

11. Student Complaints

- [11.1 Introduction](#)

1. Aberystwyth University is committed to ensuring a high quality educational experience for all its students whether studying at Aberystwyth or with a partner institution, supported by appropriate academic, administrative and welfare support services and facilities. However, there may be occasions when students are dissatisfied with the teaching and learning facilities, or services, provided and may wish to submit a complaint. Aberystwyth University believes that students should have access to an effective system for handling complaints and that they should feel able to make a complaint, secure in the knowledge that it will be fairly investigated.

Note: This procedure refers to the process to be followed by students studying at Aberystwyth and studying for an Aberystwyth qualification at a partner institution. However, Aberystwyth students studying at a partner institution must also consult the relevant handbooks for more detailed arrangements and how the process at the partner institution feeds into the overall Student Complaints Procedure.

The definition of a complaint

2. For the purpose of this procedure, a student complaint is defined as ‘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. Complaints that **can** be considered under the Procedure include those relating to:

- (i) aspects of a student’s learning and teaching experience
- (ii) services and facilities offered by the University
- (iii) services and facilities offered by a third party on behalf of the University that contributes to the student experience
- (iv) industrial action by staff.

4. Complaints that **cannot** be considered under the procedure include those relating to:

- (i) academic appeals submitted against the decision of an examination board
- (ii) matters relating to admissions
- (iii) complaints against the Students’ Union
- (iv) complaints that question academic judgement
- (v) requests to leave University accommodation and associated appeals
- (vi) complaints arising from decisions made under University Support to Study/Return to Studies Policy, Fitness to Practice, and University Disciplinary Regulations
- (vii) complaints relating to private accommodation. You are required to raise any issues with your landlord. You may seek guidance from the Students’ Union, if necessary.

The consideration of a complaint

5. Complaints are considered at the following levels:

(i) Stage 1 (Early resolution)

(ii) Stage 2 (Formal level)

(iii) Stage 3 (Final Review)

6. Students should begin the process at Stage 1 by raising the issue with the individual(s) involved and to seek as early a resolution as possible.

7. If any complaints are received where it is felt the case could or should be handled under a different University procedure, the student will be notified in writing. It is the responsibility of the member of staff receiving the initial complaint to seek guidance from the Academic Registry via casework@aber.ac.uk as to whether the student has submitted their complaint under the correct procedure or not and to inform the student accordingly.

8. If (a) student(s) wish(es) to submit a complaint via email, they should make sure this is unambiguous: we recommend that they insert '**Stage 1 Complaint**' in the email subject line, so staff are clear that a complaint is being raised, which will ensure it is dealt with according to procedure and in a timely manner.

9. If the complaint needs to be submitted under another process, the student must be informed and the complaint passed to the relevant persons/department within the University by the receiving member of staff. The case will be dealt with within the relevant timescale beginning from when it was received by the correct department.

10. It is the responsibility of the member of staff receiving the complaint to ensure it is considered promptly. See 11.3 below for further guidance.

11. Departments should note that a delay or lack of communication with the student regarding their complaint could result in the student escalating the complaint to Stage 2: Complaint level.

- [11.2 Who Can Complain?](#)

Registered students

1. Any registered student of Aberystwyth University is eligible to make a complaint under this procedure.

Students who are studying under collaborative arrangements at a Partner Education Provider.

2. If students are studying under collaborative arrangements at a Partner Education Provider, they should attempt to seek resolution with the department at the Partner Institution in the first instance, before engaging with the formal stage of this procedure, as per Stage One: Early Resolution. If the complaint relates directly to Aberystwyth University, they should engage directly with the Aberystwyth University link academic or the Academic Partnerships Office, Aberystwyth University [aqsstaff@aber.ac.uk] in the first instance.

Students who have completed their studies

3. Students who have completed their studies can also make a complaint to the University but should normally do so within 90 calendar days of the end of the period of their registration. In the case of research students, whose candidature extends beyond the registration period,

complaints may normally be made up to 90 calendar days after their final result has been issued.

Group complaints

4. Where an issue affects a number of students, those students can submit a group complaint.

5. At Stage 1, students can either meet the relevant member of staff as a group, or a student should submit an email to the relevant member of staff on behalf of a group, naming the other students and providing their contact details within it.

