



Complaints Annual Report 2018

WEST COLLEGE
SCOTLAND



Context

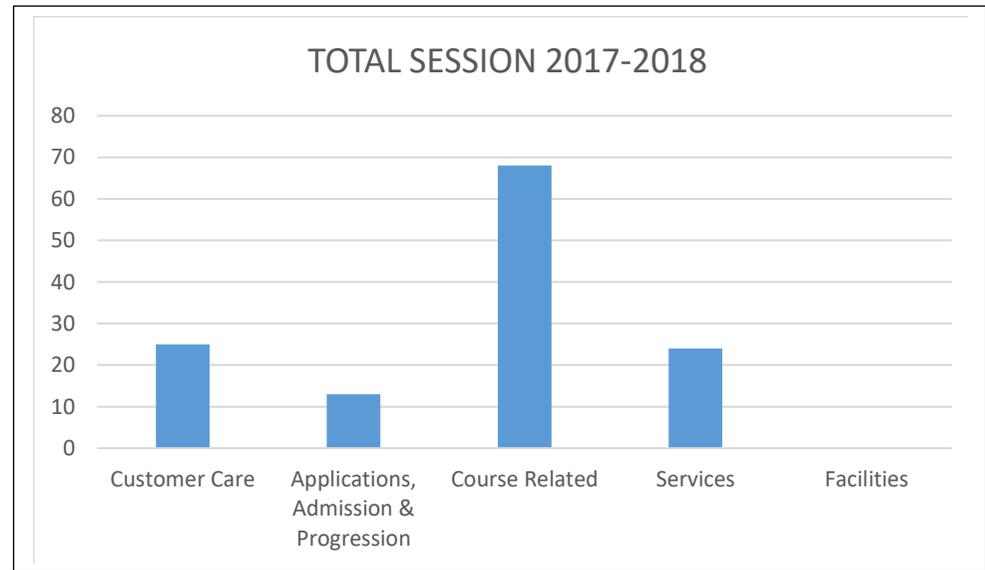
The College operates its complaints handling procedures in accordance with the Scottish Public Sector Ombudsman. The college regards “expressions of dissatisfaction” as opportunities to review and amend its’ practices, and recognises complaints as key elements of learner [and other stakeholders] feedback. This report is a summary of the complaints received and actions taken for the academic session 2017 – 2018.

Trends

The number of complaints received last session was 133. This was considerably less than the previous session, even allowing for high number of complaints relating to industrial action [during session 2016-2017].

Figures for the total number of complaints received for the last three sessions are provided below.

Total Number of Complaints by session		
2015 – 2016	2016-2017	2017-2018
168	301	133

