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Scope

For the purpose of this policy and its practical application, a COMPLAINT is defined in line with the UK Quality Code as being "the expression of a specific concern about matters that affect the quality of a student's learning opportunities".

Examples of complaints could include sub-standard facilities, misleading course information, or concerns about the delivery of an academic programme.

The definition of an ACADEMIC APPEAL used by the College is taken from the same source, and encompasses "a request for a review of a decision of an academic body charged with making decisions on student progress, assessment or awards".

Examples of academic concerns include alleged irregularities in assessment, perceived bias, or mitigating circumstances which may not have been considered in the original assessment process.

There may be occasions where a student raises issues which come under both categories, and in these instances the College in conjunction with the individual concerned will determine which is to be followed first.

Introduction

This document is based upon, and reflects the key principles in the document 'Good Practice Framework: handling student complaints and academic appeals', produced by The Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education.

The College differentiates between student complaints and academic appeals, and provides a discrete approach for each, albeit that there are many similarities in the underlying principles. In addition, and as a provider of higher education in partnership with other providers, the College recognises and welcomes a clarity of process where our policy in this respect joins seamlessly with that of each of our Partners. The document also signposts clearly where our student cohort can access guidance and support in relation to their complaint or academic appeal.

Policy

Process for Dealing with Complaints

In line with best Practice, the College operates the HE complaints process in line with the three stage model of informal resolution, formal resolution and an appeal stage. In the case of the HE Curriculum delivered in partnership with the University of Wolverhampton and the University of Worcester, the responsibility for the management of complaints is dealt with as a shared responsibility between the respective Institutions. For provision under Pearson BTEC arrangements, the processes which apply are those of the College.

The first stage is informal resolution, and is designed to deal with complaints at the lowest possible level of the College, and to address matters to the mutual satisfaction of the Student and the College before an escalation to a formal complaint is needed. This could include face to face discussions between the student and Head of School, or meetings facilitated by a third-party from elsewhere within the College, trained in conciliation and mediation. Where it is proportionate to do so, the College may write to the student setting out briefly the issue and the resolution. In any case, a brief record will be kept, and forwarded to the HE Quality Coordinator for collation on a database of complaints. Details will only be passed to the Partner Institution in the anonymised and statistical form of the annual review of complaints.

The second stage or formal stage is used where a student is dissatisfied with the outcome of the first stage, or where the first stage was unsuitable due to the nature or complexity of the complaint. The second stage will always be dealt with by people who have not been involved previously, and wherever possible will include staff trained in mediation or consultation.

The investigation will be carried-out by an officer who has not previously been involved in any aspect of the case, and the name of this individual will be divulged to the complainant, who may make representations if they feel there is a tangible conflict of interest. The length and depth of the investigation will be proportionate to the complaint made, and may involve interviewing staff or other students, and reviewing documentary evidence.

The second stage will be chaired by the Deputy Principal or their nominee (a senior staff member not involved with the subject-area concerned), and include Colleagues with expertise in mediation or conciliation where appropriate. The Partner Institution will also be invited to provide a representative to observe the hearing. A student representative from an area of the College not involved with the complaint will be a full member of the panel.

The College will provide the student, seven days in advance, notification of the date of the hearing; the composition of the panel who will hear their complaint, and a copy of the investigating Officers report

The student making the complaint may be supported by a fellow student or representative, but may not be accompanied by someone from outside the College. The role of the supporting individual should be notified to the complainant in writing.

The outcome at the conclusion of this stage must always be notified to the student in writing, copying in the HE Quality Coordinator to ensure inclusion in the HE database of complaints. The letter to the student must give a clear explanation and outline the reasons for each decision in straightforward language. It must also clearly notify the student of the grounds on which an appeal can and cannot be made, and the time limit for doing so.