6. At Stage 2, the student nominated to act as a group representative will need to complete the relevant section of the form before it is submitted.

7. At both levels, the University will deal with the representative only, and will expect the representative to liaise with the other students in the group regarding any discussions that take place.

8. Each student in the group will be contacted by the University to provide their name and contact details as confirmation that they wish the issue to be investigated as part of a group complaint. The complaint will not be progressed until confirmation is received by all students.

Appointing a representative

9. A student submitting an individual complaint may appoint a representative to submit the complaint on their behalf. The student would normally be expected to provide written consent, by letter or via their University e-mail account, to authorise a representative to act on their behalf (there would have to be a good, valid reason for this not to be possible).

- [11.3 Stage 1: Early resolution and Stage 2: Formal level – matters for consideration](#)

Stage 1: Early resolution

1. Aberystwyth University seeks to minimise students feeling the need to make a complaint by ensuring they have opportunities to participate in formal decision-making processes at all levels and by encouraging regular feedback through Department or Faculty Staff-Student Consultative Committees (including at partner institutions). In the event that a student is dissatisfied with a service provided by the University, the University will seek to resolve the matter at the earliest possible opportunity through early resolution.

Stage 2: The formal level

2. If, however, a student feels it is necessary to pursue a complaint at a further level, this procedure sets out the process they and the University must follow.

3. This procedure provides a mechanism for addressing complaints promptly, fairly and effectively. Further advice about this Procedure may be obtained from the Faculty Registrar, Academic Registry (casework@aber.ac.uk) or from a Student Adviser in the Students' Union (union.advice@aber.ac.uk).

4. In the instance of a complaint involving a Partner Institution, students may obtain advice from the Academic Partnerships Office, aqsstaff@aber.ac.uk, who can signpost to the relevant complaints procedure at Aberystwyth University and/or the Partner Institution.

Confidentiality

5. Students, and those against whom complaints are made, may expect complaints to be dealt with confidentially and for their privacy to be respected. However, any person who is the subject of a complaint will be made aware of it, in order that they are given the opportunity to respond to the allegations made against them, when requested by investigating staff. It may also be necessary to disclose information to other individuals, such as relevant members of staff, professional bodies and schools (placement), where applicable, so that the complaint may be dealt with appropriately. In these circumstances, the complaining party (ies) will be informed of such a disclosure, including those at a Partner Institution.

6. Students can have confidence that they will be protected under this Procedure and should not feel the need to submit anonymous complaints. Matters of concern can be raised anonymously through channels such as [‘Tell Us Now’](#), and the [‘Dignity and Respect at Work’ policy](#) however it may be difficult to resolve an individual or group complaint at further levels if they are made anonymously, as it prevents staff from investigating the specifics of the allegations being made. An anonymous complaint may only be considered if there is a compelling case, with supporting evidence, for the matter to be investigated further. However, it should be noted that raising a concern anonymously could impede the investigation and communication of the outcome. It may also make it difficult for the University to provide the relevant support required by students submitting a complaint. Students should carefully consider these points when considering submitting an anonymous complaint.

Non-legal accompaniment

7. At any stage in the procedure, the parties involved may be accompanied, in a non-legal capacity, by a friend, parent(s), representative of the Students’ Union or Trade Union recognised by the University, or any other member of the University community.

8. Complaints procedures are an internal matter and do not have the same degree of formality as a court of law. In most cases it will not be necessary or appropriate for a student or the provider to be legally represented at a complaints panel or meeting.

Contact details

9. During the complaints process, the University will need to contact the student making the complaint. This may be done via email, telephone or letter. It is a student’s responsibility to ensure that their contact details are correct on the central records system so the University can contact them easily. The University bears no responsibility for letters that do not reach a student due to their record not being kept up to date. The primary method of contact will be via e-mail, though letters of outcome at the Stage 2 and Review stages of the procedure may also be forwarded to the address on the forms submitted.

