



# Abertay University

## ANNUAL REPORT ON COMPLAINTS HANDLING IN SESSION 2015/16

### Introduction

This report covers complaints handled in session 2015/16.

Although complaints relating to Further and Higher Education account for only around 3% of those received by the SPSO, as listed public bodies under the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) Act 2002, Universities were statutorily obligated to comply with the Ombudsman's intentions and a Model Complaints Handling Procedure (MCHP), developed with the SPSO, was implemented across all Scottish Universities in August 2013. The Working Group which co-ordinated the development of the new procedure was led by the University Secretary and Dr A Ramsay. The MCHP is almost identical to complaints procedures in operation across all public sector bodies.

The MCHP introduced at Abertay from 31 August 2013 has only two internal stages, Frontline (stage 1) Resolution and Investigation (stage 2), with emphasis upon the prompt resolution of complaints at the point closest to their occurrence. Additionally, the period of opportunity for complaints to be made has been extended to 6 months, rather than 3 months under the previous procedure.

After the Investigation stage has concluded a complainant, if still dissatisfied, may then appeal externally to the SPSO.

### Summary

Fewer complaints have been received in the 2015/16 year than in the previous two sessions. All complaints received in this year have been from students. In previous years, a few complaints were from other categories of complainant, although the vast majority have been from students.

As the overall numbers are low, it is difficult to draw meaningful conclusions as to trends. Nonetheless, there is a mechanism in place for members of staff to recommend changes to University policies or practices in the light of complaint outcomes. Improvements are suggested regularly where complaints are upheld (and occasionally when they are not), and these improvements are normally accepted by the recipients, and then are tracked and chased up regularly until completion. The aim is to avoid, wherever possible, recurrences of the same type of complaint, growing a culture of continuous improvement.

The majority of complaints are responded to within the obligatory time-limits stipulated for all public bodies by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman. These are 20 working days for complaint investigations, and 5 working days for a frontline response. There is a reasonable distribution of outcomes across the categories of 'upheld fully' (4), 'not upheld' (7), or 'upheld partly' (3).

The most common type of complaint related to 'University policies, procedures and administration', followed by 'teaching and assessment' as the second most common category.

### Dissemination of information, advice and guidance about complaints

The provision of information, signposting and guidance has developed considerably. The Support Enquiry Zone is available to assist students with complaints-related matters, and training in confidentiality has been provided to these staff and to Counselling. The Support Enquiry Zone webpages include a link to the main intranet page on complaints, for additional signposting to students.

A webpage for complaints is also located on the University's website-based statutory Publication Scheme and has been further developed. A downloadable copy of the University's Complaints Handling Procedure is provided as well as information about the time-limits applicable. A suite of guidance materials is also provided, for students, staff, and members of the public.

There are complaints pages on the University's intranet, which are also regularly updated and developed and they provide detailed information on how to make a complaint, as well as a link to the University's Complaints Handling Procedure itself; relevant guidance, and the policy on unacceptable actions by complainants.

The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman requires the University (and all public bodies under its jurisdiction) to publish regular complaints reports. The University therefore publishes, regularly, its quarterly complaints reports to Senior Management Group; "You Said We Did" summaries of improvement actions taken in response to complaints; and annual reports to University Court, all with data which could lead to the identification of individuals removed.

The intranet page about complaints provides information and advice for staff, with a downloadable Frontline Resolution Complaint Record Form, as well as a downloadable complaint consent form for third parties making a complaint on behalf of another person.

#### Standard wording of communications and compliance

To improve efficiency, as well as compliance with statutory obligations, several new and existing standard letters have been revised or developed. These reflect developments in good practice and organisational learning, embodying the results of experience with this Complaints Handling Procedure since its inception in autumn 2013.

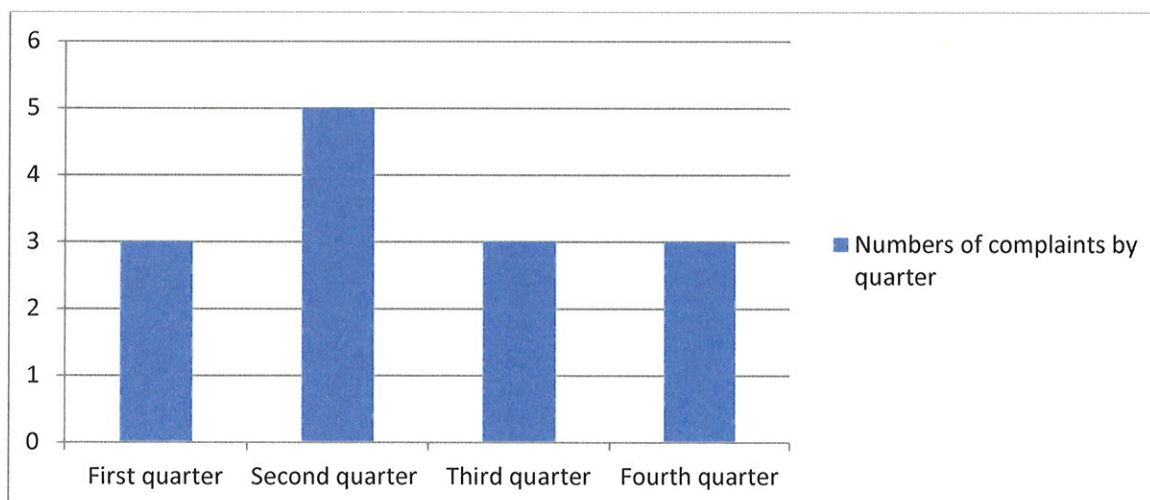
#### Training

New staff members are provided at induction with training on the Complaints Handling Procedure.

