

Student Complaints & Grievances Policy

2025/26

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Student Complaints & Grievances Policy (2025/26)

1. Introduction

Oak Hill College is committed to delivering a high-quality student experience and encourages students to raise concerns openly. This Complaints & Grievances Policy explains how students can raise concerns related to their Common Awards academic programmes or associated services.

This policy should be read alongside:

- Durham University's *Complaints Procedure for Students*
- The Common Awards *Complaints Procedure*

The College treats all complaints seriously and seeks fair, timely, and transparent outcomes that support student interests and uphold academic quality and standards.

2. Definition & Scope

2.1 Who can use this policy

This policy applies to:

- Individual students who are, or have recently been, formally registered on approved Common Awards programmes at Oak Hill College;
- Groups of students jointly submitting complaints about the same matter. Groups must nominate a **group representative**, with whom all communication will take place.

2.2 What this policy covers

Complaints may relate to:

- Teaching, assessment, supervision, and academic support;
- Assessed placements within academic programmes;
- Administrative/support services linked to academic programmes;
- Information/publicity about programmes;
- Learning resources, teaching spaces, and infrastructure;

- Any other provision impacting academic experience or progress.

This is not an exhaustive list. In cases of doubt as to whether a concern is an academic complaint, students or staff may seek advice from the Academic Registrar or Common Awards Team.

2.3 What this policy does *not* cover

Separate procedures exist for:

- Academic appeals – see *Academic Appeals Policy*;
- Complaints involving allegations of student misconduct – speak to the Academic Registrar in the first instance.
- Complaints relating to the behaviour of staff (that is non-academic in nature) – speak to the Director of Operations and Finance;
- Complaints involving allegations of sexual misconduct or safeguarding – see *Safeguarding Policy*;
- Complaints about admissions decisions – see *Applicant Complaints and Appeals Policy*.

2.4 Principles

Oak Hill College will:

1. Handle complaints promptly, fairly, objectively, and without bias.
2. Investigate on the balance of probabilities (e.g. circumstances deemed most likely to have occurred).
3. Provide reasoned written outcomes.
4. Protect complainants from disadvantage for raising a complaint in good faith.
5. Keep proceedings confidential, disclosing information only on a “need to know” basis.
6. Act on upheld complaints to correct mistakes and improve provision.
7. Monitor and review complaints processes annually via the Teaching & Learning Committee, including investigator training and case analysis to identify enhancements.
8. Induct all staff involved in complaint handling and engage them in ongoing training.
9. Monitor complaints annually and review trends via the Teaching & Learning Committee, ensuring continuous improvement.
10. Consider findings from complaints in the annual self-evaluation and periodic review processes.

3. Student Support & Representation

Students may be accompanied at any formal stage by a current member of the College or University community or a Durham Students’ Union representative.

Legal representation is not normally permitted, but requests will be considered by the Principal (TEI stages) or University Secretary (University stage).

Students may seek advice and support from:

- Academic Registrar (local procedural advice)
- Student Academic Representatives (Student Academic Rep or Chair of the SCR [Student Common Room])
- Director of College Placements (for placement-related complaints)
- Durham Students' Union (independent advice and advocacy)
- Common Awards Team (procedural guidance)

4. Timeframes

- Stage 1 (informal resolution) complaints should be raised **within 28 days** of the incident or latest in a series of incidents. In exceptional circumstances, complaints received outside of this time frame will be dealt with sympathetically.
- Stage 2 (formal complaint) must be submitted **within 28 days** of the Stage 1 outcome.
- Stage 3 (Council review) requests must be made **within 14 days** of the Stage 2 outcome.
- Stage 4 (University review) requests must be made **within 14 days** of the Council review outcome.

5. Student Complaints & Grievances Procedure

5.1 Stage 1: Informal Resolution (TEI Level)

Complaints should, wherever possible, be raised directly with the person (e.g. a tutor) or service (e.g. a specific area/department of College) most closely involved in order to give them the opportunity to address the concerns.

If the student feels that this is not possible and has a complaint or grievance about their academic programme, then this should be raised in the first instance with the Student Academic Representative. If the complaint relates to a more general, non-academic matter, then it should be raised with the Chair or the Vice-Chair of the SCR Committee. These student representatives will address concerns or complaints promptly and efficiently.

