

DEGREE STUDIES AT WEST SUFFOLK COLLEGE

STUDENT COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

Purpose To allow students to have full opportunity to raise matters of concern to them without fear of disadvantage and in the knowledge, the College will deal with them fairly, promptly and uphold their privacy and confidentiality. With upheld complaints, appropriate remedy is provided within the bounds of what is reasonable and practicable for the College to provide.

Scope This Procedure applies to applicants to, and students on, all courses offered by Degree Studies at West Suffolk College. It is also available to students for three months after they have left the Institution. The Complaints Procedure operates in accordance with the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) UK Quality Code for Higher Education Chapter B9: Appeals and Student Complaints published in April 2013, and the good practice framework for handling complaints and academic appeals issued by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) in December 2014.

Principles

1. A student may provide feedback which will be useful to the College or service when reviewing its policies and operations, without invoking this policy. Students are encouraged to provide feedback to their Course Director, Associate Dean Student Experience or service provider in a prompt and constructive manner.
2. A student complaint, as defined by the OIA, is “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”.
3. There are specific procedures that deal with academic appeals against decisions of Assessment Boards, or appeals in relation to Academic Misconduct, Extenuating Circumstances, Fitness to Practice, and Criminal Convictions. This Complaints Procedure deals with any appeals or complaints that fall outside these. Advice is available from the Degree Studies Office, the HE Support Tutor or the course leader about the most appropriate procedure.
4. Students or applicants will not have the right to have the same case heard again through a different complaints route.
5. Complaints are typically considered individually but where complaints are raised by a number of students or applicants involving the same issue, the complaints may be considered collectively, subject to any confidentiality requirements. In such circumstances, the individuals involved will be invited to nominate one of their number as a spokesperson to facilitate the process.
6. In order to enable the full investigation of a complaint and communication of the outcome, the College will not accept anonymous complaints.
7. In considering complaints, Degree Studies at West Suffolk College will apply the Procedure in accordance with its Equality and Diversity Policy. Reasonable adjustment agreements will be

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implemented for students or applicants with disabilities, specific learning disabilities, or long-term medical conditions.

8. All personal information will be managed in accordance with General Data Protection Regulation (2016).

9. All individuals involved in any complaint must ensure confidentiality. Whilst confidential information may need to be disclosed in order to consider the complaint, this will only be to those staff involved in consideration of the complaint.

10. The College expects that students will not engage in:

- complaints which are harassing, repetitive or pursued in an unreasonable manner;
- insistence on pursuing frivolous or non-meritorious complaints and/or unrealistic or unreasonable outcomes;
- complaints designed to cause disruption, vexation or annoyance;
- Complaints based on unreasonable expectations;
- demands for redress which lack any purpose or value.

In such cases, the Associate Dean or nominee reserves the right to terminate consideration of the complaint. The student or applicant will receive an explanation, in writing, of why their complaint was terminated and details of any further right to complain. Complaints of this nature may result in disciplinary action against the student(s) or applicant(s).

11. Information that is discovered due to a complaint may lead to Degree Studies at West Suffolk College or other agencies taking other kinds of action. This includes staff and student disciplinary procedures and civil or police investigations. Should this happen the resolution of the complaint may be delayed until that other action has been taken. Students or applicants will be kept informed of how long this process might take.

Procedure

12. There are three stages: an informal stage for early resolution; a formal stage if a student or applicant was not able to resolve their complaint informally and wishes to pursue their concerns further; and a review stage that a student or applicant may follow if they were not satisfied with the outcome of their formal stage complaint. At any time during the formal and review stages, the Degree Studies Office may attempt to resolve the matter in collaboration with other colleagues.

13. A student or applicant can withdraw their complaint at any point by advising the Degree Studies Office in writing but may not recommence the complaint later.

14. It may not always be necessary to hold face-to-face meetings when a complaint is considered, but either party may request a meeting. Throughout the Procedure, the student or applicant has the right to have a friend at meetings. The definition of a friend is a member of staff or a registered student (for example a course representative) of Degree Studies at West Suffolk College. The role of the friend is to act as an observer, give moral support and to assist the student or applicant to make their case. In addition, where reasonable adjustments agreements are in place, a student or applicant may have a supporter, for example, a sign language communicator or a note taker, and a student or applicant with difficulty in understanding English may have an

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interpreter. If attendance at a meeting is not possible, an alternative may be arranged, for example a telephone or Skype call.

INFORMAL STAGE

15. In the first instance, a student or applicant should seek to resolve the matter in an informal manner by taking it up as quickly as possible with the person(s) most directly involved, if at all practicable. This may involve contacting their course leader, personal tutor or another member of academic staff or other appropriate person, such as the manager of the service they are concerned about if it is a non-academic matter. Verbal reporting is best at this stage, although a student or applicant may present their complaint in writing if they wish. A student can get assistance in making a complaint from the Degree Studies Office, HE Support Tutor or their course leader.

16. The student or applicant should receive a report from the member of staff of actions taken to try to resolve the complaint.

17. Most complaints will not need to progress beyond this initial stage. However, should the informal approach not resolve the matter to the student's or applicant's satisfaction, they may make a formal complaint under the Formal Stage.

