

Student complaints procedure

The University welcomes feedback from its students. Whilst most of the feedback we receive is positive, we recognise that from time to time problems do arise and students may occasionally wish to express concern or dissatisfaction with aspects of the University or the services it provides. We aim to use the feedback gathered from such complaints positively to help us improve the services we offer and to enhance the University experience for all students.

The following circumstances need to be distinguished, one from the other:

- **Student appeal:** where a student is dissatisfied with a formal process which has culminated in a decision, for example decisions by examination boards, the outcome of disciplinary procedures, or the investigation of examination offences. The University has in place appropriate internal procedures for appeals to be considered; information is given in student handbooks and on the student web pages www.reading.ac.uk/internal/student/stdserv-home.aspx or available from the RUSU advisers www.rusu.co.uk/advice/.
- **Student complaint:** where a student has a complaint against the University relating to the delivery of teaching, support services, administration, facilities, or other aspects of the student's relationship with the University.

The three-stage procedure outlined below applies to **Student Complaints**. Generally - unless there is a good reason for doing so - a student may not progress his or her complaint to a higher stage unless all lower stages have been completed.

Before embarking on any stage of the Procedure, students are strongly recommended to seek advice from the RUSU Advice Service (www.rusu.co.uk/advice/)

Principles of the Student Complaints Procedure

- Any student who makes a complaint in good faith will not be adversely affected by the fact of the complaint, and there will be no impact on the student's academic career, whether or not the complaint is upheld.
- A complaint will normally only be accepted for consideration if it is made within six months of the relevant issue occurring, unless there has been good reason for a delay.
- Both the complainant and the designated person considering the complaint are expected at all stages to maintain appropriate confidentiality. However,

details of a complaint may need to be shared with relevant colleagues to enable a full investigation to be carried out.

- It is generally in the best interests of both the student and the University to resolve a complaint at the least formal and lowest stage possible of the Procedure.
- In any interview of the complainant he or she may be accompanied by a 'friend' who, unless otherwise agreed by the person authorised to consider the complaint, shall be a currently registered student, a member of the Academic Staff of the University, a RUSU Sabbatical Officer, or a member of the RUSU Advice Service team. If a student is unable to attend in person, they may be permitted to attend via telephone or skype e.g. distance learning students.
- The student complaints procedure is not a disciplinary procedure, although an upheld complaint may give rise to such a procedure. An upheld complaint may result, for example, in an adjustment to a previous decision relating to a student's academic progress or award, or action by the University against a member of staff.
- The designated person considering a complaint under any stage of the procedure may decline to settle the complaint while any matter intrinsic to it is the subject of disciplinary or other formal procedures within the University.
- Reference to 'student' in the procedure includes any group of students with a common complaint.
- A complaint made anonymously will only be considered under exceptional circumstances, and where the nature of the complaint makes an investigation appropriate.
- Disputes regarding matters of academic judgment will not be considered under the Student Complaints Procedure.
- The University will permit a student to submit their Stage 1 or Stage 2 complaint forms after the time limits specified in this procedure if the student demonstrates a good reason for their late submission, supported by medical evidence where appropriate.
- In exceptional circumstances, the University reserves the right to terminate the consideration of a complaint as outlined in the procedures for dealing with frivolous and vexatious complaints in appeal of results and student complaints.

Student Complaints Procedure

NOTES: Before embarking on any stage of the Procedure, students are strongly recommended to seek advice from the RUSU Advice Service www.rusu.co.uk/advice/

For students on Henley Business School programmes, references throughout this Procedure to 'Head of School' should be taken to refer to the relevant Head of Programme

Stage 0: Informal complaint raised directly with the relevant staff in the School or Service, either verbally or by email.

The student should:

- be specific about the problem;
- describe the problem succinctly;
- provide supporting documentary evidence where available and appropriate;
- state the outcome requested – be clear and realistic;
- if unsure who to direct the complaint to, contact the relevant School or Faculty Office, the Doctoral Research Office (for PGR students) or the Student Services Help Desk in Carrington (Tel: 0118 378 5555; or log a call through the RISIS web portal) for advice in the first instance.

Unless the issue can be resolved immediately, the member of staff receiving a Stage 0 complaint should respond to the complainant by email, even when the complaint was raised verbally. Acknowledgment of the complaint should be sent within three working days, indicating the likely timescale for a full response to be received if some further investigation is required. The email exchange will be retained for six months by the member of staff concerned as a record of the Stage 0 complaint and response. This will be passed to the Head of School, or equivalent, if requested.

The University expects that the majority of complaints can be resolved informally at Stage 0 through discussion and negotiation between the student and staff at the point closest to where the issue originated. However, where this cannot be achieved, the student may wish to pursue the matter under the more formal Stage 1 of the procedure. This should be done no later than three months after the Stage 0 response has been received.

