

## Student Complaints and Resolution Procedure

### For all Undergraduate and Postgraduate Programmes

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## 1. Introduction and purpose

1.1 The Royal Veterinary College (RVC) is committed to providing a high-quality educational experience for all our students. It is critical that we understand when things are not working as they should for any student who feels that they have received poor service or have been unreasonably treated by the RVC. We welcome the opportunity to listen to student concerns and deal with them appropriately.

1.2 Students should feel confident in raising a concern or making a complaint; they will not experience any detriment or disadvantage in further dealings with the RVC after doing so in good faith.

1.3 The RVC will evaluate its complaints, along with other forms of feedback, to improve the quality and effectiveness of its educational delivery and services.

1.4 This procedure can be used by:

1.4.1 Any student who is currently enrolled, or was enrolled within the past three months, on a RVC programme. This may contribute to a University of London degree awarded by the RVC; a programme that leads to the award of an RVC degree or simply be credit that is awarded by the RVC (which may or may not contribute to a degree award by another higher education provider or professional body).

1.5 This procedure cannot be used by:

1.5.1 A third-party (e.g., parent or legal representative) to complain on behalf of an RVC student unless the student is under 18 years of age.

1.5.2 Applicants to the RVC - please use the [Admissions Policy and Procedure](#) to raise a concern or complaint.

1.5.3 Students complaining about the Royal Veterinary College Students' Union (RVCSU) – please visit <https://www.rvcsu.org.uk/>.

1.5.4 Clients of our veterinary services – please use the links below to raise a concern or complaint: <https://www.rvc.ac.uk/equine-vet/information-and-advice/raising-a-concern> <https://www.rvc.ac.uk/small-animal-vet/general-practice/about-us/privacy-statement>.

1.5.4 Members of the public – please contact the College Secretary via email [governance@rvc.ac.uk](mailto:governance@rvc.ac.uk) to outline your concerns.

## 2. Definition of a complaint

2.1 The Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) defines a complaint as “an expression of dissatisfaction by one or more students about a provider’s action or lack of action, or about the standard of service provided by or on behalf of the provider”. Examples of complaints therefore include:

2.1.1 Failure to meet obligations, including those outlined in course/student handbooks.

2.1.2 Misleading or incorrect information provided during the application process.

2.1.3 Concerns re: educational delivery Poor quality support, resources, or facilities – either provided by the RVC or its agents.

2.2 A student cannot complain about academic judgement that is concluded following correct application of RVC procedures (e.g., exam boards). The OIA define academic judgement as:

*“Academic judgement is not any judgement made by an academic; it is a judgement that is made about a matter where the opinion of an academic expert is essential. So, for example a judgement about marks awarded, degree classification, research methodology, whether feedback is correct or adequate, and the content or outcomes of a course will normally involve academic judgement.”* (OIA, 2018, Section 30.2)

## 3. Complaint or appeal

3.1 The OIA define an appeal as “a request for a review of a decision of an academic body charged with making decisions on student progress, assessment and awards”. Students making such a request should refer to our [RVC Student Appeals Procedure](#). If students remain unclear as to which procedure to use, students should email the Student Appeals, Complaints and Conduct Team for further guidance ([studentcomplaints@rvc.ac.uk](mailto:studentcomplaints@rvc.ac.uk)).

## 4. Responsibilities of students

4.1 We expect students to treat all members of our community with respect as outlined in our [Student Charter](#) and the [General Regulations for Study and Award](#); This includes when raising a concern/complaint with the RVC. We encourage students to raise concerns responsibly by following this procedure; grievances raised via social media are therefore discouraged and will not normally be responded to.

## 5. Anonymous and vexatious complaints

5.1 Anonymous concerns or complaints will not normally be considered by the RVC as they cannot readily be investigated. In cases where the concern or complaint relates to the behaviour of a student or member of staff, it is particularly difficult to maintain anonymity or provide the reported person with an adequate right of reply.

