

Complaints 101

Advice from your SU Advice & Support Team

Overview

- What is a complaint and why should you consider it
 - Why does strike disruption matter
 - Factors to consider for making a complaint
 - Examples of student complaints
 - What can a complaint achieve
- The University complaints process
 - Advice and support available throughout
 - Overcoming barriers to making a complaint
- Further internal and external complaints processes
- Key resources

What is a complaint and why consider it?

What is a complaint

The University defines it [here](#) as the following:

A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction, or about the standard of service provided by or on behalf of the University. This can include things like:

- *A University service, academic (e.g. quality of learning and teaching, facilities, access etc) or non-academic (e.g. Accommodation, Security, Student Services, Students' Union (SU) etc),*
- *Concerns about the delivery of a programme, teaching or administration of a course*
- *Misleading or incorrect information about academic programmes*
- *Poor quality facilities, resources or services provided by the University*

The NUS define it [here](#) as the following:

By making a complaint you are arguing that your HE provider has not adequately fulfilled their contractual obligations to you. If anything advertised to you when you applied/paid for has not been delivered in full, and no, little or inappropriate alternatives have been given to you then you can argue that you have not been provided with what you paid for.



UCU strike disruption

The [UCU strikes](#) may have negatively impacted your experiences at University.

While the occurrence of strikes may not be the fault of the University, they are responsible for continuing to fulfil their contractual obligations to you during any disruption due to them.

Therefore, if you feel that you were not provided with appropriate alternatives for your student experience during these periods, you are entitled to complain and seek a reasonable outcome.

The NUS led various campaigns to encourage students to complain and obtain appropriate alternatives for and the strikes. This includes the [#studentsafetynet](#) and [Student Complain Chain](#) campaigns.



Factors to consider for complaint due to strike disruption

You can use the [OIA's Six Core Expectations](#) to help you consider whether you have grounds for a complaint due to strike disruption. NB: The term 'provider' below means 'University' in this context.

1. Whether the provider acted **reasonably** and treated the student **fairly**;
2. What the provider did at the time to **minimise disruption** for students affected by the circumstances, to try to put things right;
3. What the provider **promised**, and what the student could **reasonably expect** in terms of **contact hours** and other **learning opportunities**;
4. What the provider did to ensure that students were not **disadvantaged academically** and could achieve their learning outcomes;
5. What the provider **delivered**, and whether that matched **what was promised** and what students **reasonably expected**, and was **broadly equivalent** to its usual arrangements;
6. Where there has been a **shortfall of delivery**, what were the **consequences** for the student, and whether the provider has **considered those consequences**.

Examples of academic complaints

- Quality of learning and teaching, especially due to strike disruption e.g.:
 - Reduced delivery times e.g. receiving 4 hours of teaching vs the 15 hours expected,
 - Not enough amendments made for online teaching e.g. content and delivery not appropriate for online delivery
 - Time zone considerations e.g. teaching sessions delivered at inappropriate times for people in other countries,
 - Quality of 'In Person Teaching'
 - Limited access to academics, departmental staff, labs and equipment
 - See further examples in the [NUS Complaint Chain guidance \(Section on 'What do I need to include in my complaint'\)](#)
- Communications from departments and/or the University regarding learning and teaching
- Placement issues

Examples of non-academic complaints areas

- Harassment, discrimination and bullying from students, staff or volunteers
- Accommodation e.g. contract issues
- Hospitality and retail e.g. food quality
- Sports facilities e.g. access to facilities
- Security e.g. patrolling practices on campus
- Student Services e.g. quality of service
- Students' Union e.g. event and service quality
- Library e.g. access to materials
- The Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) have published
- [these examples of complaints including successful and non-successful outcomes.](#)

What outcome can a complaint achieve

The aim of a complaint is for you to find a satisfactory outcome to the problems you've experienced.

A complaint to the University therefore includes detailing what you'd like your 'desired outcomes' to be from your complaint.

Examples of outcomes students can request but are not limited to are:

- Academic outcome e.g. 'repeat performance attempt,' deferral of studies
- Provision of the element/s of the service you didn't previously receive
- Financial compensation e.g. a proportion of tuition fees, accommodation costs
- A change in policy, procedure and operations
- A formal apology
- Multiple elements of the above

Overview of The University Complaints process

The University complaint process

There are 3 stages to the University complaint process detailed in this [guide](#)

Stage:	Level:	When to do it:	What happens:
1	Informal	If you have any issues you need a resolve for	Contact the Head of department or Service to relay your concerns and try to resolve with them directly.
2	Formal	If your issue isn't resolved at the informal complaint level	Detail your issues on the formal complaint form and provide any supporting evidence. It may also involve meetings to obtain further information from you.
3	Review	If you're not satisfied with the outcome of the formal complaint	Detail your issues with the outcome of the formal complaint on the review form, along with supporting evidence. It may also involve meetings to obtain further information from you.

Detailing your complaint

At each level of the complaint's process you need to provide an overview of your complaint. Try to include the following:

- A chronological account of the issues you've experienced
- Include dates, those involved, communication platform (e.g. email) etc
- Where possible, highlight how the issues demonstrate how the University isn't fulfilling its contractual obligations and/or not following policy and procedure (refer to the specific ones)
- Detail any action you've taken to try to resolve the issues and the outcomes of this
- Detail any impact the issues have had on you e.g. mental health, academic performance, financial issues etc
- Refer throughout to any evidence you're providing that demonstrates the above

Evidencing your complaint

Providing evidence that demonstrates the issues you're raising in your complaint, helps to further strengthen your case to those reviewing it.