Stage 1: Raising a formal complaint

Under Stage 1 of the Procedure, the complaint must be submitted in writing, using the form provided (www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/qualitysupport/Complaint_Form_-_Stage_1.docx), to the person responsible for the area within which the complaint arose. In the majority of cases this will be the Head of School, the Head of Programme (for HBS students), the Dean of Postgraduate Research Studies (for PGR students), the Head of Function, or equivalent. If required, relevant contact details can be obtained from the School or Faculty Office, the Student Services Help Desk in Carrington, or the Doctoral Research Office (for PGR students). Information to be entered on the form includes:

- complainant's name, address, contact telephone numbers, University email address, student number and programme of study;
- the nature of the complaint (attaching any supporting evidence where available);
- an outline of the steps taken to resolve the complaint informally at Stage 0;
- details of the outcome the complainant is seeking.

Receipt of the complaint will be acknowledged within three working days (subject to the availability of the relevant contact). The person who is authorised to consider a complaint at Stage 1 (normally the Head of School, Head of Function, or equivalent) will instigate an investigation of the issues raised in the complaint. A full response will normally be sent within four weeks of submission of the Stage 1 complaint, unless a complex or prolonged investigation is required, in which case the complainant will be kept informed of the likely timescales.

The Stage 1 investigation shall be allocated to a member of staff who has had no previous involvement in the matter. The name of the person conducting the Stage 1 investigation will not normally be confidential.

The staff member investigating the complaint may meet with the student to facilitate the investigation. A different staff member should Minute the meeting and provide a copy of the student.

If the staff member investigating the complaint upholds the complaint and recommends that the University should issue a remedy, the staff member investigating the complaint should receive approval from the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Teaching and Learning).

The student should receive a Stage 1 outcome letter and a copy of the complete investigation report. The Stage 1 outcome letter should include: the procedure(s) followed, the conclusions, a recommendation to resolve the complaint where appropriate and inform the student that they may request a review of the outcome at Stage 2. The Student Appeals and Complaints Officer will receive a copy of the Stage 1 outcome letter.

The Stage 1 complaint and the response will be formally recorded, and anonymised details will be reported to the Student Experience Committee.

If the complainant is not satisfied with the Stage 1 investigation or its outcome, he or she may wish to pursue the complaint at Stage 2 of the Procedure.

Stage 2: Escalation of a formal complaint

Within three months of receiving the Stage 1 response, the complainant may request an independent review of the complaint. A complaint must be considered at Stage 1 before it can be escalated to Stage 2. Such a request must be submitted in writing, using the form provided (www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/stdserv/Complaint-Form-Stage-2.pdf), to the University Secretary. Information to be entered on the form includes:

- complainant's name, address, contact telephone numbers, University email address, student number and programme of study;
- the nature of the complaint (attaching any supporting evidence where available);
- an outline of the steps taken to resolve the complaint at Stage 0 and Stage 1;
- Details of the Stage 1 response received;
- A statement of why the complainant remains dissatisfied;
- details of the outcome the complainant is seeking.

The University Secretary (or his nominee) will review the complaint and determine:

- whether the Stage 1 outcome was reasonable in the circumstances;
- whether the relevant procedure(s) were followed;
- consider any new information which the student was unable to provide for valid reasons earlier the process;
- and consult as appropriate with a view to determining a suitable resolution of the complaint.

The Stage 2 review will not usually consider the issues afresh or involve a further investigation.

The University Secretary will submit a report to the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Teaching and Learning), with a recommendation as to remedy, if appropriate. The Pro-Vice-Chancellor will issue the University's formal Stage 2 response to the complainant. A full response will normally be sent within six working weeks of submission of the Stage 2 complaint, unless delay is unavoidable, in which case the complainant will be kept informed of the likely timescales.

In cases where the University Secretary has been involved at an earlier stage of the Procedure, the independent review at Stage 2 will be carried out by an alternative senior member of University staff.

The Stage 2 complaint and the response will be formally recorded, and anonymised details will be reported to the Student Experience Committee and the University Council.

Stage 2 of the Student Complaints Procedure concludes the University's procedures in relation to complaints, and will normally result in the issue of a Completion of Procedures Letter.

If the student remains dissatisfied with the outcome of the complaint it may be possible to apply for an external review of the complaint to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA) providing that the complaint is eligible under the OIA Rules. Such an application must be received by the OIA within 12 months of the date of the University's Completion of Procedures letter.

Recording, reporting and learning from complaints

Following the outcome of an upheld complaint, the person responsible for the area within which the complaint arose will submit a report to the Student Experience Committee to record any corrective action following the complaint. This should be submitted to the Student Appeals and Complaints Officer within the instructed timeframe. The report shall not identify the student and appropriate levels of confidentiality will be maintained.

Examples of corrective action may include but is not limited to a change to policy, process or practice and relevant staff training.

Stage 1 and Stage 2 complaints shall be recorded and reported to the Student Experience Committee annually.

The following details will be recorded and reported:

- The complainant's programme and part of study

- The complainants age, gender, ethnicity and whether the complainant has a disability. The complainants name shall not be reported. If the student considers that this information may make them identifiable, at the request of the student this shall not be reported.
- Summary of the complaint, whether or not the complaint was upheld, the remedy to resolve the complaint where appropriate.