

Report on Complaints Handling in Session 2014/2015

Introduction

This report provides a summary and analysis of complaints handled in session 2014/15, the second year of the MCHP.

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.

Complaints Investigators

A group of initially around 20 senior members of staff across the University has undergone training provided by the SPSO in order to act as investigators at stage 2. This approach is intended to ensure that a range of investigative skills across the Schools and Services is available. In-house training is expected to be made available to replace investigators who retire or leave.

Reporting and monitoring

The SPSO requires that internal management reporting of complaints information takes place quarterly. Abertay has complied, with a report being provided quarterly to members of SMG containing both qualitative and quantitative information on complaints for each quarter.

The SPSO also requires that complaints information is published quarterly and an annual report made to the Governing Body. Abertay provides a curtailed and anonymised version of the quarterly report to SMG which is published on the University's external webpages. In addition, this Annual Report is provided to the University Court.

Day-to-day detailed scrutiny, management, and monitoring of complaints is undertaken by Dr Ramsay, Clerk to Court and Corporate Governance Manager, and the Compliance Officer, in Secretariat.

Numbers and Source of Complaints arising under the University's MCHP

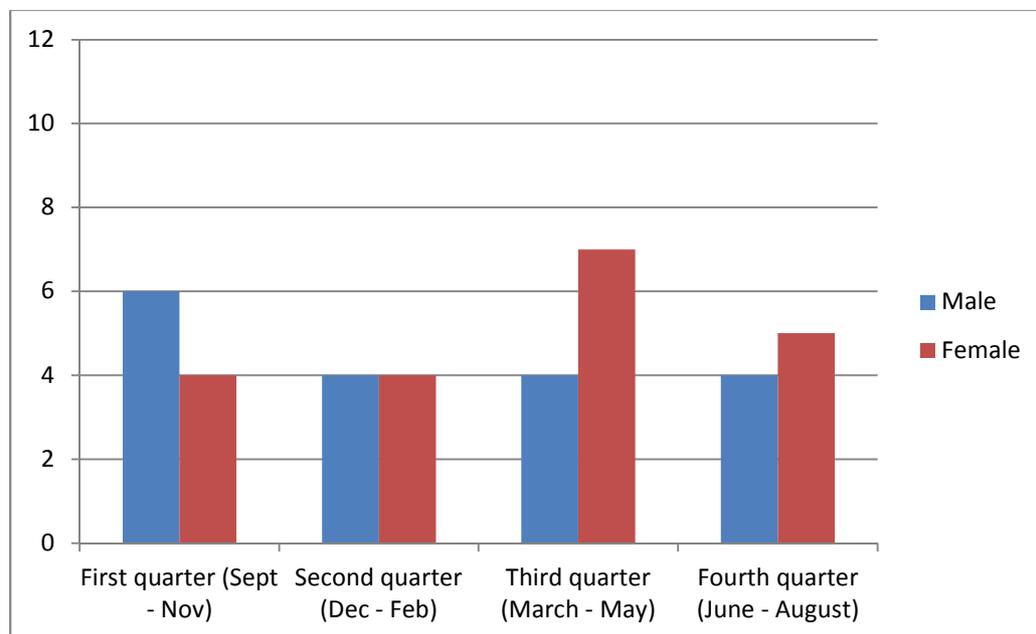
A slight drop in overall numbers of complaints has been noted. Most complaints are received from students.

Numbers of complaints received in session 2014-2015 and type of complainant.

Academic Year	Total number of complaints (Frontline and Investigation)	From Members of Public	From Students ¹
2014-15	38	3	34
2013-14	48	1	47