Evidence

10. Evidence in support of the complaint must be submitted. **A complaint cannot be investigated without evidence.**

11. For the purpose of this procedure, evidence submitted in support of a student’s complaint must be independent, corroborative, and sufficient to establish any facts or issues raised. **A personal statement of what a student believes to be true cannot constitute evidence.**

Examples of evidence can include:

(i) documentary evidence such as e-mails and photographs

(ii) witness statements from University staff or students, support workers, and other professionals, including those from a Partner Institution.

12. The student is responsible for identifying and submitting appropriate evidence with the complaint. The University will not do this on the student's behalf, unless someone employed by the University is acting as the student's named representative. **Any complaint made stating that further information can be sought on the student's behalf will not be actioned and the complaint will be rejected.** Students should note that they can submit further evidence following the submission of the complaint, but that in doing so this may lead to a delay in the response being issued. It is in their interests to submit all relevant evidence at the same time as they submit their complaint.

13. Students have the right to receive reasons for decisions taken following consideration of a complaint at any stage of the procedure, and to be informed of any opportunity for a further review.

Allegations of a criminal offence

14. If there are allegations of a criminal offence made in the complaint, Aberystwyth University may refer the matter to the police and suspend its own proceedings, at any stage of the procedure, until the outcome of any criminal proceeding is known. The student will be informed if this decision has been taken.

- [11.4 Procedure for Dealing with a Student Complaint](#)

1. The Procedure for dealing with a complaint refers to the three stages involved:

(i) Stage 1: Early resolution

(ii) Stage 2: Formal stage

(iii) Stage 3: Final review.

2. Upon request by the student, a Completion of Procedures letter will be issued by the University to the student following the completion of all internal procedures (the three stages). It will inform the student of the outcome of their complaint and their right to have the University's handling of the complaint considered by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA), should they feel it necessary to do so.

3. The University subscribes to the independent scheme for the review of student complaints. If a student is dissatisfied with the outcome, they may be able to apply for a review of their complaint to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA) providing that the complaint they take to the OIA is eligible under its Rules. Please note that the OIA will normally only review issues that have been dealt with through the University's internal procedures.

- [11.5 Stage One: Early Resolution](#)

1. It is anticipated that the majority of concerns, issues or complaints can be resolved easily and quickly at the time the problem first occurs and with the individual(s) directly involved (student and the person against whom they are complaining, or is responsible for the service against which the student is complaining).

2. The Early Resolution stage process for the early resolution of a complaint should proceed as follows:

Complaints involving an academic department

3. Any student with a concern, issue or complaint against an academic department at Aberystwyth or a partner institution, should, in the first instance, seek to resolve the matter as early as possible. This could be achieved by arranging a face to face meeting to discuss the situation at hand, followed by an explanation or apology, where appropriate. Students (as an individual or a group representative, as stated in 11.2 above), should offer a description of the problem encountered and state their desired outcome at this point, and, where possible, include any available evidence to support their complaint.

4. The student may wish to raise the matter with their personal tutor, another member of the academic staff or other appropriate person, including those at a Partner Institution. In the case of a group concern, issue or complaint (not involving allegations against a named individual) the appropriate departmental Staff-Student Consultative Committee, (and that at a partner institution) may be involved. These proceedings will not prejudice the investigation of the complaint at the formal level, should it be escalated to that level.

5. If (a) student(s) wish(es) to submit a complaint via email, they should make sure this is unambiguous: we recommend that they insert 'Stage 1 Complaint' in the email subject line, so staff are clear that a complaint is being raised, which will ensure it is dealt with according to procedure and in a timely manner.

Complaints involving a non-academic department

6. If the complaint is against a non-academic department, the student should discuss the matter with, for example, the person responsible for the service or facility the student has a concern or issue with, who can then refer the student to an appropriate member of staff within the department, or partner institution, if they are not in a position to resolve the issue themselves.

7. If a student is unsure to whom in a non-academic department they should submit their complaint, they are advised to contact the Academic Registry on casework@aber.ac.uk, who will be able to guide them in the right direction.

Outcome

8. When recording the outcome of a Stage 1 complaint, academic and non-academic departments must complete each of the following steps:

(i) The outcome of all Stage 1 complaints must be recorded systematically by each department. Details should include:

(ii) the name(s) of the student(s) submitting the complaint

(iii) the matter of concern

(iv) the investigating officer

(v) the outcome.