5.2 We may decide to consider an anonymous concern or complaint if there are compelling reasons (supported by evidence) to do so. In these cases, we will make every effort to preserve the anonymity of the reporting student.

## 6. Support and advice for making a complaint

6.1 Students who are unsure about raising a concern or making a formal complaint can approach a range of staff and supporters for advice:

- Tutor
- Senior Tutor
- Supervisor
- Departmental Postgraduate Research (PGR) Advisor
- [Research Degrees Officer](#)
- [Student Union Representative](#)
- Course Director or Academic Head of the Graduate School
- Year Leader
- [Advice Centre](#)
- [Study Skills Team](#)
- [Student Appeals, Complaints and Conduct Team](#)

## 7. Process and timescales

7.1 This procedure provides for initial informal resolution and subsequent formal proceedings:

Stage 1	Raising a concern for informal resolution
Stage 2	Formal complaint
Stage 3	Final Formal review (internal to RVC)
Stage 4	Office of the Independent Adjudicator (independent external review)

7.2 Indicative timescales for each stage:

Stage 1	Informal concern	10 calendar days
Stage 2	Formal complaint	60 calendar days
Stage 3	Final Formal Review	30 calendar days
Stage 4	Office of the Independent Adjudicator	90 calendar days from receipt of all requested information*

\*Please visit <https://www.oiahe.org.uk/about-us/our-scheme/our-rules/> for further information

7.3 We will make every effort to adhere to the timescales above but matters of complexity and/or periods of RVC closure or staff absence may require additional time to ensure that the concern/complaint is fully understood, investigated and the outcome fully considered. Where these timescales need to be extended, we will confirm this in writing to the student and keep them regularly informed of progress.

7.4 Students should support us in completing procedures in a timely manner by adhering to any deadlines set for submission of material, attending meetings etc. as far as possible – and letting us know if these cannot be met at the earliest opportunity, providing both reasons for any delay and anticipated completion dates.

## **8. Reasonable adjustments**

8.1 The RVC encourages students to disclose at the earliest opportunity if they have any disabilities, learning differences or personal circumstances that may require the RVC to make reasonable adjustments to appeals processes so that the RVC has sufficient time to consider these requests and implement any agreed adjustments. Request can be submitted in writing to [studentappeals@rvc.ac.uk](mailto:studentappeals@rvc.ac.uk).

8.2 These may include providing information in different formats, providing additional breaks during meetings, or conducting meetings via videoconferencing (for example where students are working/carers and unable to travel as a result).

## **9. Students using more than one procedure**

9.1 Students may raise concerns or complaints that are usually managed by more than one procedure.

9.2 If these cannot be considered together, or the student does not agree for them to be considered together, we will inform the student in writing which issues will be managed under which procedure and provide direction to the appropriate procedures.

9.3 These may run concurrently; however, it may be necessary to suspend one procedure until another has been completed. In all cases we will provide the student with an explanation as to how the matters will be investigated and which procedures will be utilised.

## **10. Related policies and procedures**

10.1 [Dignity at Work Policy](#) – this policy describes the expectations of behaviour of staff and students of the RVC with regards to bullying and harassment. Students who feel they

have been subject to bullying and harassment should use this procedure to inform the RVC.

- 10.2 [Student Engagement](#) – Many RVC committees and [quality assurance processes](#) provide opportunities for students to provide feedback to the RVC. We encourage students to use opportunities such as student surveys, course representatives and discussions with staff to provide this feedback in a constructive manner. However, where a student feels that there has been a particular disadvantage, or the concern/complaint is more urgent they should use this procedure to inform the RVC.

