



UQAIB

Good Practice Guide

Grievance procedures



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What is the purpose of this guide?

This guide is intended to inform institutions about the ways in which Grievance Procedures could be developed in the Dubai context. The guide does not expand the scope of the UQAIB requirements and addresses an issue already contained in the *UQAIB Quality Assurance Manual*. It is not prescriptive and provides exemplar options to suit different circumstances that can be adapted by each institution to meet their individual requirements.

Introduction

Initial applications to the Dubai Free Zones require a demonstration that 'The HEP Branch has systems for receiving and responding to students' academic grievances and general complaints that are fair, effective and in accordance with the rights and responsibilities of students at the HEP Home.' (*Appendix D, UQAIB Quality Assurance Manual*)

Thus, as part of the application, the HEP Branch must submit a "Student Grievance Policy & Process (including explanation of any variances from the policy and processes in use at the Home HEP)" (*Appendix C, UQAIB Quality Assurance Manual*). The expectation is that this will be a HEP Branch procedure that would be in line with the Home HEP grievance process and that students would be able to turn to the HEP Branch first before being referred, if necessary, to the HEP Home.

This grievance policy is expected to address two types of procedures:

- Complaints: these are usually lodged about the poor standard of a service, a procedure or an action of the Branch HEP;
- Academic appeals: these challenge decisions that affect a student's progression (for example, an unfair mark).

The following discussion is based on a recent publication addressing these issues. It has been slightly adapted.¹

Key principles

¹ *The Good Practice Framework for Handling Complaints and Academic Appeals*, Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA), December 2014, <http://www.oiahe.org.uk/good-practice-framework.aspx> Permission was given to use the content of the two tables on pp. 4–5. The document includes references to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator in the UK, which can be useful to the students registered in the UK branch campuses but would not apply to other jurisdictions.

Although complaints and appeals are generally two distinct processes, (and in large institutions, the responsibilities of different staff), the OIA document stresses that they share a similar set of seven principles.

Accessibility

- The procedures are 'open to anyone who is or was recently a registered student', which includes those registered or enrolled on a course, those on an interruption of study, temporary withdrawal or temporary exclusion or suspension and those who have recently left a university.
- The policies 'give students clear information about how to access advice and support'.
- The procedures 'allow students to appoint a representative' (for example, a student representative or an advisor).
- The procedures are 'responsive to the needs of individual students'.

Clarity

- The procedures are 'well signposted so that students know which process to follow'. This includes:
 - ✓ A clear definition of what constitutes a complaint and what are the grounds upon which an academic appeal may be brought.
 - ✓ An explanation of where to direct a complaint or an appeal.
 - ✓ Information on the appropriate way to lodge a complaint or an appeal (for example, email, letter etc.) and what kind of evidence to present.

Proportionality

- The procedures are 'flexible when a student raises issues that fall under more than one process'; the student is advised as to which process applies to which part of her or his claim and the sequence in which it will be addressed.
- The complaints procedure consists of four steps.
 - ✓ Early resolution: the complaint is resolved at the local level, informally and as early as possible; this can be done through mediation or conciliation as appropriate.
 - ✓ Formal stage: a senior staff member unrelated to the case investigates and determines whether the claim should go through an appeal or a complaint procedure and if there are sufficient grounds to pursue the case. The senior staff member will propose a resolution to the student.

- ✓ Review stage: if the student rejects the proposed solution, the complaint goes to a higher body of the HEP Branch to settle it.
- ✓ Appeal to the HEP Home: in case the student rejects the Dubai Branch solution, the student can appeal to the relevant senior officer holder in the Home HEP.
- The academic appeals procedure consists of four steps:
 - ✓ Early resolution: informal and local resolution of an appeal is the preferred option. In the most frequent cases, students will appeal their marks (grades): they can be encouraged to go to their heads of department for a discussion.
 - ✓ Formal stage: if the first step fails to satisfy the student, a senior staff member unrelated to the case investigates and determines whether the claim should go through an appeal or a complaint procedure and if there are sufficient grounds to pursue the case.
 - ✓ Review stage: a higher body in the Branch HEP review the case and propose a settlement.
 - ✓ Appeal to the Home HEP: in case the student rejects the judgment at the Dubai Branch, the student can appeal to the judiciary body of the Home HEP.

Timeliness

- Policies include 'time limits within which students are normally expected to submit complaints' or academic appeals; that is, they specify the maximum period during which a current or a former student can file a complaint or an academic appeal.
- Procedures allow 'for the identification of complaints or academic appeals that require particularly swift action', for example, in a situation where a student would suffer needlessly from a delay.
- Procedures will normally be completed within 60 calendar days of the start of the formal stage. The policies give clear information about time limits, particularly in spelling out how many days each of the different steps will take.

Fairness

- Policies ensure 'that decision-making staff are properly trained, resourced and supported, and able to approach each decision afresh'.
- Procedures allow 'each party an equal opportunity to present their case'.
- Procedures expect 'clear reasons to be given for decisions reached'.
- Policies ensure 'that students are not disadvantaged as a result of bringing a complaint' or an academic appeal.

- Procedures will include 'effective record keeping to ensure that:
 - ✓ 'Decisions are made consistently'
 - ✓ 'Decisions are made at the appropriate level'
 - ✓ 'Appropriate action is taken on issues identified'
 - ✓ 'Information gathered is used to improve services for students and the student experience'.

Independence

- Procedures ensure 'that decisions are taken by staff members without actual or perceived conflicts of interest at all stages of the process.'

Confidentiality

- Procedures ensure 'an appropriate level of confidentiality without disadvantage'.
- The students would be informed that this principle also applies to the way they express a complaint or an appeal. Making a complaint or an appeal public before it is adjudicated (including in social media) is not appropriate or acceptable.

Follow-up

An annual report of all grievances and appeals would normally be compiled to be discussed by the HEP Branch senior office holders and sent to the Home HEP. Quality assurance officers would receive relevant information to allow them to improve some functions or processes. Summary information (e.g., number of cases handled) could be provided to staff and students to build awareness of and trust in the procedures.

Additional resources

1. Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA) Good Practice Framework (2014) is a guide to handling complaints and academic appeals in higher education in England and Wales. It sets out principles and operational good practice but does not include prescriptive detail. Each university and college remains free to draft its own policies and procedures to fit its own size and context. It can be accessed from:
<http://oiahe.org.uk/media/96361/oia-good-practice-framework.pdf>
2. Part B: Assuring and Enhancing Academic Quality of the UK Quality Assurance Agency's Quality Code sets out expectations that higher education providers are required to meet to ensure: that appropriate and effective teaching, support, assessment and learning

resources are provided for students; that the learning opportunities provided are monitored; and that the provider considers how to improve them. It can be accessed from:

<http://www.gaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/quality-code-part-b>

3. The Student Grievance Procedure at New York University is a 4 stage process: Phase One: Attempt to Resolve the Matter Through Informal Resolution; Phase Two: Formal Review; Phase Three: Review of the Appeal Officer's Decision by the University Judicial Board; Phase Four: Final Review by the President. A summary of the formal Student Grievance Procedure at New York University can be accessed from:

<https://www.nyu.edu/life/student-life/student-communitystandards/student-grievance-procedure-.html>

4. Section 12.1 of Chapter 1 in The University College London's Academic Manual provides a clear and concise guide to the UCL Student Complaints Procedure. This can be accessed from:

<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/srs/academic-manual/c1/complaints/guide>