

## Informal Complaints Guidance for Staff

The below includes guidance from the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA). For further guidance from the OIA please click [here](#).

Under Part O of the University General Regulations, complaints are for concerns about the provision and delivery of academic programmes and related services, and/or concerns about a student's experiences at the University, including engagement with academic, professional services and support staff.

It is expected that most complaints can be resolved informally at a local level, without the need to escalate it to a formal complaint via the Governance team.

Students might raise a complaint, informally, in person or in writing via email or Microsoft Teams. Colleagues are encouraged to meet with students (in person or virtually) to resolve informal complaints where possible. This should then be followed up with an email so that there is a clear audit trail to help support the informal complaint, should it be escalated to a formal complaint.

Communications regarding any complaints should be considered carefully. It is important to remember the audience of the email and that there is likely to be a lot of emotions tied to the complaint. Where appropriate, staff should signpost to the relevant support resources; this may include Student Wellbeing, Student Support, and the SU Advice Centre.

### **Who is responsible for informal complaints?**

Each School, Department, and Service should have a dedicated informal complaints advisor, chosen by the Head of School/Department/Service, who can guide colleagues on how to proceed with an informal complaint. The complaints advisor will not handle informal complaints; they are there to help guide you.

Staff members can and should attempt to resolve informal complaints. It is important to consider whether an outcome is practical or proportionate to the complaint. Where you are unsure of a suitable, proportionate outcome you can contact your complaints advisor. If you are unsure who your complaints advisor is, please contact [contention@lincoln.ac.uk](mailto:contention@lincoln.ac.uk).

### **Training on complaints**

Dedicated complaints advisors receive training from the Governance team. Heads of School/Department/Service should delegate responsibility for informal complaints appropriately.

Where complaints advisors wish to have refresher training, please contact [contention@lincoln.ac.uk](mailto:contention@lincoln.ac.uk).

The following training (available via MyView) may also be useful for those dealing with complaints regularly:

- Active Bystander
- Building Emotional Resilience
- Communicating Well
- Customer Service Skills
- Managing Conflict and Mediation Skills

### **What isn't a complaint?**

If the complaint relates to another student's behaviour, then the student must be referred to [contention@lincoln.ac.uk](mailto:contention@lincoln.ac.uk) to raise an allegation of Student Misconduct under Part P of the University General Regulations, which outlines the student misconduct process. If the complaint about another student's behaviour concerns allegations of sexual misconduct, please contact Student Wellbeing immediately as they are trained to support students with such experiences and take first disclosures. Further details about student misconduct can be found here.

If the complaint relates to an academic result, grade, mark, etc., then the student should be advised to raise their issue informally with (for example) their Personal Tutor in the first instance. If informal resolution fails, the student should be referred to the Academic Appeals process as under Part N of the University General Regulations.

### **Questions to consider**

The below are questions to consider when dealing with informal complaints, as recommended by the OIA.

- Is this a complaint, student misconduct, or academic appeal? Should the student be referred to another procedure?
- What specifically is the concern about, and which area(s) of the provider is/are involved?
- What outcome is the student hoping for and can it be achieved?
- Is the concern straightforward and likely to be resolved with little or no investigation?
- Can it be resolved on the spot by giving an explanation, an alternative solution, or an apology?
- Can someone else help resolve the issue? Does it need someone with particular expertise or training?
- Would it be helpful to use confidential mediation or conciliation, and are the student and the University willing to do so?
- What help or support can be provided to the student in taking this forward?

### **Providing evidence**

For informal complaint resolution, students may be asked to summarise or clarify the key parts of their concern. Students should not usually be asked to provide significant evidence during an informal resolution. If the matter cannot be resolved without gathering extensive evidence, then it is usually best to escalate the complaint to the formal stage.

### **Who else can help and when do I delegate?**

If responsibility for the issue raised lies in the staff member's area of work, they should try to resolve the concern in consultation with the student and without involvement of the Head of School/Department/Service. If responsibility lies elsewhere, the staff member should work with the relevant colleagues to help resolve the student's concern, rather than simply passing the student on to another colleague. Where this is not possible or not appropriate, and the student is directed to liaise with another colleague, it is good practice to introduce the student to the person who will consider the concern or to make an appointment for the student to meet them as soon as possible.

You may need to delegate an informal complaint to another member of staff when you do not have the expertise or capacity to deal with the complaint. It is also important to bear in mind any periods of upcoming leave you have. If the informal complaint needs dealing with in a short timeframe and you have a period of long leave coming up, it may be necessary to pass it onto another colleague. Where

you have short periods of leave which may interfere with the typical timeline of an informal complaint you should inform the student as soon as possible.

Heads of School/Department/Service should not be involved at the informal complaints stage as if the complaint were to be escalated to a formal complaint they would be involved in the case. You may wish to involve a Deputy Head or a nominated alternative colleague.

### **Possible outcomes**

It is important that outcomes are as consistent as possible across your School/Department/Service. Therefore, if you are unsure if your suggested outcome is proportionate, please contact your complaints advisor for further advice.

Examples of outcomes for informal complaints:

- No action required – student is provided with an outline of how the misunderstanding has come about
- Verbal or written apology
- Timetabling/Seminar Group change arranged
- Admin error is corrected
- Both parties agree on an act of practical resolution
- Compensation is at the discretion of the Head of School/Department/Service and is uncommon during the informal resolution stage. Guidelines on compensation and complaint resolution can be found on the [OIA HE website](#).