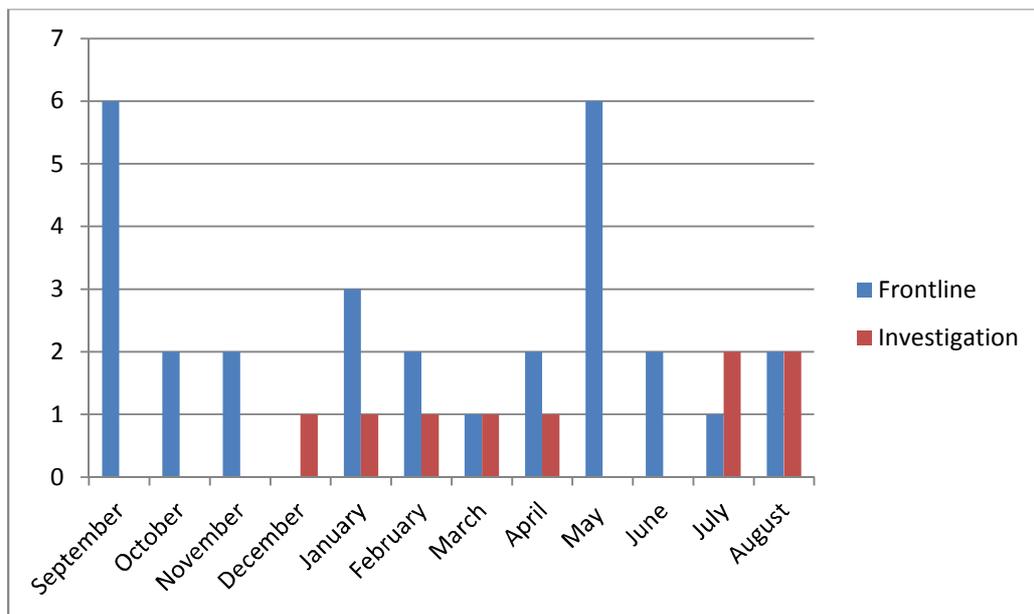
Note: direct comparisons with complaints figures from academic years prior to 2013/14 are not possible. This is because of the change to the complaints procedure explained above. The MCHP is now required to cover all individuals who receive a service from the University, including members of the public. However, in practice, staff complaints arising are normally handled under the Grievance Procedure, which is operated by Human Resources; such cases are therefore not included within complaints reports.

Gender of complainants



¹ Includes applicants.

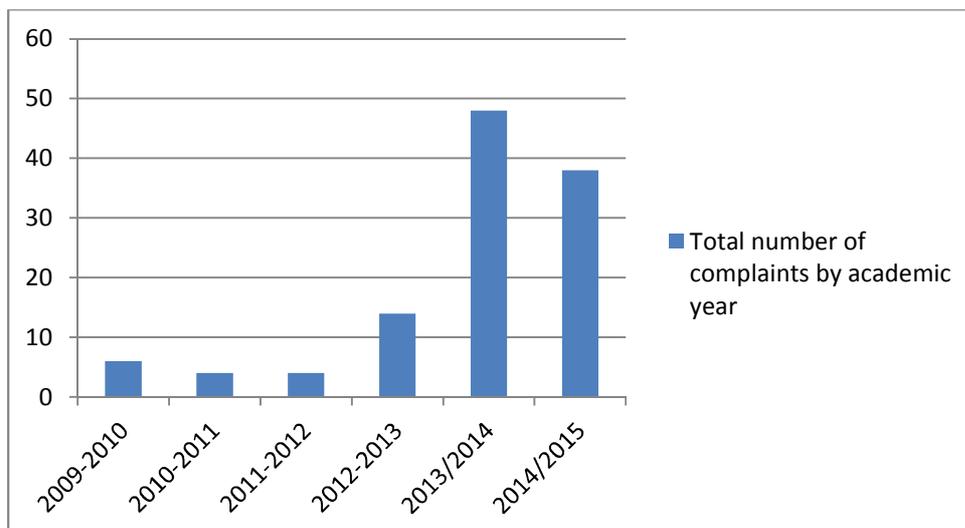
Numbers of complaints received by stage of MCHP and month



	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Quarter 4	Average
% frontline of total	100%	62.5%	90%	55.5%	77%

Frontline complaint numbers exceed those of investigations. The former tend to be more straightforward matters. The SPSO's principle is that as many complaints as possible should be dealt with at the frontline stage. This is because doing so provides a resolution as close as possible in time and space to the origin of the complaint. There is, however, a strict 5 working day time-limit for frontline complaints, and the SPSO requires that a senior manager approve any extensions. Some complaints are dealt with initially at investigation stage, because they are more complex, and it would be impossible to meet a strict 5 working day deadline for these. There is a 20 working day time-limit for resolving investigations and, in practice, complex cases may make it extremely difficult to meet even this deadline.