## **11. Confidentiality and record keeping**

- 11.1 Cases of complaints are treated with confidentiality and are not discussed amongst the RVC or wider community.
- 11.2 The Academic Board will receive annual reports of anonymised appeal cases including data on the total number of reported case types, outcomes and identified risk and control measures. The RVC will annually evaluate and audit the complaints cases along with other forms of feedback, to improve the quality and effectiveness of the RVC's governance, compliance, and service delivery standards.
- 11.3 Students are advised to keep a copy of all correspondence in case they are dissatisfied with the complaint outcome and wish to use this information as part of their supporting evidence when making a request for a Final Formal Review or submitting a complaint to the OIA.
- 11.4 Complaints records are administered centrally by the SACC Team within the Academic Registry. Records of appeal cases are retained for 3 years following student graduation or exit from the RVC to enable the RVC to respond to any requests regarding the decision and processes that may be made by the OIA and/or Freedom of Information (FOI) requests.
- 11.5 To help support the RVC annual evaluation any student who undertakes the complaints process will be invited to complete a [Student Appeals, Complaints and Conduct Survey](#).

## **12. Retention, Deletion and Archiving**

12.1 Data related to complaints is used to:

- (a) Monitor and analyse our management of casework within the required timeframes in order to improve and develop RVC service delivery.
- (b) Respond to internal audit requirements.
- (c) Enable us to respond to any requests regarding the decision and process that may be made by the OIA.
- (d) Conduct the periodic evaluation of cases in relation to Freedom of Information Request.

12.2 Investigators and Complaints Review Panel members who obtain copies of records before and during an investigation and/or Hearing will be sent an automated reminder to delete or shred any papers and/or documented evidence related to the students' investigation and/or Hearing.

12.3 This may also include double deleting any copies saved in downloaded folders. Access Will also, be removed from the created One Drive Folder where the case documents are securely shared.

## **13. Partner institutions**

13.1 In order to provide educational and other student experiences the RVC may partner with other Higher Education Providers (HEP) or organisations. Examples of these include joint and franchised degree programmes and partnerships with veterinary practices to provide clinical training.

13.2 In all cases we encourage students to try to resolve their concerns informally and directly with the partner institution. Raising a concern locally and at the time of the issue leading to the concern increases the opportunity for early resolution to negate any adverse impact on the student's experience and learning. However, if the matter is not resolved to their satisfaction, students are able to raise the matter with the RVC as a Stage 2 formal complaint.

## **14. Stage 1 – Raising a concern for informal resolution**

14.1 Students should raise their concerns in person or in writing via email or letter (not social media) directly with the member of staff most related to the concern. Raising a



concern locally and at the time of the issue leading to the concern increases the opportunity for early resolution to negate any adverse impact on the student's experience and learning.

- 14.2 If the student feels uncomfortable about raising the grievance with the person directly, they are able to raise the issue through a third party such as their course representative, tutor or supervisor, member of the Advice Centre or a Student Union Representative. The student should make sure that the issue is clearly outlined, explain the impact that it has had on them and suggest what might resolve the problem.
- 14.3 In some circumstances, such as bullying or harassment, it may not be appropriate for the student to raise their concerns directly. In these circumstances, students are advised to contact the [Advice Centre](#) for wellbeing support and guidance on next steps.
- 14.4 The SACC Team may themselves deem it necessary to consider the issues presented and carry out a local level investigation. This may ask the student for additional information or seek independent evidence, but a full and formal investigation will not be undertaken.
- 14.5 They may also determine and implement an appropriate remedy (in consultation with relevant colleagues if necessary) at this stage if they consider the concern to be justified in whole or part.
- 14.6 The person receiving the concern may advise the student to proceed directly to a Stage 2 Formal Complaint if the concern is complex or serious in nature and therefore warrants a full investigation.
- 14.7 In all cases it will be explained to the student, either verbally or in writing (likely dependent on how and when the concern was raised) the response to their concern and any further action that needs to be taken by the student and/or the RVC.
- 14.8 If the student remains dissatisfied with the resolution, they must be directed to Stage 2 Formal Complaint and provided with a copy of this procedure.