### **Record keeping**

It is good practice to keep a records relating to the informal complaint. This may include communications to the parties involved, actions taken to consider and resolve the concern, the decision and the timelines associated with this. This is useful if the complaint is escalated and it should be stored centrally so that the complaint advisors can assure consistency across the School/Department/Service complaints resolution.

It is recommended that emails are kept in folders in your inbox and a pdf export is saved centrally so that there is an audit trail available for the complaints advisor and Governance team should the complaint be escalated.

Where meetings are held in person or on Teams in some cases it may be appropriate to have another person present to make notes. These should be saved centrally with the emails.

Any actions should be stated and monitored locally. The retention period for documents relating to complaints is 6 years after the year in which the complaint is made.

### **What to do if a complaint is very serious**

Where it is clear early resolution is not appropriate or possible, and that the student's concern needs to move to the formal stage, the student should be directed promptly to the relevant procedure. They should be advised to complete the appropriate form, providing full details of the complaint and any relevant documents or information. It is good practice to tell the student about any time limits for making the complaint or appeal and where and how to access advice and support, for example Student Wellbeing, Student Support, the SU Advice Centre, the Students' Union, or Student Representative(s), professional associations, or the relevant trade union.

## Informal Complaints Guidance for Students

### **I have a complaint, who do I contact?**

It is expected that most complaints can be resolved at a local level, on an informal basis, without the need to escalate it to a formal complaint via the Governance team. The type of complaint will determine who you should direct it to. In the first instance, you are advised to talk to the person or service the complaint relates to. For academic matters, your Personal Tutor can assist you in taking your complaint further or direct you to the relevant colleague. If you are unsure who to direct your informal complaint to, please consult Student Support or the SU Advice Centre.

### **Support**

Before making a complaint, either formally or informally, students are encouraged to seek advice from the University's Student Support Services, the Students' Union's Advice Centre, and/or their Personal Tutor. The contact details for these services can be found below.

Student Support: +44(0)1522 837080 [studentsupport@lincoln.ac.uk](mailto:studentsupport@lincoln.ac.uk)

SU Advice Centre: +44(0)1522 837000 or [advice@lincolnsu.com](mailto:advice@lincolnsu.com)

Students making a complaint have the right to be accompanied to meetings by a member of staff, student of the University, or a staff member from the Students' Union Advice Centre.

### **Providing evidence**

For informal complaint resolution, students may be asked to summarise or clarify the key parts of their concern in writing. Students should not usually be asked to provide significant evidence during an informal resolution. If the matter cannot be resolved without gathering extensive evidence, then it is usually best to escalate the complaint to the formal stage.

All evidence should be provided in an accessible format, where associated evidence is not in English, you will be required to provide a translated version. The translation may later be verified by an appointed translator.

### **Complaint about another student's behaviour**

If your complaint relates to another student's behaviour, then this will not be handled under the complaint procedure, instead, please refer to Part P of the University General Regulations which outlines the Student Misconduct Process. Further details about student misconduct can be found [here](#).

### **Accommodation maintenance/complaints**

Where your problem relates to accommodation maintenance, please register this with the Accommodation Services team. Should you wish to raise a complaint in regard to the service provided, please first aim to resolve this informally by contacting those involved and/or speaking to the reception team in your accommodation.

### **Escalating a complaint**

Where you are unable to resolve the complaint informally, or the complaint is severe enough to warrant a formal investigation the complaint will be investigated in line with Part O of the University General Regulations. You can submit a formal complaints form using OneUni.

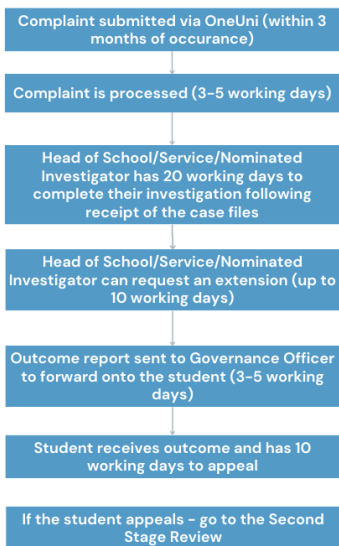
### Possible outcomes

The outcome for informal complaints varies from case to case – will link in with the examples given in the staff section once we have decided on these examples

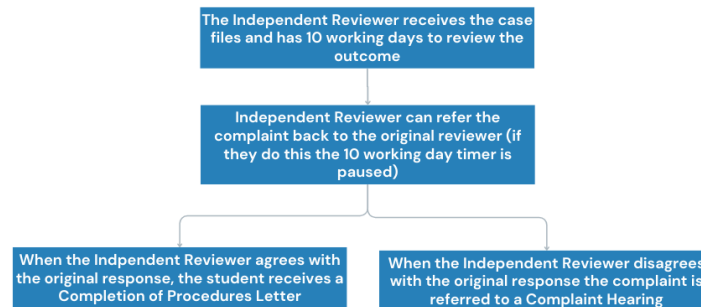
### Visual timeline of complaints

# Student Complaints

## 1 - Head of School Stage



## 2 - Second Stage Review



## 3 - Complaint Hearing