Examples of evidence include, but are not limited to:

- Emails
- Departmental communications e.g. on Moodle, email, notice boards
- The information provided in your course prospectus, handbook, module outlines
- Policy and procedure documents
- Texts, screen shots, images etc
- Medical e.g. certificate, note, prescription
- Student Services statement of service access

Individual vs group complaint

Process	When to do it:
Individual complaint	<p>If you've experienced issues receiving the experience and services you have paid for and this has impacted you negatively.</p> <p>An individual complaint allows you to detail the issues specific to you and the how this has impacted you.</p>
Group complaint	<p>If more than one of you has experienced the same shared issues, a group complaint may be the best approach. It can demonstrate a bigger issue, when more than one student complains about it.</p>

SU Advice and Support Centre – How they help

The [SU Advice and Support Centre](#) is an independent, confidential, free and non-judgemental service for all students at any level. They are the **only team in the University** that can help students prepare their complaint and advise them throughout the process.

How they help with complaints (at all levels):

1. **Initial contact set up** – Students contact via email, phone or the Report and Support tool. They can also be referred and the team will contact them if consent obtained.
2. **Student explains issues they're experiencing** – Adviser provides advice on their options, explains and work with them on relevant policy/process and signposts to other services that can help and support.
3. **Ongoing advice and support** – includes:
 1. Reviewing case students put together for complaint at all levels e.g. University complaints, OIA
 2. Continued correspondence providing advice and support and signposting to other services
 3. Attend meetings with them as an Adviser e.g. complaint interview, hearing, review etc.
4. **They support as much as students need** – cases can be a one off simple query about a complaint, through to complex cases that can go on across academic years and have many different issues.

Overcoming barriers to making a complaint

Making a complaint can sometimes be a daunting prospect. You may worry about e.g. if you have time to prepare it, whether you have adequate grounds, potential repercussions etc.

The SU Advice and Support Centre understands this and is there to help you at every step of way from start to finish. This includes talking to you about your options and any apprehensions and then helping you through the one that is best for your needs. We encourage students to find out what their options are and how the service can help, as it could be the information and support you need, to getting you the resolve you need.

We encourage you to feel confident that it is your right to make a complaint about services you're paying for and get a satisfactory resolve that works for you.

Further University complaints processes

If your complaint is involving any of the services below, you may want to start the informal level of the complaint via their processes linked below.

- [Accommodation and Hospitality Services \(AHS\)](#)
- [Students' Union](#)

You can also use the Report and Support tool to commence the complaints process and you can do this anonymously if you choose too. The tool allows you to send a report when ever is convenient to you and the team you send it to, will help advise you on your options.

- [Report and Support tool](#)

External complaints processes

OIA complaints process

If you believe the University's complaint process wasn't followed properly, or you feel that the outcome is unreasonable, you can submit a complaint to the OIA.

The OIA are an external, independent body set up to review student complaints.

- You'll have 12 months from the date on your outcome letter to submit an OIA complaint, and can do so by completing the form found on their [website](#).
- The SU Advice and Support Centre can also support you to detail your case here too.

OFS Notification process

You may want to consider notifying the [Office for Students \(OfS\)](#) of the issues you've experienced also. The OFS are the regulatory body for Universities and they set up the [Notification Process](#) in early 2021 to help students report issues within their University to them.

A notification to the OfS informs them about concerns or issues you have about your university that are relevant to their regulatory remit. They will review the information you provide and make a decision as to whether they need to also investigate it. This could help add further weight to your internal University complaint and helps ensure further students don't experience the same issues.



Examples of Notifications include, but are not limited to:

- Poor teaching quality
- Lack of academic support
- Mishandled complaints
- Issues with University management
- Issues with fairness and equality

Key support and takeaways

Key resources for students

The linked resources below provide key information and guidance to help you with your complaint. The SU Advice and Support Centre are also there to help you throughout the process from start to finish.

- [University complaints policy and procedure](#)
- [University guidance for students making a complaint](#)
- [NUS Complaint Chain Guidance](#)
- [OFS Notifications Guidance](#)
- [OIA Complaints Guidance](#)
- [OIA Case Summaries](#)

Key services to get support from

We recommend contacting and getting support from as many of the services below as possible, to help you present the best case possible and get the best support throughout.

- [SU Advice and Support Centre](#)
- [Wellbeing Service](#)
- [Be Well Talk Now](#)
- [Independent Advisers \(Doctoral students only\)](#)

Key takeaways

- **It's your right** – It is your right to complain as a student when you're not receiving the services your paying for.
- **Strike disruption can be grounds for a complaint** – Many students across the UK have complained where they've experienced disruption to their experience and don't feel that the University adequately mitigated against these.
- **Act as quickly as possible** – The complaints processes have time limits and the quicker you act, the more timely the University can be in addressing your issues.
- **Get support** – There are various options to making a complaint and the SU Advice and Support Centre can help advise you on these and support you throughout. Emotional and wellbeing support can be accessed via the Wellbeing and Be Well Talk Now Services.

Supporting a Group Complaint as an Academic Rep

- Try to resolve the issue with Staff first. The SU Voice Team can support you in this.
- Work with The SU Advice and Support Team
- Organise a group meeting to discuss and collect feedback for the group complaint
- Keep the group informed on progress

It is not an
Academic Rep
Responsibility
to lead a
group
complaint!