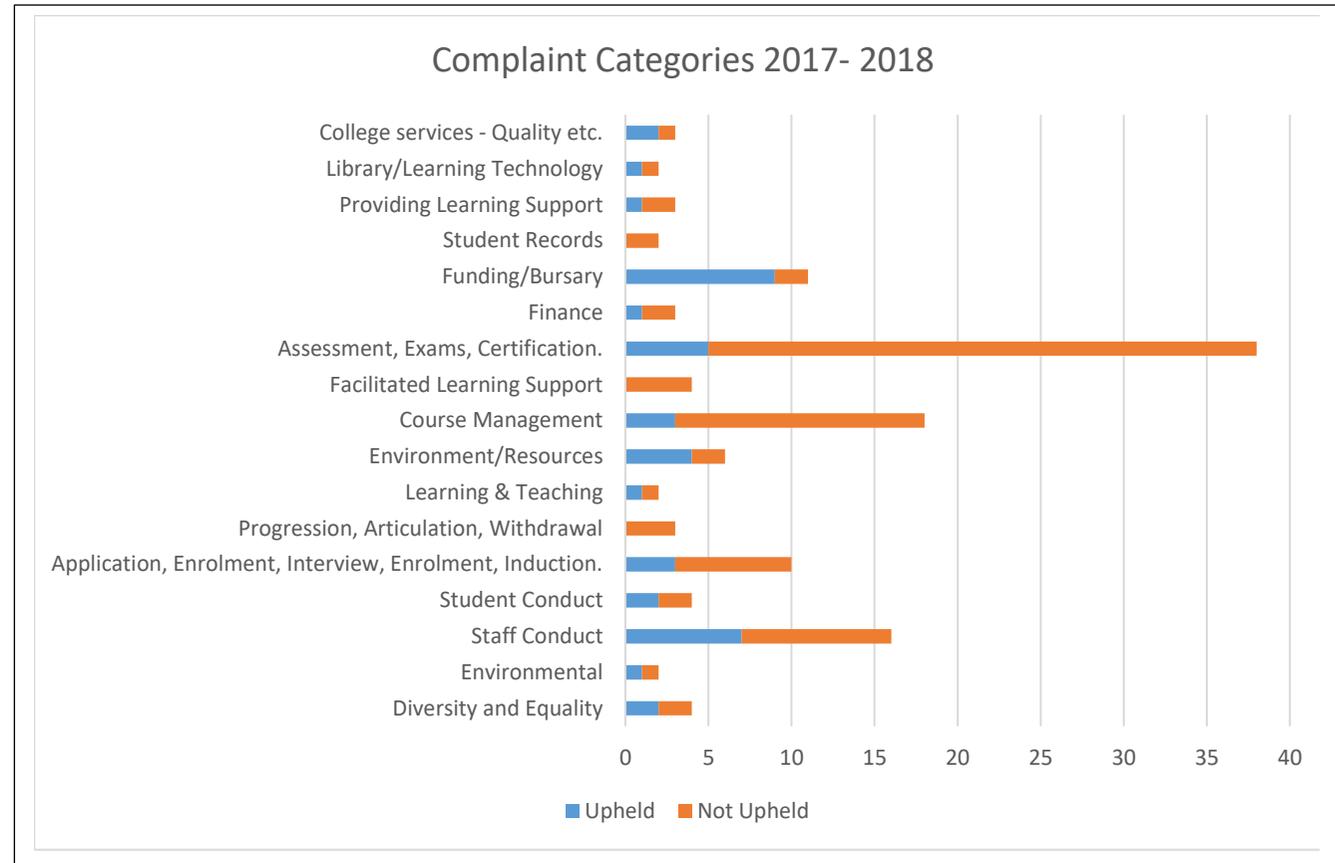


Most complaints received were categorised as “course related” – see chart. A more detailed breakdown is provided below.

A more detailed examination of the data reveals that the majority of complaints were concerned with:

- Assessment and Certification
- Course Management
- Staff Conduct

In particular, building works adjacent to Clydebank Campus caused issues for students sitting Higher English.

