

How You Can Make a Complaint to Your Higher Education (HE) Provider

Why are we sending you this?

You were one of thousands of higher education students who signed up to our [Complaint Chain campaign](#). Government's across the UK have not yet acted. Now is the time for you to put in a complaint. By going through the complaints process, you may be able secure compensation. Through the process, you will have the opportunity to suggest what compensation you think is most appropriate to your personal situation.

The exact complaints process will differ depending on where you are/were studying. This guide will provide you with the basic outline of most complaints processes, along with suggestions of how to find more information and access further tailored support.

How does the complaints process usually work?

In a nutshell, 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 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. If you have friends or coursemates who have experienced the same or similar disruption to their studies as you did, then you could choose to make a complaint as a group. If you have a course rep they may be well-placed to lead this process and you may all get a response more quickly by working together.

There are usually four stages to making a complaint, three within your university or college and one which is independent:

Stage 1: Early resolution

This is an attempt to try and resolve your complaint via informal dialogue at a 'local level' in your HE provider such as at School or Faculty level. Your School is usually your subject (History) and your Faculty is the broader department which your subject is a part of (Arts and Humanities).

Raising your complaint with your School or Faculty might give you the outcome you want. For example, if you are looking for a chance to participate in missed activities, or need more information about what your studies will look like in the next year.

However, it is highly likely that 'early resolution' **will not be appropriate** for the complaint you're making due to the scale of disruption you have faced and because you are seeking financial or other significant compensation - which the School or Faculty will not be able to authorise. As a result, **you may be able** to skip straight to the formal stage, although some HE providers make this stage compulsory.

- **If you choose to try the informal complaints process first, and you do not get the outcome you are happy with, then you will need to say you want to escalate immediately to Stage 2. If you just go straight to Stage 2 then explain why you don't think Stage 1 will resolve your complaint.**

Stage 2: Formal complaint

When Stage 1 has failed, or is not appropriate, then your HE provider would ensure they investigate and the complaint is dealt with through a more formalised process.

Stage 3: Review/appeal

If you are not satisfied with the outcome that has been reached when Stage 2 concludes then you can usually appeal or request that your complaint is reviewed by a 'higher body' in the HE provider.

At Stage 2 and Stage 3, your uni/College should keep you informed about how long the process is likely to take.

Stage 4: Referring your complaint to an external, independent body

If you are still not satisfied with the outcome of the review/appeal then you can refer your complaint, free of charge, to an independent body that reviews complaints in higher education.

- If your HE provider is in England or Wales, then you can approach **The Office of the Independent Adjudicator** – [which you can read about here](#).
- If your HE provider is in Scotland, you can approach the **Scottish Public Services Ombudsman** – [which you can read about here](#).
- If your HE provider is in Northern Ireland, then you can approach the **Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman** – [which you can read about here](#)

Where do I complain?

It's usually quite difficult to find these processes, but you should try:

- "Regulations" or "Procedures" sections of your HE provider's website
- Searching the site index for "complaint"
- A student handbook from the start of your course

In some cases, there are multiple processes. If so, in the first instance you are most likely looking for a **non-academic complaints procedure**.

- **Some HE providers may have set up a process just for complaints relating to the impact of coronavirus. This might be more streamlined than the 4-stage process described above.**

Your students' union may also feature a guide to your local complaints service on their website – likely in their 'Advice' section. If you cannot find your students' union's website online, then you can [search for their contact details here](#).

If you are a disabled student and you are finding it hard to access your provider's complaints process, get in touch with them and let them know. **Your provider's disability support service or student welfare services may also be able to help.**

When should I submit my complaint?

Now! Your HE provider may try to impose time limits on when you can submit a complaint. This will be made clear in each provider's own published regulations and procedures. You can still submit a complaint if you have recently graduated or left your studies.

Who do I need to contact to start my complaint?

The contact details of the person or department you need to contact will differ depending on your HE provider.

- **If you are starting your complaint a Stage 1, then contact your module leader, academic advisor/personal tutor, head of school or head of department.**
- **If you are starting your complaint at Stage 2 then you will usually submit a complaint by email or by a specific web form to an address detailed in your higher education provider's complaints procedure.**

What do I need to say and provide in my complaint?

Your HE provider should detail in their complaints processes what sort of information and evidence they need from you to consider your complaint. However, we would advise you detailing in your complaint the following information and, where possible, providing evidence for your claims:

- How you feel your studies have been affected.
- Has online teaching been adequate and of good quality? If not, why not? Provide examples and evidence if possible.
- Concerns about whether your assessments have been, or will be, affected. List the assessments and explain what has happened. For example, were deadlines not postponed or extended sufficiently?
- Was any feedback not provided on time or is yet to be provided?
- Were you not able to contact academics or supervisors?
- If there is any teaching or content set out in the course prospectus that will no longer be delivered, you may wish to express your dissatisfaction at not receiving this if it was a significant factor in choosing your programme.
- If you were unable to access any promised facilities, especially those that are key to your course. This may include labs, workshops, equipment etc.
- If you've been unable to access any services, you rely on to study. This could include student support services, the library etc. If these services have tried to mitigate the effects of the pandemic then you should explain why and how this has not been adequate, with evidence if possible.
- If you are not happy with your department's attempt to mitigate the impact on your studies, you could also mention this and explain why you think the steps they have taken are not enough.
- If you have any other evidence that relates to the impact or inconveniences caused you should mention this and provide the evidence.
- Whether any changes to what was advertised to you before you began the course was agreed with you (i.e. the change to online teaching), and whether alternative ways to access facilities or services have been offered and were agreed with you.
- **If you make your complaint at Stage 2, then you should also detail why you have chosen to do this rather than seek a resolution at a local level.**

In your complaint you should also detail what solution you are seeking to the issues that you have faced. You should think about:

- The proportion of fees or compensation you are requesting, taking into account the proportion of teaching and services delivered as normal from the start of your course until teaching moved online/stopped due to the pandemic.
- Whether any alternative resolutions other than financial compensation would be acceptable. This could include deferral of studies, or “repeat performance” of your studies next academic year when facilities and services are accessible.
- Any other compensation you would deem reasonable and helpful for your issue.

With regard to “repeat performance” you should carefully consider whether repeating study in future is viable for you. If fees are covered, would you still be able to afford to study and would you have access to maintenance funding? How does this affect your career aspirations, or other responsibilities? Will you be able to fit in additional teaching sessions together with doing your next year of study?

If asking for financial compensation, a good starting point could be to work out from the fees paid for the term, how much you may have paid for the module(s) affected etc. You could then factor in any measures taken by your department to reduce the impact before deciding what amount you consider to be appropriate compensation.

You may also wish to consider **if you have evidence of any unexpected additional costs incurred** directly as a result from the circumstances or the measures taken by the higher education provider to reduce the impact. This evidence should be provided, and you should tally up the amount you want reimbursed.

Who can I get support from in my complaint?

The complaints process can be complicated and involve stressful paperwork, meetings and panel ‘hearings’ in your HE provider:

- **You have a right to be accompanied by a friend, family member, academic, course representative or in some cases a lawyer or professional representative. You can also appoint a person to represent you throughout the process rather than engaging directly yourself.**
- **Your students’ union will be able to provide you with the best information about the complaints process at your local institution and will be able to either accompany or represent you most effectively.**

If your students’ union has an Advice service, this is who will likely support you with the process. If you cannot find your students’ union’s website online, then you can [search for their contact details here](#). You could also seek advice from organisations such as [Citizen’s Advice](#).