



What to do if you have a complaint about a college or university

A guide from the SPSO

If you have a complaint, there are ways to sort things out.

Use the complaints procedure.

Still unhappy, ask the SPSO for advice.

This leaflet tells you how to raise a complaint with your college or university and what you can do if you're still unhappy after doing this.

SPSO student advice line **0800 377 7330**

If you want this information in another language or format, such as audio, LARGE FONT, or Braille, contact us on freephone **0800 377 7330** or email us at **www.spsso.org.uk/contact-us**.



Got a complaint?

Use the complaints procedure

The first step in trying to sort out a problem about a college or university is to tell someone about it. All colleges and universities have a complaints procedure that you can use if you feel you have been treated unfairly.

How long do I have to make a complaint to the college or university?

Normally, you must make your complaint:

- within six months of the event you want to complain about, or
- within six months of finding out that you have a reason to complain, as long as this is no longer than 12 months after the event itself.

In exceptional circumstances, the college or university may be able to accept a complaint after the time limit. If you feel the time limit should not apply to your complaint, please tell the college or university why.

Complaining can feel overwhelming. If you need help, ask someone.

Getting help

There are people who can help you make a complaint if you give them written permission. You could ask a friend, a relative, a student union representative or welfare officer. You could also ask for help from your local Citizens Advice Bureau, a Member of the Scottish Parliament or a Member of Parliament. Details of your local Citizens Advice Bureau can be found online at www.cas.org.uk or under 'c' in the phone book.

Your college or university's students' association can give you advice and support if you are having a problem or if you have a complaint. They are there to represent you and your interests. The college or university will have their contact information. If you are an international student, you might find it helpful to contact the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA).

Website: www.ukcisa.org.uk

Advice line: **+44 20 3131 3576**



Advice on complaining

It is easier for the college or university to resolve complaints that are made quickly and directly to the service concerned. If you want to make a complaint you should first talk to a member of staff in the department you are complaining about. This will give them a chance to try to resolve any problems on the spot and put things right.

You can make your complaint in person, by phone, in writing by post or email, or by asking someone else to do it for you (see the **Getting Help** section on page 2 for information).

Complaining in writing

If you complain in writing, it is helpful to follow the steps below:

- 1 Ask for the college or university's complaints leaflet or procedure.
- 2 Clearly mark your letter 'complaint.' There is an example complaint letter on the next page.
- 3 Make sure you write to the correct member of staff at the right address. Phone the college or university for advice if you're not sure who to write to.
- 4 Keep copies of your letters and the replies you get back. If someone from the college or university responds to you by telephone, ask them to also put it in writing.
- 5 Colleges or universities will normally try to resolve your complaint quickly and at the first point of contact.
- 6 If you are unhappy with the reply you get from the college or university, ask them to take it to the next stage of the complaints procedure. If you are not sure how to do this, call them to find out.
- 7 Follow all steps in the complaints leaflet or procedure.

Do not send your complaint to the SPSO until you've completed the college or university's complaints procedure. We won't be able to help until you've done this.



Example of what to put in a complaint letter

Your name
Address
Phone number
Date

To: *Name*

Job title

College/university name

College/university address

Dear _____

COMPLAINT

I would like to complain about your service.

- Give details of what has gone wrong and tell them what you think would resolve the problem. Clearly explain what you would like to happen.
- Think about the outcome that you want. Are you looking for an apology, a change in policy, a service that should have been provided?
- You can ask the college or university to explain how they made their decision.
- Include information, but not too much, about what you complained about and what has been done to try to sort things out. You may also find it helpful to include copies of previous letters, photos, statements etc.

Please contact me so that I know that you have received my complaint. I would also like to know when you will send me a full reply.

Yours sincerely,

Your name

Please keep a copy of your complaint letters, you might find them helpful.



Complained? Still unhappy? Ask the SPSO for advice

The SPSO might be able to look at your complaint after you have completed the college or university's complaints procedure.