If unsure who is best placed, students should contact the Academic Registrar, who will advise or forward as appropriate.

The aim is to resolve concerns quickly and informally and mediation may be offered at any point.

5.2 Stage 2: Formal Complaint

1. If the above informal procedures have been exhausted and the Complainant remains dissatisfied with the outcome, they may submit a Student Complaint and Grievance Form within **28 days** of the informal outcome, which can be found on Acorn→Study→Policies & Forms to the:

- Vice-Principal (Teaching & Learning) – for academic matters; or
 - Director of Operations & Finance – for non-academic matters.
2. The form must include:
- Details of the complaint
 - Evidence of informal resolution attempts
 - Supporting documents
 - Desired outcome
3. The College will:
- Acknowledge within **7 days**
 - Appoint an investigator (not previously involved)
 - Investigate and respond within **42 days**, updating if delays occur
 - Enable students to be accompanied by a member of the College (staff member or student), Durham University community or a Durham Students' Union representative.
 - All staff involved in complaint handling will receive induction and ongoing training.
 - The Teaching & Learning Committee will monitor complaints annually and review trends, ensuring continuous improvement.
 - Findings from complaints will be considered in annual self-evaluation and periodic review processes.
4. Outcomes may include:
- Complaint upheld or dismissed
 - Apology or corrective action
 - Recommendations for policy/practice change
 - Referral to another process
5. Written outcome will include:
- Decision and reasons
 - Information on Stage 3 University review rights and deadlines

Please note: The Respondent of a complaint (whether an individual or a particular department/section of the College) will receive a copy of the complaint and will be granted the right to respond to it. They will also be informed of the outcome of a complaint. Third parties will be consulted if, in the professional judgement of the Investigator, their views or opinions may be directly relevant to the investigation of a complaint.

Records will be kept securely in line with GDPR to ensure that any decisions made throughout the complaints process are clearly documented for review and referral to the University or the Office for the Independent Adjudicator where required.

The College will be unable to consider a complaint under the above procedures if (except in exceptional circumstances):

- Complaints are made more than 28 days after the actions and services to which the complaints refer or following unsatisfactory outcome of an informal attempt at resolution;
- The complainant does not personally raise the complaint;

- The complaint is anonymous;
- The complaint is frivolous, vexatious, or motivated by malice.

Stage 3: Principal or Council Review

If a student believes that:

- there was a procedural irregularity in the Stage 2 investigation,
- new and significant information has become available which, for exceptional reasons, could not previously be disclosed, or
- the Stage 2 outcome was unreasonable in light of the evidence available to the College,

they may request a College-level review. This stage does not reopen the original complaint, and dissatisfaction with the Stage 2 outcome alone is not grounds for review.

Process:

- The student must submit a written request for review within 14 working days of receiving the Stage 2 outcome, addressed to the College Principal. The request should include all relevant documents from earlier stages, along with details of the grounds for review.
- Where the Principal is the subject of the complaint, the request should be addressed to the Chair of the College Council via the Director of Operations and Finance. If the Principal was involved in Stages 1 or 2, they will appoint a suitable nominee to conduct the review.
- Requests will normally be acknowledged within 5 working days.
- The review will focus on whether the Stage 2 decision was reasonable, not on reinvestigating the original complaint. The reviewer may, however, seek further information from the student, respondent, or staff involved at earlier stages.
- Reviews will normally be concluded within 20 working days of acknowledgement. The student will be informed of the expected timescale and updated if delays occur.

Outcomes:

The Principal (or nominee)/College Council Chair will confirm the outcome in writing. Possible outcomes are:

1. Uphold the Stage 2 decision (with any recommendations or actions).
2. Dismiss the complaint, giving reasons.
3. Seek an alternative resolution with recommendations or actions.

The decision is final within the College and may include disciplinary action where appropriate. In some cases, the Principal (or nominee)/College Council Chair may decide to notify a person/persons outside the College such as the Kingham Hill Trust.

Completion of Procedures:

Following the conclusion of Stage 3, the College will issue a Completion of Procedures letter within 28 days. This will confirm that internal processes are exhausted and will include:

- a summary of the appeal,
- reference to the relevant procedures,

- a summary of the issues considered,
- the final decision and reasons, and
- information on external review routes.