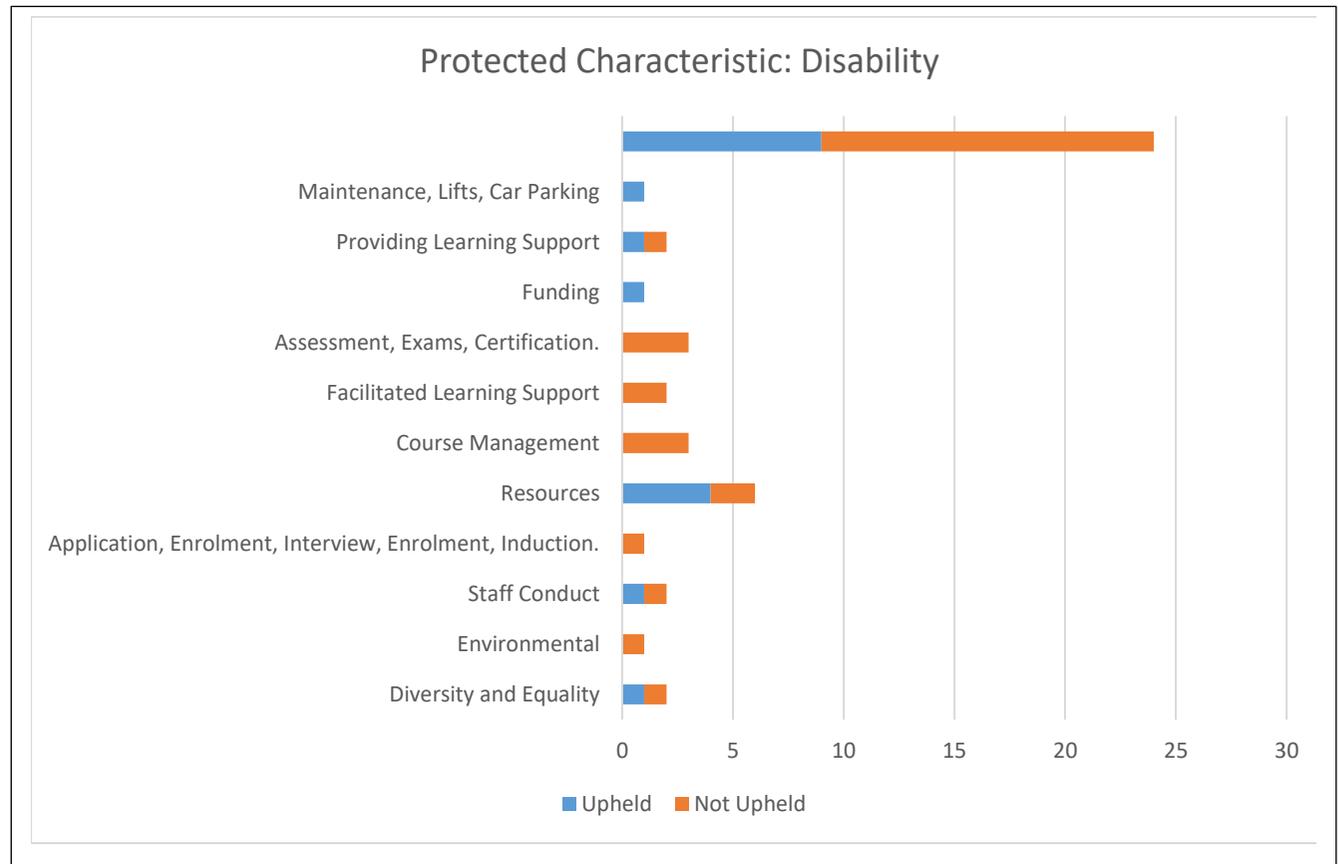


Protected Characteristics

A total of 34 complainants identified a protected characteristic. Of these, 25 declared “Disability” as their characteristic. A breakdown of the complaints is provided in the chart. Only two complaints related to issues arising from their characteristic.

Four other students identified “Religion”, and “Sexual Orientation” as their characteristics. All were in relation to the same complaint concerning excessive noise during an assessment. Since the college had taken a number of pre-emptive measures to avoid this situation, the complaints were not upheld.

