

## UCO Policy and Procedure

### Higher Education Student Complaints

Reference Code: UCOQH – PR005

Version No: 3

Issue Date: June 2025

Date for Review: June 2028

### Purpose and Scope

This policy applies to all students currently enrolled on higher education courses at University Campus Oldham (UCO), Higher Education at Oldham College. It covers complaints about the quality of teaching and learning, access to learning resources and facilities, student support services, communication, and the conduct of staff.

The purpose of this policy is to provide a clear and transparent process for students to raise concerns or complaints about their experience. This policy sets out how complaints will be handled and resolved fairly, effectively, and in a timely manner.

Complaints that relate specifically to academic decisions, such as marks or progression outcomes, should be raised through the relevant university or validating institution's Academic Appeals Policy. Similarly, disciplinary issues involving student conduct are dealt with under the HE Student Disciplinary Policy.

### Principles

UCO recognises that, on occasion, students may feel dissatisfied with some aspect of their experience. It is UCO's aim to address and resolve such issues constructively and to use them as opportunities to enhance the quality of its provision. This policy is guided by several key principles.

Firstly, the process must be accessible. Information about how to make a complaint will be published clearly on the UCO website, in the HE Student Handbook, and will be explained during induction. The process is designed to be user-friendly and easy to follow.

Secondly, the complaints procedure will be fair and impartial. All complaints will be handled without bias, and outcomes will be based on the evidence provided. Independent staff who have not previously been involved in the matter will conduct formal investigations.

Confidentiality is another key principle. Complaints will be managed sensitively, and information will be shared only with individuals directly involved in resolving the issue. Retaliation or victimisation in response to a complaint will not be tolerated and may result in disciplinary action.

UCO is committed to resolving complaints as quickly as possible, with clear timeframes set out for each stage of the process.

Finally, all complaints are taken seriously and used to inform ongoing improvements to the student experience. UCO analyses complaints annually to identify themes, areas for development, and good practice.

### **HE Complaints Procedure – Undergraduate Students**

This procedure should be followed by all UCO Students who's Awarding Partner is:

- Sheffield Hallam University;
- University of Central Lancashire;
- Open University;
- Pearson.

#### **Early Resolution (Stage 1)**

Students are encouraged to raise concerns as soon as possible, ideally within 10 working days of the issue or concern arising. Informal resolution is often the most effective way to address a concern and it is anticipated that the majority of complaints will be resolved satisfactorily on an informal basis. Where appropriate, students should discuss their concerns directly with the staff member, academic tutor, or service area involved. This may be done in person, via email, or by arranging a meeting.

Staff are expected to respond in a professional and timely manner, within 10 working days. During this stage, every effort will be made to resolve the issue through dialogue, clarification, or practical actions. If an issue is resolved informally, no further action will be taken unless requested by the student.

A written record of the outcome will normally be sent to the complainant within 10 working days. This will be notified to the relevant Faculty Lead or Service Manager where the effectiveness of the Faculty or Service could be improved.

However, if a student feels that the matter is too serious to be handled informally, or if attempts at early resolution are unsuccessful, they have the right to escalate the complaint to the formal stage.

#### **Formal Complaint (Stage 2)**

When informal efforts do not result in a satisfactory outcome, students may submit a formal complaint. Formal complaints must be submitted in writing, using the HE Student Complaint Form, which can be accessed from the UCO website or via the MyUCO VLE page. The Form should include a clear description of the complaint, the steps already taken to resolve it informally, and any supporting evidence such as emails, correspondence, or relevant documents.

Formal complaints should be submitted within 10 working days from the date of the final response to Early Resolution (Stage 1), or in cases where informal resolution is not appropriate, within one calendar month of the alleged incident or concern. The complaint should be sent to the HE Quality Team via the designated email address [ucohe.qualitydepartment@oldham.ac.uk](mailto:ucohe.qualitydepartment@oldham.ac.uk).

Upon receipt of the complaint, the HE Quality Team will acknowledge it in writing within five working days. The complaint will then be allocated to an appropriate member of staff who has had no prior involvement in the matter. This individual will be named the Investigating Officer, and they

will conduct a fair and thorough investigation, which may include reviewing documentation, interviewing relevant individuals, and seeking advice from other departments if required.

