**MPLS Division   
Guidance for Departments when handling complaints and academic appeals**

This document sets out what departments should do when they receive a complaint from one of their graduate students. The University’s [complaint procedure](https://academic.web.ox.ac.uk/complaints#collapse1054166) is designed to ensure that complaints are properly investigated and are given careful and fair consideration. Stage one of the complaint process is local resolution, and it is this stage which is the focus of this document. Further [guidance for stage 1 complaints](https://academic.web.ox.ac.uk/complaints#collapse1054166)have been developed for departments by the Proctors Office and Education Committee.

**Definitions**

* A **complaint** can be made in relation to:
  + University administrative and support services (including departmental facilities and central facilities such as libraries, counselling, etc.)
  + University academic services and support (departmental teaching, supervision etc.)
* An **academic appeal** is an appeal against the decision of an academic body in terms of whether the procedures were followed properly, errors were made, or the process was biased in some way.

For the remainder of this document, it is assumed that a complaint is being handled. The process for academic appeals is similar, although the timeframes are different. See University guidance on academic appeals for more information.

**General Principles**

1. Complaints should be handled confidentially.
   1. Information about the complaint should only be communicated to people who need it for the purposes of investigating or responding to the complaint.
   2. It should be made clear to the student who will be informed about the complaint.
   3. Where information is required to process the complaint, third parties should not be told more than is strictly necessary to secure the required information.
2. Where any individual investigating the complaint has, or could be perceived to have, a conflict of interest they should declare it as soon as they become aware of the conflict and the investigation should be conducted by someone independent.
   1. The independent alternative must have at least as much seniority as the person who is being replaced. Departmental complaints procedures should make clear how an independent alternative will be appointed, e.g. they will be appointed by the Head of Department to investigate the complaint.
3. Information about the complaint should be clear to the student.
   1. Departments should publish information on how to make a complaint, including who to contact for each type of complaint on their website or intranet. It should be easy to find.
   2. If the designated person who would normally handle the complaint is on annual leave for a long period or on sick leave, the department should have an alternative contact that can manage the case.
   3. Make sure the student has the Student Complaint Procedure Quick Guide and knows where to find complete information on the complaints procedure.
4. All students should be able to access the complaints process.
   1. Guidance and procedures should be made available to students in accessible formats where applicable.
   2. Departments should assess on a case-by-case basis whether reasonable adjustments are required to ensure students are able to access the process.
   3. Students should be directed towards the support services available.
   4. If the student finds it difficult to engage effectively with the complaints process, the student can appoint a representative.
      1. The department should ensure that the student is aware of this possibility.
      2. It may be appropriate to pause the complaints process while a representative is appointed.
5. Students should be able to air their concerns and feel that they have been listened to.
   1. This means it is important that the student understands that their concerns are taken seriously and given equal consideration to other parties to the complaint.
   2. It is equally important that the student understands that other parties to the complaint will be invited to present their own account, which may conflict with that provided by the student, and that other parties’ accounts will also be taken seriously and given consideration.
6. Students are entitled to make a complaint if they feel that the University is not meeting its obligations to them. There should be no repercussions on students for making a complaint in normal circumstances, although repeated and vexatious complaints can be dealt with through student disciplinary procedures.
7. In cases where a student wishes to discuss concerns but does not wish to make a complaint, there should be the opportunity for them to do so.
   1. Departments should take reasonable steps to resolve situations where there is no complaint.
   2. It should be clear to the student that a department may be limited in the action that can be taken unless a complaint is made.
8. When a complaint is received by the department, it is essential that a local investigation is completed, and a written outcome is provided, as if the student wishes to pursue a complaint with the Proctors the outcome of the local investigation needs to be provided.

**Timescales and investigation steps**

1. An acknowledgement should be sent to the student as soon as possible and within five working days at the latest. The acknowledgement should include information on who will be dealing with the complaint and, if possible, provide an indication of preliminary steps and timeframe.
2. Written records should be kept at every stage of the process, detailing anything that was discussed and agreed.
   1. If the complaint has been made in writing, clarify any ambiguities in the written complaint with the student as soon as possible. It may be appropriate to conduct an initial meeting with the student so that all parties are clear what the complaint is about.
   2. If the complaint has been made orally, summarise the complaint in writing yourself and send it to the student as soon as possible with a request to clarify anything you may have misunderstood.
3. Give the student the option to be accompanied to any meeting, e.g. by a friend or college advisor.
4. The student should be contacted within ten working days of the complaint being made to update them on progress. You should explain to the student:
   1. Who is investigating the complaint and why this person is dealing with the complaint, e.g. they are the person responsible for dealing with student complaints of this type.
   2. What the department is going to do to investigate the complaint.
   3. How long it is expected to take, including when the student should expect the next update.
5. Investigate the complaint, gathering any relevant information/evidence.
   1. Ask the student to provide evidence to substantiate the issues raised, where possible. Set out the types of evidence that may be required. This may include independent medical evidence, reports by professionals, financial information or witness statements, etc.
   2. Gather any relevant evidence from formal records, e.g. eVision, GSR, published information.
   3. Ask other parties to the complaint to give their perspective. This may be in writing or meeting in person. If meeting in person, keep a record of what was said.
   4. During investigation it is important to keep in mind the need to maintain confidentiality. It should be clear to the student who is going to be made aware of the complaint prior to information being disclosed.
      1. If the student objects to information being disclosed to someone who is required for the complaint to proceed, explain to the student that you can only continue investigating the complaint if they consent to the disclosure of this information. If they withhold consent, explain to them that the investigation cannot proceed or will be limited. Give reasons for why this is the case.
6. Meetings should usually have a minimum of three people present, the investigator, the party being interviewed (which may be the student making the complaint) and someone to take notes.
   1. It should be clear to all parties what their role is and what the role of other people in the meeting is.
7. Keep the student regularly informed of what progress is being made.
8. Once all investigations have been completed write to the student setting out how the issue has been considered or how it will be resolved.
   1. Provide solutions, if possible.
   2. Be empathetic and understanding when there is no apparent solution.
   3. Give an apology where it seems appropriate to do so.

**Complaints Time Limits**

1. Students are advised to make complaints as soon as possible and no later than three months of the matter arising.
2. Academic appeals should be made within five working days of when they were notified of the academic decision which they are appealing.
3. There is a time limit of three months for a complaint to be referred to the Proctors for consideration. It is therefore imperative that local resolution is carried out efficiently to keep within this time limit.
   1. If a student makes an initial complaint very close to the three month time limit and there will not be sufficient opportunity for the department to investigate, notify the Proctors’ Office of the complaint and seek advice on how to proceed.
   2. If the department is unable to deal with the complaint within the prescribed timelines, and causes a delay with the process, you may want to consider whether it is appropriate to offer a distress and inconvenience payment to the student.
   3. If there has been some delay with the complaint being investigated the student is entitled to refer their complaint to the Head of Department. If the Head of Department is the person already dealing with the complaint please contact the Division for advice (graduate.studies@mpls.ox.ac.uk).
4. If the complaint is being raised outside of the three month time limit the student should be informed that their complaint is ‘out of time’ for consideration.
   1. Complaints outside of the three month time frame can only be considered in exceptional circumstances, e.g. where the student is able to demonstrate clearly that they were unable to make the complaint sooner and within the three month time frame.
5. It is acknowledged that in some cases there is not a clear point at which the matter arose, e.g. where a PGR student is complaining about inadequate supervision over a period of time. However, it is important that complaints are made as soon as possible, as this gives the maximum opportunity for a satisfactory resolution to be reached.