9. This report should also direct the student(s) back to the Aberystwyth University Complaints Procedure which sets out what options the student has available to them should they remain dissatisfied with the outcome and wish to pursue the complaint further.

10. The information should be drafted by the member of staff addressing the student's/students' complaint, and be circulated to all interested parties within the department and a copy retained in a clearly marked '**Stage 1 complaints**' folder in the department's central email address.

11. An electronic copy should also be submitted to the Academic Registry on casework@aber.ac.uk. This information will help the University monitor its performance in dealing with complaints and may be requested by the Academic Registry for the purpose of reporting to the relevant University committees.

12. Departments can seek general advice from the Academic Registry (casework@aber.ac.uk) on issues relating to the procedures when considering the case and any possible outcomes or redress, if felt necessary.

13. No formal time limit is applied to early resolution, however it is expected that attempts will be made to resolve the initial complaint, wherever practicable, within 10 working days. Students need to be mindful that responses may take longer if a complaint is submitted close to a University closure period.

- [11.6 Stage Two: Formal Stage](#)

1. Where early resolution of a complaint has been unsuccessful, or has been exhausted without appropriate resolution of the matter, the student may take their complaint to Stage 2.

2. Where students are studying under collaborative arrangements at a Partner Institution and initial proceedings have been unsuccessful or have been exhausted without appropriate resolution at the Partner Institution, the student may make a Stage 2 complaint directly to Aberystwyth University.

The submission of a Stage 2 complaint

3. Every Stage 2 complaint must be submitted on the [Formal Complaints Form](#) and submitted to the Academic Registry at casework@aber.ac.uk, normally within 10 working days of the student having received written notification that the early resolution stage has been completed. **A formal complaint submitted in any other format will not be considered.**

4. Students who submit a Stage 2 complaint that does not follow the Procedure will be directed to the right procedure and support will be made available to them, where this is felt appropriate. Following submission of a complaint submitted under the correct procedure, students will receive a written acknowledgement of the complaint, normally by e-mail, within 5 working days from the Academic Registry.

5. As per the instructions on the form, the complaint should clearly set out the following:

(i) the nature of the complaint: this should be brief and to the point, referring to any specific events

(ii) evidence should be provided that the student has exhausted the early resolution stage of the complaints procedure by providing, for example, a copy of the relevant e-mail trail and/or a copy of the written outcome from the person who attempted to resolve the matter

- (iii) a statement as to why the student remains dissatisfied and the outcome they are seeking
- (iv) copies of any relevant documentary evidence and correspondence, which support the complaint, must be attached.

The investigation process

6. Upon receipt of a formal complaint form, the Academic Registry will consider the complaint and will decide whether it is eligible for consideration, based on the acceptable grounds for a complaint (11.1 above). If it is not eligible, the Registry will inform the student.
7. If it is eligible, the Registry will ask the relevant Head of Department, or for students studying at a Partner Institution, the relevant 'AU Partnership representative' (link academic from relevant Aberystwyth University academic discipline or the Deputy Registrar for Academic Partnerships, Academic Registry) to investigate, where they must either arrange to interview all interested parties, or gather further evidence from relevant persons at their discretion.
8. The Head of Department, or AU Partnership representative, must also arrange to meet the student if they have requested a meeting at the point of submitting the formal complaints form. Any individual invited to attend an interview or meeting will be entitled to be accompanied by any of the individuals noted in 11.3 above.
9. Upon consulting the relevant evidence, the Head of Department, or AU Partnership representative, must complete an Investigation form and prepare a letter addressed to the complainant, detailing their investigations, which outlines the process followed, the information gathered, the conclusions drawn and any recommendations made. General advice can be sought from the Academic Registry (casework@aber.ac.uk) on issues relating to the procedures when considering the case, and any possible outcomes or redress, if felt necessary.
10. The letter, together with copies of any written evidence which was used to form the judgement, must be submitted to the Academic Registry (casework@aber.ac.uk), which is responsible for issuing the formal outcome to the student. Copies of the response will be circulated to all interested parties and an electronic copy kept on file.