About the SPSO

We are the **final** stage for complaints about public service organisations in Scotland. We take complaints about **colleges and universities** and other public service organisations.

When to bring your complaint to the SPSO

You can bring your complaint to us **after** you have gone through the college or university's complaints procedure. The college or university's final response should tell you that you can take your complaint to our office. If it does not, you should contact them for advice on what to do next.

Unless there are special circumstances, we won't look at issues that happened more than a year ago.

What the SPSO can and can't look into

We can look at whether there are reasonable procedures in place and decide whether they have been followed correctly.

We can look at complaints about:

- the applications procedures for admissions (but not the admission decision itself)
- services like accommodation, welfare and support
- the procedure followed in academic or disciplinary appeals

We cannot look at:

- the exercise of academic judgement
- personnel matters
- contracts and other commercial transactions
- the quality of teaching or assessment
- grades or a final award

And you should note that:

- we cannot normally look at complaints made anonymously
- we don't look at complaints that have been dealt with in court
- we can't assess or challenge the merits of academic decisions. We cannot get your grades changed or have a college or university make a final award
- you cannot appeal an institution's decisions through us.

If you have any questions about whether we can look into your complaint, please contact us.
Advice line freephone **0800 377 7330**.



Complaining to the SPSO

Once you have gone through the college or university's complaints procedure you can ask us (the SPSO) if we can look at it. You should make your complaint to us in writing. It is best to use our SPSO complaints form to do this. Contact us for a form, or you can make a complaint online: www.spsso.org.uk/complain/form

When returning your form please send us copies of relevant paperwork, in particular the final response you received from the college or university. Tell us what went wrong, and what you would like to happen to put things right. For information about what happens when we receive your complaint see **SPSO Information leaflet 2**.

You can get copies of any of our leaflets by contacting us or going to our website: www.spsso.org.uk/online-leaflets

Not sure if we can help? Contact us for advice

We can help with any questions before you send your complaint to us – one of our complaints reviewers is always available. Please call us on freephone **0800 377 7330**. You can also visit our office. You don't need to make an appointment. See the back page for more information about contacting us.





When we get your complaint

We will check that it has been through the right complaints procedure, and that the college or university has had a chance to deal with the issue, and has given you their final response.

If your complaint is one that we can look at, we will try to deal with it as quickly as possible.

From your complaint, we need to know:

- what happened
- what should have happened
- why you are complaining
- why you feel it is still not resolved after complaining
- what would put things right for you.

We also need copies of the complaints correspondence between you and the college or university.

What we do

If we find a problem, as well as asking the college or university to put things right for you, we want to try to make sure the same thing doesn't happen to someone else. This is why we sometimes make recommendations after looking into a complaint. We publish reports to share the learning from complaints and help service providers improve.

Here are some examples of what we might ask the organisation to do to put things right for you:

- apologise to you
- take action to sort out a problem
- change how they do things
- make sure they deal with complaints properly.

Please note that there are some things that we cannot do, such as getting your grades or final award changed or getting compensation for you.

For more information about our service, what we might be able to do, or to ask for a complaint form, call us.

Advice line freephone **0800 377 7330**

Contact us

If you're not sure whether the SPSO can help, or for advice on making a complaint about a college or university, please call us on **0800 377 7330**.



SPSO
Freepost EH641
Edinburgh
EH3 0BR

SPSO
4 Melville Street
Edinburgh
EH3 7NS

Opening hours: **Monday, Wednesday,**
Thursday, Friday 9am – 5pm
Tuesday 10am – 5pm



Advice line freephone **0800 377 7330**



Fax **0800 377 7331**



Website **www.spsso.org.uk**

Mobile site **<http://m.spsso.org.uk/>**

Online contact form **www.spsso.org.uk/contact-form**



You can fill in our complaints form online at:
www.spsso.org.uk/complain/form

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in other languages and formats
(such as **LARGE PRINT** or Braille).