UCO aims to provide a written response outlining the outcome of the investigation within 20 working days of acknowledging the complaint. The response will explain whether the complaint has been upheld, partially upheld, or not upheld, along with the reasons for the decision. If the complaint is upheld, the letter will outline any actions taken or remedies offered. The response will also include information on the student's right to request a review of the decision if they are not satisfied.

### **Review (Stage 3)**

If the student does not consider their complaint resolved by the response to Stage 2, they may apply to invoke Stage 3 for a review of the decision. Stage 3 may only be invoked when Stage 2 has been completed. The student may not introduce any new issues of complaint at Stage 3. Dependant on the nature of the complaint, the review stage will be handled either by UCO or the relevant awarding partner, as detailed below:

#### **Students who's Awarding Partner is the Open University**

As part of their outcome to the Stage 2 investigation, students will receive a Final Decision Letter from UCO. The student can appeal to The Open University (OU) for a review of the process (of the formal Stage 2 carried out by UCO) to make sure that appropriate procedures were followed, and that the decision was reasonable. The original complaint is not reconsidered at this stage unless there is new evidence to consider. Once the review is complete, the OU will write to the student setting out their decision.

**New Evidence** – if new evidence is provided as part of the review request, the student must demonstrate that they were unable to provide this evidence as part of the original complaint.

Students wishing to request a review should contact the Open University Student Casework Team at [studentcaseworkoffice@open.ac.uk](mailto:studentcaseworkoffice@open.ac.uk) within 28 calendar days of the date of their outcome from Stage 2 and receipt of their Final Decision Letter from UCO. The student should explain why the outcome to their complaint has not resolved the issue or why they consider the decision has not been made in accordance with the relevant policies, procedures and regulations. The request should also set out one or more of the following grounds on which the student believes the OU should review institution's decision:

- that relevant evidence has not been taken into account; or
- that irrelevant evidence was taken into account; or
- that any relevant regulations, policies, or procedures have not been applied correctly; or
- that the reasons for the decision were not fully and clearly communicated; or
- that there was bias, or the likelihood of bias in making the decision; or
- that the procedure followed was not fair or adequate; or
- that the decision made was not fair or reasonable in all the circumstances; or
- that the decision was made by a person or body without the necessary responsibility or authority.

Further information can be found in the OU Handbook for Validated Awards - <https://university.open.ac.uk/validation-partnerships/about-ou-validation/ou-handbook-validated-awards>.

**Students who's Awarding Partner is Sheffield Hallam University; or University of Central Lancashire; or Pearson.**

### **Complaints relating to Service or Facilities**

If the student is dissatisfied with the outcome at Stage 2, they may request a review of the decision. This request must be made in writing within 10 working days of receiving the outcome letter from the Formal Complaint (Stage 2) Investigation.

The request must clearly explain the reason(s) for review and will only be considered if the complainant can evidence one or more of the following criteria:

- Any aspect of the original complaint was not investigated; or
- The investigation findings do not match the outcome; or
- There is new evidence which was not reasonably available at the time of the original complaint investigation; or
- The complaints policy was not followed.

The request should be sent to the HE Quality Team via the designated email address: [ucohe.qualitydepartment@oldham.ac.uk](mailto:ucohe.qualitydepartment@oldham.ac.uk).

A review will be conducted by the Assistant Principal – HE & Higher Skills, or nominee. The reviewer will consider the grounds submitted, revisit relevant documentation, and determine whether the Stage 2 process was carried out appropriately and whether the decision was fair and proportionate.

The outcome of the review will be communicated to the student in writing within 10 working days. This letter will include a clear explanation of the decision and confirm that the UCO's internal procedures have been concluded. The student will also be issued with a Completion of Procedures letter by UCO.

### **Complaints relating to Academic Standards or Learning Opportunity**

If the student is dissatisfied with the outcome of their Stage 2 Investigation, and their complaint relates to Academic Standards or Learning Opportunity, they have a right to appeal to their relevant awarding partner for review. To request a review, the student should contact the HE Quality Team via the designated email address: [ucohe.qualitydepartment@oldham.ac.uk](mailto:ucohe.qualitydepartment@oldham.ac.uk), within 10 working days of receiving their Stage 2 outcome, and they will be advised on how to proceed.