Conflicts of interest

11. If at any point it is identified that the matter involves the Head of Department, or AU Partnership representative in an actual or perceived conflict of interest (e.g. they could be the subject of the complaint or have competing interests or loyalties), or if they have had any direct involvement in the case at any previous stage, then the matter will be immediately referred to the Pro Vice-Chancellor, Associate Dean or Director to which the Head of Department is accountable; they will then proceed as outlined under paragraphs 1 and 2 of Section 11.5, above, upon receipt of the complaint and evidence submitted.
12. If the Pro Vice-Chancellor, Associate Dean or Director also feel that there is a conflict of interest or have had any previous direct involvement in the case, the case will be referred to another Pro Vice-Chancellor, Associate Dean or Director who will continue to proceed as outlined above under paragraphs 1 to 4 of Section 11.5 above.

Timeframe

13. Upon receipt of the fully completed complaint form and associated evidence, each Stage 2 complaint should be resolved within 6 working weeks. If it appears that a response will be

delayed, students will be informed why this is, and will be kept informed of progress. At all stages of the formal process, students will be contacted by the Academic Registry at casework@aber.ac.uk

- [11.7 Stage Three: Final Review](#)

1. If a student remains dissatisfied with the decision of the outcome of the Stage 2 complaint, they can request a Final Review, if there are eligible grounds. Students will be directed to this procedure upon receipt of the formal outcome of their complaint and will have 10 working days from the date of the complaint outcome letter in which to submit a Final Review application. Further details can be found at: <https://www.aber.ac.uk/en/agro/handbook/fr/>.

2. This concludes the internal procedures of the University. If a student remains dissatisfied with the outcome or conduct of the investigation into their Final Review, they may be able to raise a complaint against the University with the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (www.oiahe.org.uk). They will be informed of this in their Completion of Procedures letter.

- [11.8 Frivolous, vexatious or malicious complaints or academic appeals](#)

1. Students will not suffer any disadvantage or recrimination as the result of making a complaint or academic appeal in good faith. Only if a complaint or academic appeal is judged to have been made frivolously (i.e. with no serious purpose or value), vexatiously (i.e. it is distressing or annoying) or with malice (i.e. the desire to inflict harm or suffering), could disciplinary issues arise in relation to the student. (See Aberystwyth University Disciplinary Procedure).

2. The University is committed to dealing with all complaints and academic appeals transparently and fairly and in line with its published procedures. However, the University reserves the right to consider a complaint or academic appeal frivolous, vexatious or malicious for the reasons below, though this list is not exhaustive:

(i) Complaints or academic appeals which are obsessive, harassing, or repetitive

(ii) Insistence on pursuing non-meritorious complaints or academic appeals and/or unrealistic, unreasonable outcomes

(iii) Insistence upon pursuing meritorious complaints or academic appeals in an unreasonable manner

(iv) Complaints or academic appeals which are designed to cause disruption or annoyance

(v) Demands for redress which lack any serious purpose or value.

3. Where it is believed that there is a case to be investigated, a report should be submitted by the relevant department to casework@aber.ac.uk. An independent investigator will be appointed by the Academic Registry who will decide whether or not a complaint or academic appeal is vexatious and will take into account all the circumstances of the case when reaching their decision. The independent investigator will consider both the contents of the complaint or academic appeal and the student's behaviour in relation to the complaint or academic appeal before reaching a decision.

4. A student who is believed to have submitted a frivolous, vexatious or malicious complaint or academic appeal may be subject to the University's Disciplinary Procedure.

5. Students whose programme of study leads to professional registration may be subject to under the Fitness to Practise Procedure.
6. Students whose behaviour is a cause for concern and where the University considers that there may be an underlying problem may be subject to the Support to Study Procedure.
7. If a decision is taken by the independent investigator that a student's complaint or academic appeal is vexatious, the Academic Registry will write to the student explaining that they are no longer prepared to engage with the student in relation to the vexatious complaint or academic appeal and the complaint or academic appeal will be rejected. The student will be given a full written explanation for the decision.
8. If students wish to challenge the decision, they should submit an application for a Final Review to the Complaints and Appeals Office casework@aber.ac.uk. The application will be considered by a Pro Vice-Chancellor or nominee.
9. The Pro Vice-Chancellor or nominee will review the information of the case, including any representations the student has made, and will decide whether the Final Review is to be upheld or rejected. If the Final Review is upheld, the Pro Vice-Chancellor will instruct that the student's complaint or academic appeal is reviewed in line with the University's published procedures.
10. The decision of the Pro Vice-Chancellor or nominee under the Final Review procedure is final and the student will be informed in writing, by the Academic Registry, of the decision. A Completion of Procedures Letter will be issued to the student, on request.
11. If a student remains dissatisfied with the University's final decision, the student may submit a complaint to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education.