## **15. Stage 2 – Formal complaint**

- 15.1 Formal complaints must be submitted by completing the [Student Formal Complaint Form](#) via email to [studentcomplaints@rvc.ac.uk](mailto:studentcomplaints@rvc.ac.uk) within three months of the issue leading to the complaint arising.

15.2 Students are expected to use this form to clearly and succinctly:

- Describe the circumstances leading to the complaint.
- Outline the impact that it has had on them/their learning opportunities.
- Confirm the action taken so far to informally resolve the complaint.
- Confirm the resolution they are seeking.

15.3 All students must provide supporting evidence with their complaint form; complaints received without evidence are likely to be rejected during initial review by the Student Appeals, Complaints and Conduct Team.

15.4 Students must also ensure that they provide information for all grievances at the point of submission as it will not be possible to substantially extend the scope of an investigation once started.

## **16. Initial review**

16.1 The Student Appeals, Complaints and Conduct Casework Team will acknowledge receipt of the formal complaint within five calendar days and undertake an initial review of the Student Formal Complaint Form.

16.2 If the complaint does not fall within the remit of these procedures, it will be rejected. The student will be informed in writing of this decision and the reasons that the complaint has been rejected. If necessary, the student will be referred to other procedures, such as Appeals and Representation, for resolution.

16.3 If the complaint does fall within the remit of the procedures but the student has not already sought informal resolution as outlined in Stage 1, they will be advised in writing to do so. However, in some circumstances, such as bullying or harassment, it may not be appropriate for the student to raise their concerns directly and informally. In these circumstances, students are advised to contact the [Advice Centre](#) for wellbeing support and guidance on next steps.

16.4 If the complaint does fall within the remit of these procedures and informal resolution has already been sought, the Student Appeals, Complaints and Conduct Casework Team will notify the student and confirm that an independent and appropriately trained investigator will be appointed to progress the complaint. Where the complaint relates to a member of staff, the investigator appointed will be independent of both parties and have been accepted by both parties. Failure by the student to accept an investigator without good and evidenced reason may result in the complaint being dismissed.

## **17. Complaint investigations**

- 17.1 The investigator will ensure that the student is informed about the power and scope of the investigation. It is recommended that an initial meeting is held with the student so that the information provided in the Student Formal Complaint Form can be expanded upon and the investigator is clear on the student grievance. The student may bring a supporter to this meeting as these are internal RVC processes this cannot be a legal representative. The supporter may not contribute to the meeting unless asked to do so by the investigator. A member of RVC staff to act as note-taker may also be present.
- 17.2 The investigator may ask the student to provide additional information or evidence in support of their complaint. They may also liaise with other RVC colleagues or students to help to ascertain the facts of the case. It is the responsibility of the investigator to ensure that they have received all information and statements required to conclude the complaint.

## **18. Mediation**

- 18.1 Where the complaint concerns interaction with other students or staff the investigator may recommend referral to a mediator at any stage of the investigation. The mediator may be internal or external to the RVC.
- 18.2 All costs associated with the appointment of an external mediator will be met by the RVC. If all parties accept mediation, the investigation will be suspended whilst mediation is undertaken.
- 18.3 The mediator will report the mediation outcome to the investigator. If mediation has resolved the complaint the resolution as agreed by both parties will be communicated to the investigator and the complaint formally closed. If mediation has not resolved the complaint the investigation will be re-instated.

## **19. Investigation outcomes**

- 19.1 The investigator will reach an informed view on the merits of the complaint following consideration on the balance of probabilities and will draft an investigation report which confirms one of the following:
- 19.1.1 The complaint is upheld; suitable remedies proposed.
  - 19.1.2 The complaint is not upheld.
  - 19.1.3 The complaint is upheld in part; suitable remedies proposed.
  - 19.1.4 The case is complex, and the final decision requires review by a Complaints Review Panel

19.2 The Student Appeals, Complaints and Conduct Team will review the draft report to ensure that all concerns have been addressed and that proposed remedies are in line with RVC precedent and OIA guidance/case studies. They may involve the Registrar and/or their nominee in these deliberations. The investigator may be requested to provide further information or conduct an additional investigation if all issues have not been clearly addressed within the report.