The third stage is an opportunity for the student to appeal to the Principalship of the College for a review of the process at the second stage to confirm that appropriate procedures were followed, and the decision reached was reasonable. This is not an opportunity to reconsider the issues raised. The appeal must be heard by an officer not involved at any previous stage of the complaint. The outcome at the conclusion of this stage must always be notified to the student in writing, copying in the HE Quality Coordinator to ensure inclusion in the HE database of complaints.

Following the completion of the third stage, the student will be provided by the College with details of the opportunities available to take the complaint further, including appeals to the Partner Institution, and appeals to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, to which the College is a subscribing institution.

Process for dealing with Academic Appeals

Unlike the complaints process, because the appeal is against an academic judgement, there is no informal stage. However, the College will offer students contemplating making an academic appeal the opportunity to discuss their concerns with a Senior Academic from another discipline. If the student expresses satisfaction with the outcome of this process, and it is felt to be proportionate to do so, a written confirmation of the discussion will be sent, and forwarded to the HE Quality Coordinator for collation on a database of academic appeals.

For students on University of Wolverhampton or University of Worcester courses, the respective University system of academic appeals will be followed. The relevant Head of School is responsible for formally notifying the University of the process, and for keeping the HE Quality Coordinator apprised of progress and ultimate resolution. It is recognised that students may make their academic appeals direct to the University, and in such cases the flow of information is from the University to the Head of School, and then to the HE Quality Coordinator.

For Pearson BTEC Students, the appeal will always be dealt with at the College, by people who have not been involved previously, and wherever possible will include staff trained in mediation or consultation.

The investigation will be carried out by a member of staff who has not previously been involved in any aspect of the case, and the name of this individual will be identified to the appellant, who may make representations if they feel there is a tangible conflict of interest.

The appeal will be chaired by the Deputy Principal or their nominee of a senior staff member with HE expertise not involved with the subject-area concerned. A student representative from an area of the College not involved with the complaint will be a full member of the panel.

The College will provide the student, seven days in advance, notification of the date of the hearing; the composition of the panel who will hear their appeal, and a copy of the investigating officers report

The student making the appeal may be supported by a fellow student or representative, but may not be accompanied by someone from outside the College. The role of the supporting individual should be notified to the complainant in writing.

The outcome at the conclusion of this stage must always be notified to the student in writing, copying in the HE Quality Coordinator to ensure inclusion in the HE database of academic appeals. The letter to the student must give a clear explanation and outline the reasons for each decision in straightforward language. It must also clearly notify the student of the grounds on which an appeal can and cannot be made, and the time limit for doing so. Where an academic appeal is upheld, the provider should explain how and when it will implement any remedy, whether that includes an apology and what the student can do if he or she remains dissatisfied with the outcome.

The third stage is an opportunity for the student to appeal to the Principalship of the College for a review of the process at the second stage to confirm that appropriate procedures were followed, and the decision reached was reasonable. This is not an opportunity to reconsider the issues raised. The appeal must be heard by an officer not involved at any previous stage of the appeal. The outcome at the conclusion of this stage must always be notified to the student in writing, copying in the HE Quality Coordinator to ensure inclusion in the HE database of academic appeals.

Following the completion of the third stage, the student will be provided by the College with details of the opportunities available to take the complaint further, including an appeal to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, to which the College is a subscribing Institution.

Information and Advice

The HE Complaints and Academic Appeals Policy is published on the College website, making it widely available to all stakeholders for which it covers. Additionally, student handbooks, VLEs and the HE Room outline the process and signpost students to how to seek resolution for their concerns and challenges.

Reflection and Review Process

A summary report is presented to Senior Leaders and Governors on an annual basis, which does not contain the name or any personal details of the complainant, but contains a brief outline of the nature of the complaint and the action taken. This information is then used to conduct analysis by gender, ethnicity, learning difficulty or disability on an annual basis.

This analysis is used to inform and develop policies and procedures, and subsequent curriculum planning to enhance the student experience, whilst paying all due regard to requirements of data protection and data security.