Restrictions

12. The University may restrict contact in person, by telephone, email etc. or by any combination of these. The University will try to maintain at least one form of contact with a (frivolous, vexatious or malicious) complainant.
13. The University reserves the right to write to the person concerned, informing them that there will be no direct contact between them and the University. Further communication may be maintained between the University and a third party representative of the person concerned.
14. The University will not deal with communications that are abusive, or contain unsubstantiated allegations. Should such communications be received, the University will advise where it finds the language offensive, unnecessary or unhelpful. The University will ask the person concerned to stop using such language. Students will also be advised that the University will not respond to their communications if their use of offensive language or malicious accusations etc. does not stop. The University may require that future communication takes place via a third party (see above).
15. University staff may end telephone calls or leave a face-to-face meeting where they consider the language or behaviour of the complainant to be aggressive, abusive, or offensive. The member of University staff has the right to make that decision. They should advise the person concerned that their behaviour is unacceptable, and to end the interaction if that behaviour does not immediately stop.

16. Where a complainant repeatedly emails, phones, visits the University, raises repeated issues, or sends large numbers of documents where their relevance is not clear, then the University may decide to:

- (i) Limit contact to telephone calls from the complainant at set times on set days
- (ii) Restrict contact to a single, named member of University staff who will deal with future calls or correspondence from the complainant
- (iii) Arrange to see the complainant by appointment only
- (iv) Restrict contact from the complainant to writing only, or from a third party representing the complainant
- (v) Return any documents to the complainant or, in extreme cases, advise the complainant that further irrelevant documents will be destroyed
- (vi) Suspend access to campus and university buildings

or

- (vii) Take any other action that is considered appropriate.

17. In exceptional cases, the University reserves the right to refuse to consider a complaint or academic appeal or future complaints or academic appeals from an individual. The University will take into account the impact on the individual and also whether there would be a broader public interest in considering the complaint further.

18. The following process will be followed to impose restrictions:

- (i) The University will ensure that the complaint is being, or has been, investigated properly according to the complaint or academic appeal process, if appropriate;
- (ii) Unless it is not appropriate to do so, the University may first write to a complainant to provide reasonable warning that their behaviour is giving cause for concern. This gives the complainant the chance to consider and to modify any behaviour before any restrictions available through this Policy are applied.

19. The Academic Registrar or nominee will provide to the Pro Vice-Chancellor an assessment of whether the actions/behaviour of a complainant are abusive, persistent or vexatious, or otherwise within the scope of this Policy.

20. A Pro Vice-Chancellor or nominee will determine what (if any) restrictions are to be imposed.

21. The University will confirm in writing with the complainant:

- (i) Why the University has taken the decision
- (ii) What action(s) are being taken
- (iii) The duration of that action(s)
- (iv) The review process of this decision

and

(v) The right of the complainant to contact the OIA.

22. Complainants can ask the University to review the decision to impose restrictions, following a determination that a complainant's behaviour is unacceptable. The grounds for review are limited to:

(i) In reaching a judgment that a complainant's behaviour is unacceptable, the University has made a substantial error in fact

or

(ii) Significant, new evidence comes to light. A review will normally be undertaken by a Pro Vice-Chancellor or nominee. At review, the Pro Vice-Chancellor or their nominee has the discretion to remove or vary the restrictions as they think best. They will make their decision based on the evidence available to them. Following review, the complainant will be advised in writing of the outcome i.e. that either the restrictions applied by the Pro Vice-Chancellor or nominee still apply or a decision to follow a different course of action has been reached.

- [11.9 Template Forms](#)
 - [Student Complaints Procedure Flowchart](#)
 - [Complaints form](#)
 - [Industrial Action complaint form](#)

Chapter reviewed: June 2023