FORMAL STAGE

18. To make a formal complaint, the student or applicant must submit the completed Complaint (Formal Stage) form and any supporting documents to the Degree Studies Office within three months of the matter occurring. A clear description of the resolution sought is required of the complainant.

19. Complaints about made outside the three-month timescale normally will not be considered without good reason for the delay. The Associate Dean Student Experience or nominee decides whether to accept a late complaint, this judgement will be final. The student or applicant is issued with a Completion of Procedures letter if the late complaint is not accepted.

Consideration of Formal Stage Complaints

20. Formal stage complaints are screened by the Degree Studies Office to confirm that the complaint was submitted under the correct procedure and that the form is fully completed with necessary supporting documentation, including evidence of an attempt at early resolution. The Associate Dean Student Experience or nominee may ask the student or applicant for further clarification and/or additional evidence.

21. Where additional evidence and/or clarification is requested from the student or applicant, this should be submitted to the Degree Studies Office by the given deadline. If it is not received by this date, the complaint will be considered on the evidence provided with the original submission.

22. Where a complaint has met the requirements the Degree Studies Office will acknowledge the complaint and inform the student or applicant who will be the Investigating Officer, normally within five working days of receipt. The Investigating Officer will normally be the appropriate manager, for example the Curriculum Director or Head of Service, providing they were not part of any earlier process. Where the Curriculum Director or Head of Service was involved in

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consideration of the complaint at the informal stage, the Associate Dean Student Experience will investigate or appoint an alternative Investigating Officer.

23. The Investigating Officer will consider the complaint and may talk to key staff and other students, as well as considering all relevant evidence or have a meeting to discuss the complaint and consider options for a mutually acceptable resolution with the student or applicant.

24. If the complaint is against another student, the Investigating Officer may discuss the complaint with the alleged perpetrator and give them the opportunity to respond. The alleged perpetrator may bring a friend (as defined earlier in this policy) to the meeting. If the Investigating Officer decides that there is a case to answer, the alleged perpetrator will be subject to disciplinary action under the Student Discipline Procedure and/or Fitness to Practice or Study Procedure.

25. Where a complaint involving an allegation of misconduct by a member of staff is upheld the Human Resources Director may decide this will form the basis of further action under the Staff Disciplinary Procedure.

26. The Investigating Officer will provide a written response normally within twenty working days of the complaint being lodged with the Degree Studies Office, except where good reason can be demonstrated for requiring a longer period, in which case the student will be notified of the delay and of an expected response date.

REVIEW STAGE

27. Students will be entitled to seek a review by the Student Complaints Review Committee of the decision concerning their complaint, only where:

- It is clear that the Formal Stage investigation did not include all relevant evidence, that could have been material to the outcome;
- There is evidence that the Formal Stage investigation was not operated in accordance with policies.

28. New evidence will not typically be accepted at this stage.

29. The Review Stage will be initiated by submitting a copy of the Formal Complaint Form to the Degree Studies Office, normally within ten working days of having received the outcome of the investigation of the complaint at the Formal Stage of this procedure.

30. The student needs to submit a Complaints (Review Stage) form and provide details of what action has been taken to resolve the complaint at previous stages and why they remain dissatisfied.

31. The Degree Studies Office will record and acknowledge the request for a review, within ten working days of receipt and will inform the Associate Dean Student Experience or nominee of the complaint.

32. Where the Associate Dean Student Experience determines that there are grounds for a review of the Formal Stage complaint outcome the complaint is referred to the Vice Principal or nominee. The student or applicant is informed that the review is proceeding, normally within five working days of the receipt of their review stage complaint.

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33. If the Associate Dean Student Experience or nominee decides that no further consideration is required then the complainant will have exhausted the internal procedures. The student or applicant will receive this decision via a Completion of Procedures letter from the Degree Studies Office, normally within twenty working days of receipt of the Complaint (Review Stage) form. In such cases, the complainant may be able to seek a further review of their complaint by the OIA.

Consideration of Review Stage Complaints

34. The Vice Principal Quality and Student Experience or nominee will conduct the review and assemble the evidence relevant to the complaint. In assembling such evidence, the Vice Principal or nominee may re-interview those involved and will consider any relevant evidence. The review should be completed within fifteen working days of referral to the Vice Principal or nominee. The complainant will be informed if the review is going to extend beyond this time given a likely timescale for completion.

35. The Vice Principal Quality and Student Experience or nominee will review the case and produce a report of their findings, which will be shared with the Associate Dean Student Experience and Executive Dean HE. The student or applicant will receive a written response from the Associate Dean Student Experience, via the Degree Studies Office, within five working days of the completion of the review. The response will be a Completion of Procedures letter and will include a summary of the decision made, how the decision was reached, actions that will be taken to remedy the complaint.

Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA)

36. If the student does not feel satisfied having exhausted the above Complaints Procedure, they may be able to take their complaint to the OIA. If the student is, or was, a registered student the Completion of Procedures letter includes details of the OIA scheme. Details are also available from the OIA website (www.oiahe.org.uk). The OIA will normally only consider complaints where a Completion of Procedures letter has been produced and will not consider complaints about admissions.

Monitoring and Evaluation

37. Degree Studies at West Suffolk College will monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the Complaints Procedure and reflect upon the outcomes for enhancement purposes. The Associate Dean Student Experience will submit a report, including equality and diversity monitoring data, annually to the Standards and Excellence Committee.

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