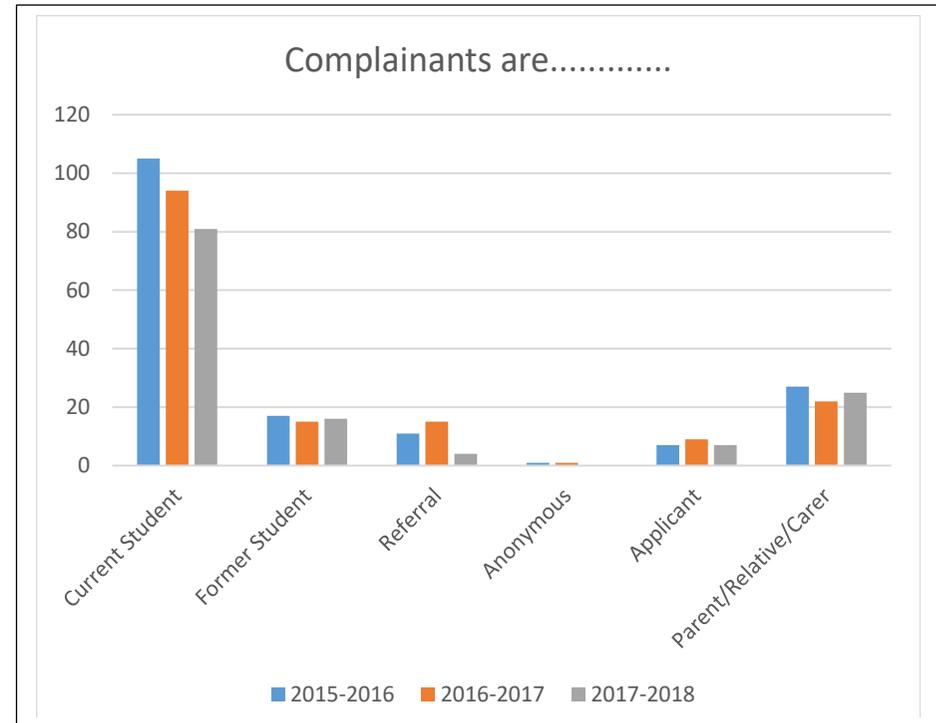
Overall 27% of complaints from complainants who declared a protected characteristic were upheld, compared to 33% being upheld for all complainants. One complaint from someone who declared a protected characteristic is being carried over into session 2018 – 2019.



Who complains?

Complaints were received overwhelmingly by current students. The mixture of complainants is consistent with the previous session, as the graph demonstrates.

NB Figures for session 2016-2017 exclude complaints in relation to the industrial action.



Feedback

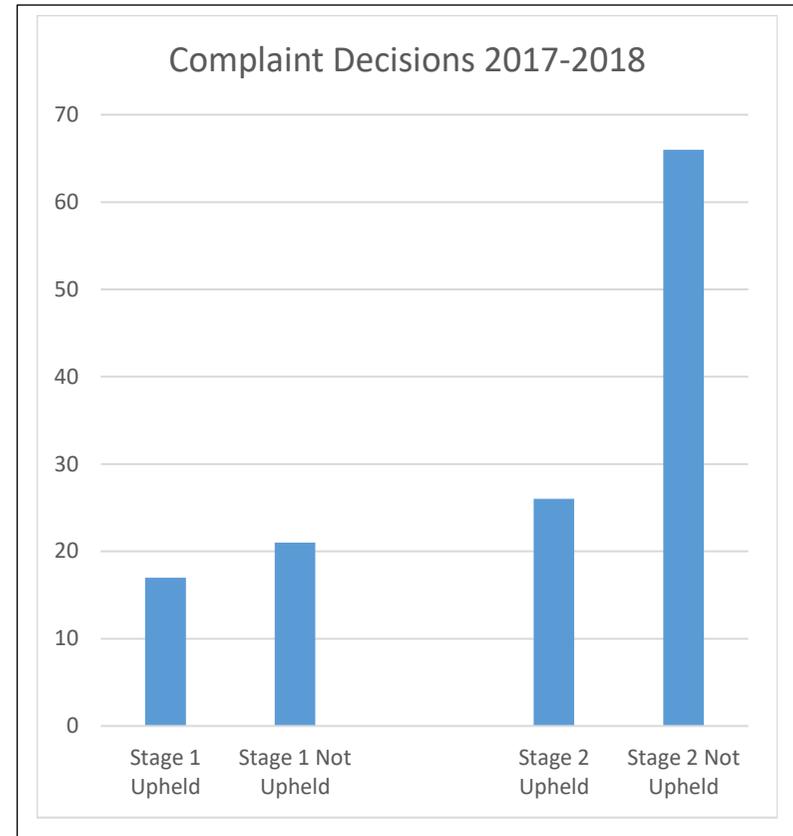
The college is keen to receive feedback on the experiences of the complainants, and issues a questionnaire shortly after the complaint is closed off. However, the response rate is very low at just 9%. Of those received, the majority have expressed dissatisfaction with their experiences, although it appears that their dissatisfaction is more to do with the decision reached rather than the process itself.