19.3 If the report is agreed with outcomes 20.1.1-3., the Student Appeals, Complaints and Conduct Casework Officer will write to the student confirming the outcome, any remedies and providing a copy of the Investigation Report. Details of Stage 3, Final Formal Review will also be provided to the student if they do not accept the complaint outcome.

19.4 If the report is agreed with outcome 20.1.4. above, the Student Appeals, Complaints and Conduct Casework Officer will write to the student confirming the interim outcome and provide a copy of the investigation report.

## **20. Complaint Review Panel**

20.1 The Complaint Review Panel will be formed by 4 members appointed by the SACC Team.

20.2 The Panel compositions of 4 is inclusive of a Chair and a nominee of the President of the Students' Union selected for their independence from the complainant, their understanding of the principles at stake and the broad context of the study of the student whose case is being considered. The student can request that the Student Union member be omitted from the panel; where this occurs, the quorum should remain at 3 members.

20.3 No panel members can have previously be involved in the case or have significant connections to the student, such as tutor responsibilities. A secretary to the panel will also be appointed.

20.4 The panel will receive the report of the investigation and the original student's Student Formal Complaint Form. The panel will determine on the balance of probabilities whether to Student Complaints and Resolution Procedure uphold the complaint or not and agree any remedies that may be appropriate (and in line with RVC precedent and OIA guidance/case studies.) The Chair of the panel will write a short report outlining the key points of discussions, final conclusions, and reasons for those conclusions.

The Student Appeals, Complaints and Conduct Casework Officer will write to the student with the complaint outcome and include a copy of the panel report.

20.5 Details of Stage 3, Final Formal Review will also be provided to the student if they do not accept the complaint outcome.

## **21. Final Formal Review**

21.1 In accordance with the [Final Formal Review Procedures](#) a request submitted using a Final Formal Review Request Form and submitted to [ffr@rvc.ac.uk](mailto:ffr@rvc.ac.uk) within 14 calendar days from the date of the previous outcome. The grounds for the review must be clearly stated as part of the request and appropriate documentation supplied.

21.2 Cases will not be considered after this time limit unless the appellant is able to demonstrate exceptional circumstances for the delay.

21.2 The Registrar, Deputy Registrar, or an appropriate nominee (known as the initial assessor) will make an initial assessment as to whether the case meets one of the following allowable grounds:

21.2.1 That there is new evidence that could not have been, or for good reason was not, made available at the time of the hearing;

21.2.2 That evidence can be produced of significant procedural error made before or during the hearing.

21.2.3 Any remedy or outcome proposed by the previous decision is manifestly unreasonable.

## **22. Completion of procedures information**

22.1 If the RVC determines that an appeal is not justified or that a case is not permitted to proceed under the Final Formal Review Process, the RVC will provide a Completion of Procedures Letter to the student within 28 calendar days. This letter will include an explanation of the decision reached.

22.2 A Completion of Procedures letter is required should the student wish to advance a complaint with the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) for Higher Education. The RVC will usually only issue a Completion of Procedures letter once the disciplinary procedure has concluded and a final decision has been provided to the student.

## **23. The Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education**

23.1 Students who are dissatisfied with the outcome of a Final Formal Review can apply to the OIA for an independent review. Requests for OIA review must be made no later than 12 months after the Final Formal Review decision.

23.2 The OIA has published an *Introduction to the OIA for Students* which can be downloaded from <https://www.oiahe.org.uk/media/2264/intrototheoia-students-jan-2019.pdf>

23.3 Further guidance on submitting a complaint to the OIA and the OIA Complaint Form can also be found on the OIA's website: <https://www.oiahe.org.uk/students/can-you-complain-to-us/>