Training materials for staff on complaints are regularly updated, and these are available to all staff on the intranet page noted above.

The training of new complaint investigators is being planned, as the number of available investigators originally trained in 2013 has been reducing over time, and one date has been scheduled at the time of writing, with another in planning. A suite of training materials for new complaints investigators has been devised.

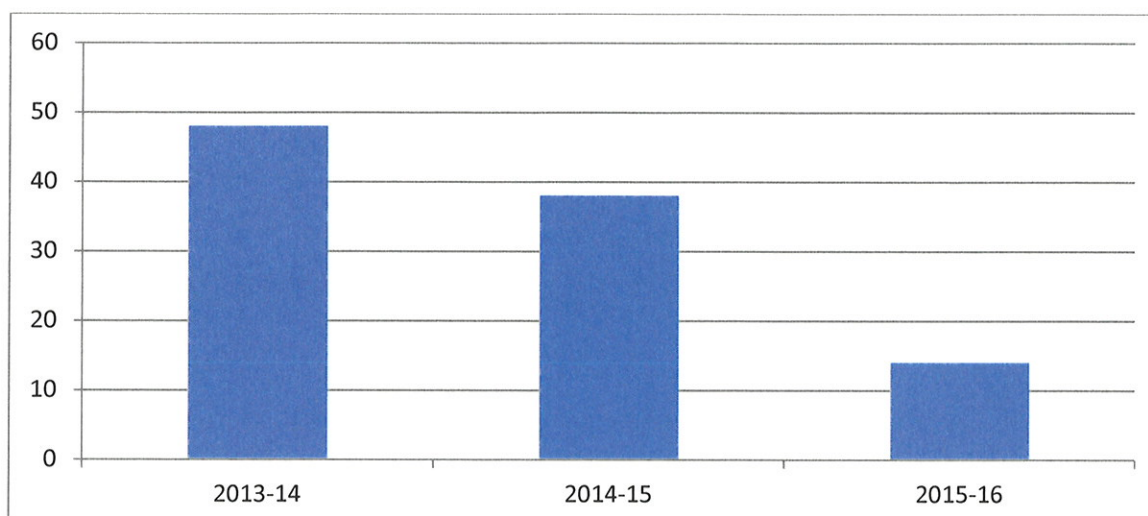
#### Number of complaints recorded in the year by quarter (totals received):





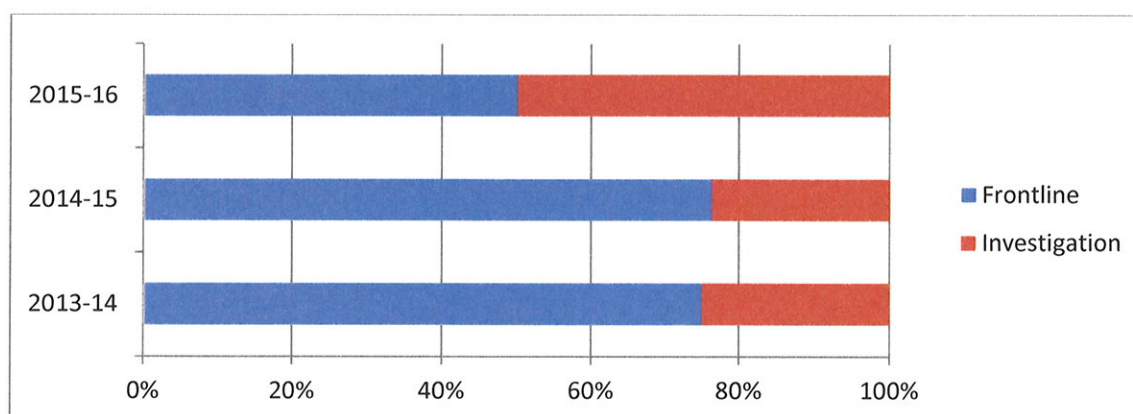
Note: first quarter refers to September – November; second quarter refers to December – February; third quarter refers to March – May, and Fourth quarter refers to June – August.

Total numbers of complaints recorded by academic year: (cumulative)



Note: Prior to Autumn 2013, a different complaints procedure was in operation: data prior to autumn 2013 are not comparable, and are not shown for that reason.

Frontline or investigation procedure: proportion of total complaints by year (%):



Note: Where low numbers are concerned, percentage information can be misleading.

The complaints year has seen an increase in the proportion of complaints being investigated at investigation, rather than frontline, level.