Complaint Decisions

The SPSO uses two categories in relation to complaints. Some complaints can be responded to quickly. The SPSO refers to these as Stage 1 complaints, for which we received a total of 38 last session. Out of these 17 were upheld and 21 were not upheld.

Those which require investigation, and take longer to reply to, are referred to as Stage 2 Complaints by the SPSO. The college received 95 last session. Out of these 26 were upheld and 66 were not upheld. There were three complaints carried over into this session.



Lessons Learned

Complaints received, whether upheld or not, may provide opportunities to review our practices and processes. The following describes a number of actions we have taken, or are taking, in relation to some of the complaints we have received last session. Additionally, we will continually review our complaints handling processes to encourage a higher proportion of stage 1 resolutions.

Complaint: Failure to provide accurate advice on post results service

The college has provided further guidance to staff and students on how this SQA post examination service works, where an appeal on an external assessment is sought by a candidate. In particular, staff and students are reminded of the importance of adhering to the time-scales and required supporting evidence. The complainant, in this case, referred the outcome to the SPSO, who upheld the complaint.

Complaint: Failure to provide prompt staff cover during periods of staff illness absence

While short-term staff absence can generally be accommodated, periods of excessive or prolonged absence can be problematic in arranging suitably qualified staff cover. In this particular case, the college has recognised the need to keep students informed about the status of the measures being undertaken, and what arrangements are being considered to offset any learning time lost, while teaching cover is arranged.

Complaint: Delays in repairing a broken hoist

This complaint highlighted the need to explain and inform, and manage the expectations of, those affected when a complex piece of equipment requires repair or replacement. In this instance, the need to utilise external contractors resulted in the repairs taking longer than the College would have expected.

Complaint: On-line assessment cancellation

This complaint related to an on-line assessment undertaken in the evening. Technical difficulties meant that the dedicated equipment could not be used, and the assessment had to be re-scheduled. The college continues to monitor the availability of technical IT support for learning, including the requirements for evening assessments.

Referrals to the Scottish Public Sector Ombudsman

All complainants are advised, in line with SPSO legislation, that they have the right to appeal to the SPSO. We received three responses from the SPSO relating to session 2017-2018 regarding complaints that were escalated to them.

SPSO Referral 1

A student with an existing medical condition indicated, verbally to a lecturer, that they likely would not be able to sit the national Higher examination. The student did not turn up for the examination and later claimed that they were advised about the potential for an Exceptional Circumstances claim, in the hope of gaining an award based on previous internal work submissions. The student complained that the College had not supported this potential. The Investigating Manager could find no record that such an understanding had been given, and advised the complainant that, on review, they did not meet the criteria for such a claim. The complainant referred the College decision to the SPSO, the outcome of which did not make any specific recommendations, but did raise doubts on the College version of the sequence of events which were deemed to have taken place.

This episode resulted in the College providing clearer details to curriculum teams, and students, about the criteria and processes needed for Exceptional Circumstance claims, particularly in relation to the requirement for supporting documentation and record keeping.

SPSO Referral 2

This case was complex, in that, in addition to the complaint aspects, concerns were raised around the use and regulation of college initiated social media platforms, particularly in relation to staff communications with individual students.

The SPSO upheld the main aspects of the complaint and recommended the following actions:

- The College should consider adding sections on the use by students and staff of college created social media pages to their existing policies.
- College staff need to know what information can be given to students who have complained about other students, in relation to the outcome of any disciplinary or remedial actions.
- College staff should explain to students the circumstances in which a particular procedure will be used to deal with any feedback.

The College has, in response, updated the Social Media Policy and improved our student induction information to address the points raised in the SPSO referral.