Following the conclusion of a review by an awarding partner, a Completion of Procedures letter will be issued by the awarding partner, in line with the Office of the Independent Adjudicator guidelines.

## **HE Complaints Procedure – Initial Teacher Education & Master in Education Students**

This procedure should be followed by all UCO Students who's Awarding Partner is:

- University of Huddersfield.

### **Informal Early Resolution (Stage 1)**

Before making a formal complaint, students should speak to a member of staff at UCO with a view to finding a positive resolution. Most complaints can be resolved informally and where possible, and should be dealt with as soon as possible after the issue has arisen. If raising a complaint, you should do so no later than one calendar month of the incident which has caused you to complain. We will not normally consider complaints made after this period, unless there is a valid and compelling reason and/or independent evidence to explain the delay.

To initiate this process, students should contact their Course Leader, or another colleague within UCO, that they feel able to discuss the issue with, in order to seek resolution.

The outcome of the Early Resolution stage will be communicated to the student in writing within 10 working days. This letter will include a clear explanation of the decision and confirm that the UCO's internal procedures have been concluded.

### **Central Formal Resolution (Stage 2)**

If the student is dissatisfied with the outcome from Informal Early Resolution, or if the nature of the complaint is not appropriate to be resolved informally, students may invoke the University of Huddersfield's Complaints Procedure - <https://www.hud.ac.uk/registry/current-students/taughtstudents/student-complaints/>.

Students should submit their complaint as directed under Stage 2 of the University of Huddersfield's Procedure (Central Formal Resolution), by completing a Formal Resolution Complaints Form. The Form is available on the University of Huddersfield website, under the Complaints section of the Regulations for Taught Students - <https://www.hud.ac.uk/registry/current-students/taughtstudents/>.

Your completed form will be sent to the University of Huddersfield complaints team at [studentcomplaints@hud.ac.uk](mailto:studentcomplaints@hud.ac.uk). You should provide all the relevant details of your complaint, including any supporting evidence you would like to submit. Where possible, you should also include the proposed outcome you would like in order to resolve your complaint.

## **Independent Review – Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA)**

The Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA) runs an independent scheme to review student complaints. Oldham College is a member of this scheme. If complainants are unhappy with the outcome of a complaint, they may be able to ask the OIA to review the complaint. Information about making a complaint to the OIA, what it can and can't look at, and what it can do to put things right can be found on their website at <https://www.oiahe.org.uk/students>.

The complainant needs to have exhausted the UCO complaints and review processes before they complain to the OIA.

If an external review is requested to the awarding university and it is deemed not to fall under their jurisdiction, they will ask UCO to issue a Completion of Procedures notification to the complainant which would allow the complainant to apply to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA) for a review. If the matter falls under their jurisdiction, the university will issue the Completions of Procedure letter under the rules of the scheme. You can find more information about Completion of Procedures Letters and when you should expect to receive one here:

<https://www.oiahe.org.uk/providers/completion-of-procedures-letters>.

Any complaint directed to the OIA must be made in writing within 12 months of receiving a Completion of Procedures letter.

## **Group Complaints**

Where a group of students wishes to raise the same or a similar complaint, a joint complaint may be submitted. The group should nominate one individual to act as a representative, who will liaise with UCO throughout the process. Each student must confirm in writing their agreement to the nominated representative and the shared nature of the complaint.

## **Anonymous Complaints**

UCO does not normally accept anonymous complaints. This is because anonymity can limit the ability to investigate the matter fully, respond appropriately, or provide a fair resolution for all parties involved. For a complaint to be investigated under this policy, the student must provide their name and contact details and be prepared to engage in the process.

However, UCO recognises that in rare cases, students may be reluctant to identify themselves due to fear of reprisal. While an anonymous complaint will not be investigated as a formal complaint under this policy, the information may still be reviewed and, if deemed necessary, passed to an appropriate manager or safeguarding lead for further consideration, especially if it raises serious concerns about student welfare, staff conduct, or institutional risk.