Notes:

- This procedure does not create legal rights or entitlements to compensation.
- Complaints will only be accepted from the student(s) directly involved. Third-party complaints will not be considered, except in exceptional circumstances where a student is unable to represent themselves.

5.3 Stage 4: Review by Durham University

1. If the Complainant remains dissatisfied once the TEI's informal and formal procedures are exhausted, the Complainant must be informed of their right to request a Review by the University. A student may submit such requests through the Common Awards Office within **14 days** (via common.awards@durham.ac.uk).
2. Grounds for University-Level Review include:
 - Procedural irregularity in Stage 2
 - New material evidence not reasonably available earlier
 - Outcome was unreasonable in the circumstances
3. Requests must be on the University proforma and include relevant documents.
4. The University will:
 - Acknowledge within **7 days**
 - Appoint an independent reviewer
 - Provide a Review Report within **28 days** (or explain delays as appropriate)
5. Possible outcomes include:
 - The Stage 2 decision upheld
 - The case being referred back for re-investigation
 - Alternative resolution being recommended
6. **A Completion of Procedures Letter** will be issued, including information on the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA). When the College's internal procedures and, where appropriate, the University's review procedures have been concluded, the student will be issued with a Completion of Procedures (CoP) letter, either from the College or the University. On receipt of this, a student who is dissatisfied with the final decision on his/her case may be able to apply to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) for Higher Education. The OIA is the independent ombudsman service of last resort. The complaint should normally be submitted to the OIA within twelve months of the date of the Completion of Procedures letter. Information and eligibility rules are available at <https://www.oiahe.org.uk/>

6. Monitoring & Enhancement

This policy shall be reviewed annually by the College's Teaching & Learning Committee, assisted by the Academic Registry Team, to ensure that they remain fit for purpose.

Should a complaint be upheld, the matter shall be referred to the Teaching & Learning Committee for the purposes of (a) identifying any learning points, and (b) agreeing any necessary changes to College procedures. The Vice-Principal (Teaching & Learning) or Director of Operations & Finance (as appropriate) shall then ensure that any changes are put in place to prevent similar complaints being necessary in the future.

Additionally, all student complaints and grievances will be logged with the Trust Secretary of the Kingham Hill Trust.

7. Summary of the Stages and Timescales of the Complaints & Grievance Procedures

Stage	Formal/ Informal	Recipient of Complaint's Submission	Timescales
1	Informal	Member of staff/another student (i.e. subject of the complaint). OR Student Academic Rep (for academic issues) OR Chair/Vice-Chair of the SCR (for non-academic issues) for their intervention with the member of staff.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Complaints should normally be raised within 28 days of the incident/series of incidents (Student).
2	Formal	Submission of Student Complaint and Grievance Form to VP/DOF to investigate and meet with all parties.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Submit within 28 days of the informal outcome (Student).Acknowledgement within 7 days (College).Investigation to be concluded within 42 days from date of sent

			acknowledgement (College).
3	Review	<p><u>Principal or College-level Review</u></p> <p>Submission of written request for review to College Principal (<i>Final College Outcome</i>); Kingham Hill Trust may be informed</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 14 working days after receipt of written response to Stage 2 (Student). • Acknowledgement within 5 working days (College). • Investigation to be concluded within 28 days from date of sent acknowledgement (College). • Provision of a Completion of Procedures letter when all internal procedures have been exhausted and within 28 days of complaint at this stage (College).
4	Formal Review	<p><u>(1) Durham University-level Review:</u> For reviews of College investigations of academic programme, College services with a detrimental academic impact or University services complaints</p> <p><u>(2) OIA Review:</u> For review of College investigations of non-academic/service complaints (<i>Final Outcome</i>)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 14 working days after receipt of 'Completion of Procedures' letter (Student). • Acknowledgement within 7 days (the University) • Provision of a Review report within 28 days (the University). <p>Timescales will depend on those of the OIA: students should consult the OIA website for further details</p>
5	Formal Review	<p><u>The Office of the Independent Adjudicator-level Review</u></p> <p>For review of Durham University-level reviews of academic programme or</p>	<p>Timescales will depend on those of the OIA: students should consult the OIA website for further details</p>

		University services complaints <i>(Final Outcome)</i>	
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Author	Academic Registrar Vice-Principal (Teaching & Learning) Director of Finance and Operations
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