for the student to show how the circumstances of which they have complained have affected them and their studies, and to adduce relevant evidence.

9. Standard of Proof

9.1 The standard of proof applied by an investigator or reviewer under this procedure is that of the balance of probabilities; that it is more likely than not something was or was not the case.

10. Group concerns or complaints

10.1 Where the issues raised in a complaint affect a number of students in a similar way, those students can submit a complaint as a 'group complaint'. The members of the group should nominate one student to act on their behalf as the group representative.

10.2 The School will normally deal with the representative only and expects the representative to liaise with the other students in the group.

10.3 The representative must provide the Student Casework Team with:

- Express written consent for the representative to deal with the complaint on their behalf
- Evidence to demonstrate how each member of the group has been affected by the matter that is the subject of the complaint

10.4 All evidence submitted to support the complaint must be agreed between the group representative and the members of the group and submitted at the outset, with the complaint form. The complaint form must be signed by the nominated representative and a sheet attached to the complaint form containing names and signature of all the complainants in the group.

10.5 The School reserves the right to refuse to accept or to progress group complaints where it concludes that there is insufficient common ground between the members of the group (because, for example, the facts do not apply to all members of the group) and the complaint cannot reasonably be investigated collectively, or that the remedy sought is not appropriate for all members of the group. In these circumstances, separate complaints may be submitted and considered in respect of the relevant individuals.

10.6 Students who have not joined in the concern or complaint when it was raised will not normally be permitted to do so later.

11. Anonymous Complaints

11.1 Normally, anonymous complaints will not be considered under this procedure. In exceptional circumstances, an anonymous complaint may be considered when the School concludes that there is a compelling case, supported by evidence, for the matter to be investigated and the investigation is not compromised by the anonymity of the complainant.

12. Confidentiality

12.1 Complaints will be handled with confidentiality and relevant information disclosed only to those who need it for the purposes of investigating, responding to the complaint or in terms of outcomes and recommendations issuing from the complaint.

12.2 A student making a complaint is expected to maintain confidentiality and to not disclose information concerning the complaint, or correspondence with the School into the public domain, including on social media. Breaches of confidentiality by staff or students may lead to disciplinary action being taken.

12.3 Investigators are expected to maintain confidentiality and this requirement forms part of their contract with the School.

12.4 Anonymised complaints data and themes will be collated on a termly basis and analysed by relevant School committees to make enhancements in identified areas of the student experience.

13. Communication

13.1 Communication will be via SOAS email addresses (@soas.ac.uk) unless otherwise specified. The student should therefore ensure that they check their email account regularly during the consideration of their complaint.

13.2 Failure to engage with the student complaints process without good reason may result in the complaint being closed.

14. Disciplinary proceedings take precedence

14.1 Where disciplinary procedures have been commenced against the student or a member of staff which relate to the same or similar issues as those affecting the complaining student(s), the disciplinary procedure will take precedence over the Student Complaints Procedure. The student will be informed that their complaint will be dealt with via an alternative procedure.

15. Conduct during proceedings

15.1 The School expects all parties to the proceedings to lodge complaints or make representations in good faith and integrity, and to conduct themselves in a reasonable and fair manner towards other members of the School community, including investigators and members of the Casework Team. Students should act in accordance with the SOAS Code of Conduct.

15.2 All parties should treat the Student Complaints Procedure, and other School regulations with respect.

16. Frivolous or Vexatious complaints

16.1 No student will suffer any disadvantage or recrimination as the result of making a complaint in good faith. However, complaints that are found to be mischievous, malicious or vexatious may result in the student becoming subject to the School's Disciplinary Procedure. An allegation might be considered malicious if it were made publicly outside the proper channels set out in this procedure.

16.2 If the Student Casework Team deem that the complaint is frivolous or vexatious, we reserve the right to terminate its investigation. A complaint can be deemed vexatious or frivolous if it is:

- obsessive, harassing or repetitive
- insistent on pursuing a non-meritorious complaint and/or unrealistic, unreasonable outcomes
- insistent on pursuing what may be a meritorious complaint in an unreasonable manner
- designed to cause disruption or annoyance
- demanding redress which lacks any serious purpose or value.

17. Equality and Diversity

17.1 In operating this procedure, the School is committed to fulfilling its responsibilities under the 2010 Equality Act. In order to ensure that students with disabilities are treated no less favourably than other students within this process, the School shall take positive steps including reasonable adjustments. Such adjustments can include permitting representatives to speak on behalf of the student or extending timescales for submitting complaints/requests for review. The decision to approve such adjustments shall be proportionate, and subject to approval by the Student Casework Manager.

17.2 Consistent with 12.4, anonymised themes emerging from complaints will be used by relevant committees to determine whether enhancement actions are required in matters pertaining to equality and diversity, and anonymised demographic data of complainants will be monitored.

18. Deadlines

18.1 The School endeavours to meet the timescales within the procedure. However, on occasions it reserves the right to vary the process it follows in the interests of fairness or extend these deadlines in particularly busy periods or when there are circumstances beyond

the School’s control that inhibit us from investigating the allegation within the stated timescales.

18.2 The School will strive to complete the complaints process within 90 calendar days of the commencement of the formal stage (i.e. Stage 2). Meeting the 90 calendar day timeframe requires students to engage with the procedure, meet School deadlines for the submission of materials, and/or attend meetings (where required) at each stage of the procedure.

19. Mediation

19.1 At any stage of the procedure, the School may recommend mediation to seek resolution, if appropriate. With both parties’ agreement, this will take place and the complaints procedure will be suspended until the mediation is concluded. During the period of mediation complaint time limits will be suspended. If the mediation fails to result in an acceptable resolution for all parties concerned, the complaints procedure will resume from the point reached when mediation was agreed.

20. Settlement of complaints

20.1 A settlement of a complaint can be reached at any stage of the procedure. If a student agrees a full and final settlement of the matters complained about, the complaint may not be escalated to any later stage of the procedure.

21. Continuous enhancement of student experience

21.1 The School seeks feedback from students at all stages of their journey at SOAS and will utilise lessons learnt from issues identified in the course of complaint investigations to ensure that the student experience is improved.

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