SPSO Referral 3

The complainant had requested a refund of course fees, on the basis that staffing changes, her completion of a work based course was longer than desired. The College apologised for the staffing changes, explaining these were a result of staff absence, and the time taken to recruit a replacement, competent assessor. The College undertook to ensure that any future staffing changes would be minimised as much as possible and communicated to students. The College also noted that despite these changes the student completed the course well within the anticipated time-scales. The SPSO did not uphold the student referral and recommended that no further action would be taken.

Future Developments:

We will seek to

- Strengthen the EDI data analysis of complainants and outcomes for special interest groups
- Ensure that all expressions of dissatisfaction are captured and recorded in the complaints handling process
- Increase the proportion of complaints that we close off at Stage 1, improving the communication of complaint outcomes to complainants
- Utilise sector benchmarking data to help us continually improve our complaints handling processes. Work to provide comparative data across the sector, is in development, through the College Sector CHP Steering Group, with representatives from SPSO and the College Sector jointly committed to improving practice. Some early work around sector benchmarking has provided opportunities for each college to analyse their own approaches and enables sharing of practice with a view of sector wide improvement. (see Appendix 1)

Appendix 1: Sector Benchmarking: Data and Analysis

	All Colleges	West College Scotland
Number of Complaints	1400	133
Complaints Per 100 popn.	0.75	0.75
	All Colleges	West College Scotland
Stage 1 Closed	66.8%	28.6%
Stage 2 Closed	28.1%	69.2%
Escalated Closed	4.4%	0.0%
Open	0.7%	2.3%
	All Colleges	West College Scotland
Stage 1 Upheld	57.2%	44.7%
Stage 1 Not Upheld	42.8%	55.3%
Stage 2 Upheld	44.7%	28.3%
Stage 2 Not Upheld	55.3%	71.7%
Escalated Upheld	41.0%	0.0%
Escalated Not Upheld	59.0%	0.0%
	All Colleges	West College Scotland
Stage 1 avge. working days	5.6	2.4
Stage 2 avge. working days	18.8	16.7
Escalated avge. Working days	20.0	0.0
	All Colleges	West College Scotland
Stage 1 closed <=5 w.d.	72.0%	100.0%
Stage 1 closed >5 w.d.	28.0%	0.0%
Stage 2 closed <=20 w.d.	66.5%	60.9%
Stage 2 closed >20 w.d.	33.2%	39.1%
Escalated closed <=20 w.d.	75.4%	0.0%
Escalated closed > 20 w.d.	24.6%	0.0%
	All Colleges	West College Scotland
Stage 1 closed >5 <=10 w.d.	77.5%	0.0%
Stage 1 closed >10 w.d.	16.0%	0.0%
Stage 2 closed >20 w.d <=40 w.d.	67.9%	47.2%
Stage 2 closed >40 w.d.	27.5%	52.8%
Escalated closed >20 w.d. <=40 w	100.0%	0.0%
Escalated closed >=40 w.d.	0.0%	0.0%

Comments

The balance between Stage 1 and Stage 2 complaints for WCS is markedly different compared to the sector

- WCS makes less use of an extension option, compared to other Colleges, and thus identifies a smaller proportion of Stage 1 complaints
- Currently any complaint closed off in excess of 5 working days is identified as a Stage 2 complaint.

WCS upholds proportionately fewer complaints compared to the sector, especially for Stage 2 complaints

WCS response times are lower than the sector for both Stage 1 and Stage 2 complaints

WCS has significantly more complaints not closed off within 40 days compared to the sector

- These tend to be submitted towards the end of the session
- Staff on annual leave typically means we are not able to close off until academic staff return from annual leave.
- Reminders are sent to all Investigating Managers just prior to the 20 day deadline [and again at 40 days if required]
- Complainants are advised and informed – where possible – of the reasons for the delay.

Considerations

Premium placed on closing off complaints within 5 days.

Utilise extension option for Stage 1 complaints i.e. response within 10 working days, to bring the College more in line with the sector.