## **Third Party Complaints**

UCO will not investigate a third-party complaint unless it receives a signed statement from the student authorising the individual bringing the complaint to act on their behalf. This includes complaints submitted by a parent, spouse, guardian or legal representative.

## **Frivolous, Vexatious, or Malicious Complaints**

UCO is committed to treating all complaints seriously and to investigating them fairly and thoroughly. However, it is also essential to ensure that the complaints process is not misused. Complaints that are found to be frivolous, vexatious, or malicious will not be progressed and may result in disciplinary action. A complaint may be considered frivolous, vexatious or malicious if it meets one or more of the following criteria:

- It is clearly untrue or has no foundation in fact;
- It is made in bad faith, with the intention of causing unnecessary distress, disruption, or reputational damage;
- It is part of a pattern of unreasonable or excessive complaints without merit;
- It contains abusive or offensive language, or demonstrates a persistent refusal to accept reasonable outcomes;
- It is pursued in a manner that is obsessive, harassing, or uses disproportionate UCO resources.

Where a complaint is suspected to fall into one of these categories, it will be referred to a senior member of staff for review. The student will be informed of the concern and given an opportunity to clarify or revise their complaint before a final decision is made.

If the complaint is deemed to be frivolous, vexatious, or malicious, the student will be notified in writing and the complaint will be closed. In serious cases, this may lead to action being taken under the HE Student Disciplinary Policy.

## **Timing of Communications**

UCO will ensure that all complaints are dealt with as promptly as possible, and would expect the organisation and the student to respond to all correspondence within the number of days prescribed within the procedure. However, UCO reserves the right to make reasonable extensions during vacation periods.

The process should normally be completed within the timescales of the Procedure, however, there may be circumstances where the timescales cannot be met. When this occurs UCO will keep the student and Faculty updated on progress. UCO also expects students and Faculty to meet the timescales when communicating to UCO, unless there is evidence of exceptional circumstances beyond reasonable control of the student and/or Faculty.

All references to timescales in the Procedure relate to working days, excluding vacation periods and statutory Bank Holidays.

## **Data Protection and Confidentiality**

Information collected and used under this Procedure will be treated confidentially and only disclosed to those staff investigating and responding to the complaint, and as may be necessary to progress the complaint.

All personal data collected during the handling of complaints will be managed in accordance with UK GDPR requirements. Information will be retained securely and only for as long as necessary to manage the complaint and meet legal obligations. Data may be anonymised and used for statistical or quality assurance purposes.

Any individual about whom a complaint is made will have the right to be informed of the fact and nature.

### Consumer Rights

This policy operates in accordance with the principles of consumer protection as outlined by the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) and the Office for Students (OfS). Students are entitled to fair, transparent, and timely complaint procedures that reflect their rights as consumers of higher education. UCO is committed to acting in accordance with consumer law and sector best practice.

### Monitoring and Reporting

UCO takes all student complaints seriously and is committed to reviewing and learning from them. The HE Quality Team maintains a central register of all formal complaints and monitors them to identify common themes or recurring issues. An annual complaints report is presented to the HE Curriculum, Quality, and Standards Committee, and the Oldham College Governor’s Curriculum and Quality Committee, outlining trends, outcomes, and actions taken in response to complaints.

This process ensures that complaints are not only resolved individually but also contribute to the continuous enhancement of the higher education provision at UCO.

### Version History:

Issue	Changes	Author	Approved at	Date of Issue
1	Policy and Procedure Implemented	Head of HE Quality and Registry	QIG / HE Executive Board	January 2016
1.1	Minor Additions	HE Quality Officer	QIC	January 2018
2.1	Review of Timeline in line with OIA Guidance / Minor Revisions / Formatting	HE Quality Officer	QIC	June 2018
2.2	Formatting / Logo Update / OIA Timeline	HE Quality Officer	QIC	November 2019
2.3	Amendment of job titles in line with current structure. Student amended to complainant throughout stage descriptions (2.1)	HE Quality Officer	CQSC / C&Q	September 2022
3	Full Policy and Procedure Review.	HE Quality and Standards Manager	CQSC / Governors C&Q	June 2025

### Published on:

UCO Website	UCO Staff Intranet	UCO Student VLE
✓	✓	✓