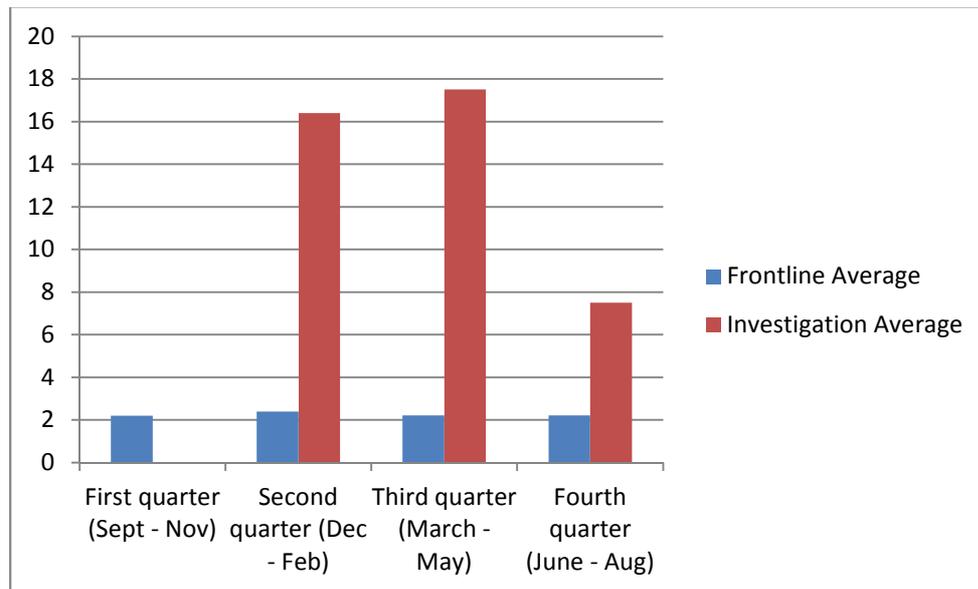
Total number of complaints received by academic year



The figures presented above for 2013-14 and 2014-2015 include both Frontline Resolution complaints and Stage 2 complaints investigations. As stated, these figures are not directly comparable with previous years' figures as, prior to 2013-2014, a different complaints procedure was used, and, in particular, records were not kept of informal complaints. It is therefore wholly to be expected that the overall number of complaints reported has increased from 2013-2014. A number of complaints were received during 2013-14 which have not since been replicated, for example, noise/disturbance during examinations; noise in the Library, and complaints about postgraduate research student supervision.

Time taken to resolve complaints

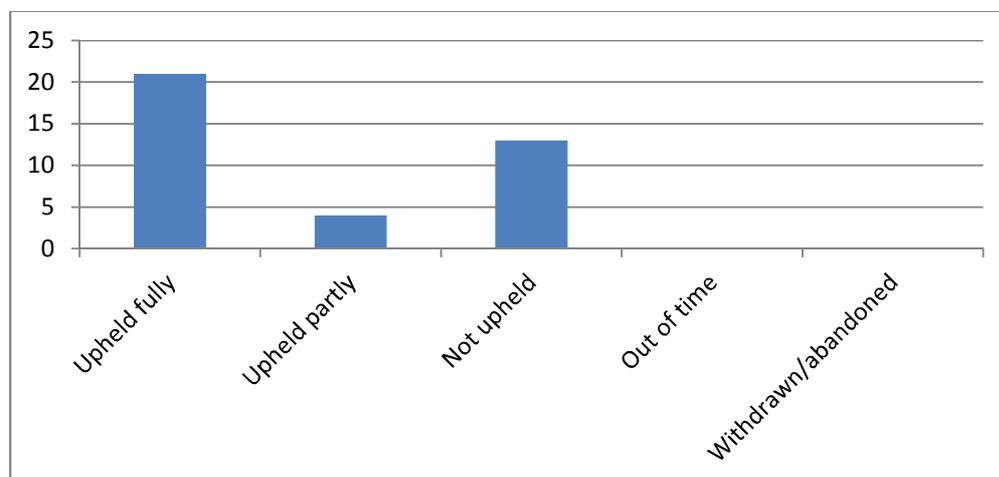
The chart below shows the average length of time to deal with complaints in working days by quarter.



The targets for dealing with complaints set down by the SPSO are 5 working days for Frontline Resolution and 20 working days for Complaint Investigation cases, which by nature are more complex. The figures for Frontline Resolution cases are well within the SPSO's targets, whilst those for Investigation cases are on average much nearer their target maximum duration.

