

What is a complaint?

A complaint is where, as a result of a student's experience at Royal Holloway, a student is dissatisfied about the College's provision of services or facilities and would like their concerns to be investigated. Complaints must be evidenced and frivolous or malicious complaints will not be considered.

If a student wishes for a decision made by the College relating to their academic studies to be reconsidered, they should follow the academic appeal process. For example, appeals against a grade, a decision regarding extenuating circumstances, or a decision to terminate your registration because of non-attendance.

Sometimes students' concerns will cover both complaints and academic appeals. In these cases, students may wish to submit an appeal in the first instance so that they meet the one month deadline. The Academic Quality and Policy Office will then determine whether their case should be referred to the Secretariat in order to be investigated as a complaint before it is investigated as an appeal. However, these cases will take considerably longer to investigate as two separate College processes have to be completed.

The Complaints Procedure was reviewed and revised in July 2015 to reflect the OIA Good Practice Framework for handling complaints and academic appeals. The full framework can be found at <http://www.oiahe.org.uk/providers-and-good-practice/good-practice-framework.aspx>

Help and Advice

Please feel free to seek advice from the Secretariat at any time during the handling of a complaint. Other sources of advice and support are:

- Support & Advisory Services: e.g. for counselling, debt advice, learning support and disciplinary issues
- Registry, especially the Faculty Assistant Registrar, for help with academic regulations, academic appeals, plagiarism etc.

When dealing with all parts of the complaints process it is helpful to bear in mind that all documents regarding the complaint including emails could be required to be made available to the student under the Data Protection Act and can be used as evidence during investigations as well as requested by the OIA. The OIA will also make the evidence available to the student.

Where to start – Early Resolution

Early resolution is designed to address straightforward concerns as quickly and locally as possible for example at department level before a student escalates them into a formal complaint. Early resolution might include a face to face discussion with the student or asking an appropriate member of staff or mediator to deal with the matter. The College's aim is to deal with complaints in an informal way and as promptly as possible. Nevertheless, no matter how informal and apparently trivial, please **make notes** of meetings with dates, and keep all relevant paperwork, including email exchanges. Where proportionate the student should be provided with a written summary of what they have raised and action that has been taken to address their concerns or advice that has been given.

When looking at early resolution it might be helpful to consider:

- What is the specific concern and which areas of the College are involved?
- What is the outcome the student is looking for and what can be achieved?
- Is the concern straightforward and likely to be resolved with little or no investigation?

- Can it be resolved on the spot by providing if appropriate an explanation, an alternative solution or a compromise?
- Can someone else assist in a finding resolution?
- Is there any merit in using confidential mediation or conciliation with the agreement of the student and the College?
- What assistance and support can be provided to the student in taking this forward?

Even at this early stage, natural justice should prevail. This means everyone is treated fairly and there are no surprises. If you meet with a student ensure that they know what the meeting is about, **tell the attendees well in advance what you want to talk about and send them copies of any documents you want to discuss**. Any complainant receiving an email response will want to be assured that you have understood their situation and the request they are making. It is therefore important that you include details in your email which demonstrate you have engaged with the situation you are considering. You might like to briefly summarise the position "as you understand it" as one way of achieving this.

You can also advise them of the following:

- (i) If the student is complaining about academic matters they should check the website on Academic Appeals and can also contact the SU Welfare & Advice Centre.
- (ii) Where the student is complaining about the standard of behaviour of a member of staff then you could talk to the Director or Deputy Director HR.
- (iii) Where a student has had their registration terminated for non-payment of debts they should talk to the Head of Student Fees.
- (iv) Where the student is unhappy with a specific facility such as the Health Centre or the Students' Union they should take their complaint to the appropriate facility – see Appendix 1 of the Student Complaint's Procedure.
- (v) Where they have been disciplined for a non-academic issue they should follow the appeals procedure in the Student Disciplinary Regulations, available from the online Student Handbook.

If you do feel that mediation or conciliation would be helpful please contact the Secretariat and we will try to make appropriate arrangements.

Where next – Formal Stage

The formal stage is used where a student is dissatisfied with the outcome of the early resolution or where early resolution is not possible or suitable due to the character or complexity of the case. The formal stage should normally be dealt with by people who have not been involved previously and may include mediation or conciliation where appropriate.