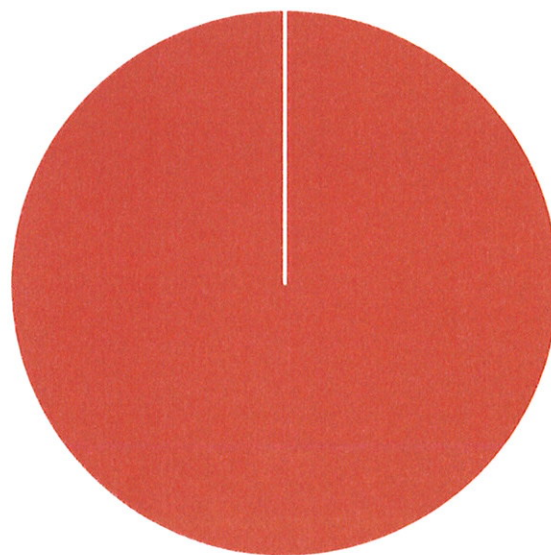
The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman's view is that Universities should address as many complaints as possible at stage 1 frontline resolution (this is the reason why the above percentages are provided). Frontline resolution is therefore performed wherever possible; this involves the complaint being addressed at the point in the University nearest to where it arose.

Number and percentage of frontline resolution and investigations complaints closed within target time-limit (5 and 20 working days respectively): by month for report year.

Month	Total number of Frontline Complaints closed	FL cases closed within SPSO target as % of total number of FL complaints closed. (Target 5 w/days)	Total number of Investigations closed	Investigation cases closed within SPSO target as % of total number of Investigations closed. (Target 20 w/days)
September	0	-	1	100%
October	0	-	1	100%
November	0	-	1	100%
December	0	-	0	-
January	2	100%	1	100%
February	1	0%	1	100%
March	0	-	-	-
April	1	100%	1	100%
May	1	100%	-	-
June	1	100%	-	-
July	1	100%	-	-
August	0	-	1	100%

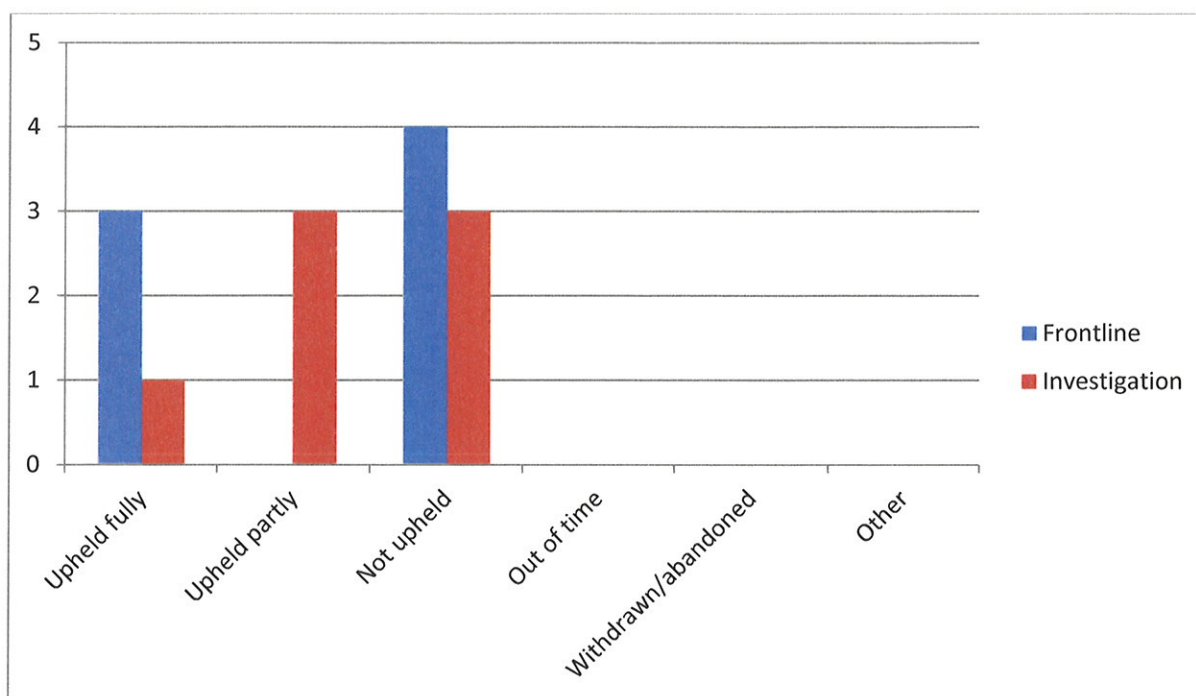
Type of complainant for report year):

Type of complainant



■ Member of public ■ Student ■ Applicant ■ Member of staff

Outcomes of complaints for report year (cumulative; numbers):



Notes: 'Other' includes referral to another procedure (e.g. disciplinary' grievance, etc) or to another organisation (if applicable), or other resolution (e.g. mediation).

Category of the complaints made in the current year to date by frontline or investigation (cumulative; numbers).