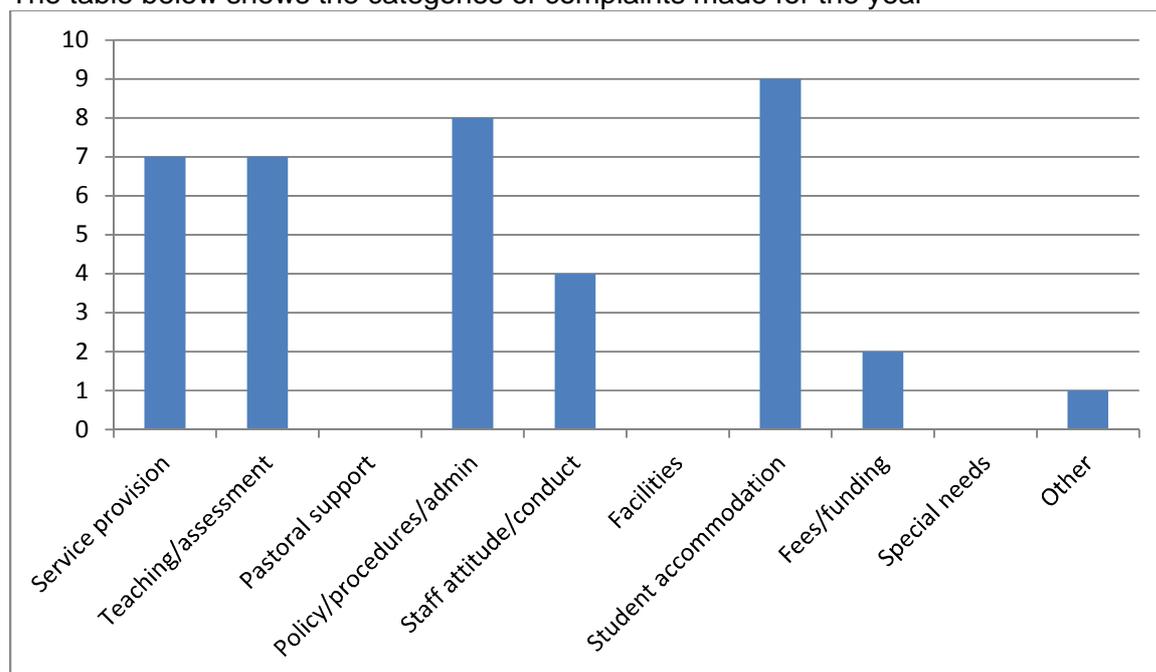
Complaint decisions for year

The chart below summarises the decisions made for the academic session.



Nature of complaints

The table below shows the categories of complaints made for the year



This profile correlates broadly with the complaints about Higher Education received by the SPSO, although it should be noted that the SPSO collects data to 30 April and has yet to publish its 2014-2015 Annual Report.

The highest number of complaints received related to student accommodation. Otherwise, policy/procedures and administration; service provision, and teaching and assessment issues are the next largest categories. This is broadly consistent with the SPSO's finding that the greatest number of complaints received relate to academic appeals, results and degree classification. In this, however, the remit of the Ombudsman is very narrow as,

notionally at least, the SPSO has no jurisdiction over academic judgement. Again, overall, this picture is broadly similar to the overall sector profile.

The table below shows complaints received by the SPSO, as categorised by the SPSO:

Subject	2012/13	2013/14
Academic appeal/exam results/degree classification	31	43
Policy/administration	18	16
Teaching and supervision	11	8
Admissions	2	
Complaints handling	10	5
Special needs - assessment and provision	2	3
Other	0	2
Personnel matters	1	2
Plagiarism and intellectual property	5	2
Accommodation	3	1
Communication, staff attitude, and confidentiality	0	1
Grants/allowances/bursaries	3	
Facilities	1	1
Pre- Contractual or Commercial Matters	1	
Anti-social behaviour	1	
Student discipline	1	1
Welfare	1	
Subject Unknown	11	1
Total	102	86

Figures for 2014-2015 have yet to be released. For information, the SPSO Annual Report will be published in due course at:

<http://www.spsso.org.uk/annual-reports>

Secretariat
October 2015