If you receive a complaints form directly please forward it to secretariat@rhul.ac.uk. All formal complaints are logged and monitored. Sometimes we have to advise our insurers of a potential risk so it is important to make sure you do notify all formal complaints.

Brief summary of the formal process

Formal Complaint Form submitted to secretariat@rhul.ac.uk (obtainable at www.rhul.ac.uk/For-Students/complaints.html)

Secretariat will allocate a Case Officer whose role will be to:

- Keep the student informed regarding the progress of the complaint
- Establish what is to be investigated and contact the relevant Heads of Department or Service for a response.

- Collate any other relevant information e.g. academic transcripts, student handbooks, regulations and policies.
- Convene a panel to consider the Complaint.
- Write a report and summarise all the submissions and evidence to be forwarded to the panel who will make a decision about whether the complaint should be upheld, partially upheld or not upheld.
- Once the decision of the panel has been made draft the initial findings letter to be agreed by the panel.

Complaint Panel

Guidance for Panel Members

The complaint panel comprises a senior member of academic staff and a member of the Student Union. Student Sabbatical Officer.

The Case Officer will contact you to ask if you are willing to be part of a panel. If you have had any prior knowledge of the complaint you should indicate this to the Case Officer as it is important that the complaint should be investigated as independently as possible.

The role of the panel is to consider all the relevant documents and make a decision about the outcome of the complaint – is it upheld, not upheld or partly upheld and any remedies or other action. For example, a full apology, compensation, refund, further investigation, improvement to policies and procedures. Do ask the case officer for advice about precedents. Anything that has a bearing on academic issues should be discussed with the Head of the Academic Quality and Policy Office and any financial redress should be discussed with the Deputy College Secretary.

It may be possible for the panel to reach a decision having had an email correspondence or a telephone discussion regarding the complaint rather than having to meet in person. If a decision is made via email circulation please bear in mind that the student is entitled to copies of these emails. Depending on the nature of the complaint and the wishes of the student it may be appropriate for the panel to meet with the student. The Case Officer will help with organising the meeting. It is important to ensure that the student is aware of the purpose of the meeting, who will be there and who they can bring with them. You will also need a note taker.

The panel chair will need to write a report outlining the decision and the reasons for it. You may like to consider the following structure for your response:

- State specifically what the student's complaint is regarding, e.g. a specific service, department or member of staff
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- Outline the student's situation as you understand it and the information with which you have been presented.
- Outline the factors you have taken into account in reaching your decision, provide your decision, and explain your reasons for it.
- State what the outcome of your consideration is and any proposed remedy or action.

Once the panel has made a decision the Case Officer will need to draft an initial finding letter

Guidance for Case Officer

1. **Contact the student.** Surprisingly often, the real nature of the complaint is not clear from the original submission and you may not be able to detect what redress the student is seeking. In this

case it is advisable to include with your acknowledgement an outline of your understanding of the complaint and what is being sought and ask the student to confirm it.

2. **Gather any relevant information.** This will include asking the department (normally the HoD) for a response to the complaint – they should be provided with the relevant part of the evidence and complaint submitted by the student. You may wish to indicate the matters that you need a response on and any evidence they should submit. You should also gather any other information likely to be relevant, especially relevant regulations, department handbooks, email circulations sent to students, or procedural documents.

You should then write a summary report to aid the panel – describing the complaint, action you have taken and indicating any areas where there is a conflict or dispute in the narrative.

3. Convene a panel and provide them with the information pack.
4. Once the panel has made a decision they will write a report outlining their decision and the reasons for it. You should send this to the student with a cover letter summarising the report and any next steps to be taken either by the College or the student.

Ideally the whole process should not take more than 20 working days as outlined in the OIA good practice framework. The College will have to explain any delay and where there is a delay it is the responsibility of the case officer to proactively keep the student informed.

Right to respond

If the student is unhappy with the outcome of the complaint they can request a review of the complaint. On receipt of the request for the review the Secretariat will allocate a new case officer who will communicate with the student (or their representative) and keep them informed of progress.

The Vice-Principal or nominee will review the case and decide whether the decision should stand or if any further action is required. Once completed the Case Officer will notify the student and the panel of the outcome of the review and issue a Completion of Procedures letter as required by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA).

Where all internal procedures have been exhausted the College will not act on any further requests to investigate the matter. If students are unsatisfied with the outcome they can ask for their case to be reviewed by the OIA (see www.oiahe.org.uk).