

Guidance on addressing informal complaints arising as a result of industrial action and/or the coronavirus (COVID-19)

[Regulation XVIII Student Complaints Procedure](#) states that “Many complaints can be resolved informally and, where practicable, a complaint should be dealt with as close as possible to the point at which it arises. The complaint should therefore be made initially to the appropriate individual(s) who seems best placed to respond...The process followed at the informal stage will be determined by reference to the nature of the issues raised and any outcomes sought by the student. Students are encouraged to commence such discussions at their earliest opportunity to enable the issues to be considered in advance of the 40 working day deadline for invoking the Formal Procedure.”

This short guidance note is therefore aimed at staff receiving informal complaints from students about the impact of the industrial action and/or the coronavirus pandemic on their studies. It is in large part based on advice to Universities from the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education.

1. **Be empathetic.** This is a concerning time for all of us, and students should be able to air their concerns and feel that they have been listened to. Students may need to be reassured that they will not be disadvantaged as a result of factors such as self-isolation, illness, or disruption to their course and that the University is taking steps to mitigate the impact. Consider how support can be provided to students at this time. Advice and resources for staff to help with supporting students are available at www.staffnet.manchester.ac.uk/supporting-students/ and student-facing resources are available at www.studentsupport.manchester.ac.uk/

2. **Try to take ownership of the complaint where possible.** On this topic, the OIA advise that: “If responsibility for the issue raised lies in the staff member’s area of work, every attempt should be made to resolve the concern at source in consultation with the student. If responsibility lies elsewhere, the staff member should work with the relevant colleagues to help resolve the student’s concern, rather than simply passing the student on to another office. Where this is not possible, and the student is directed to liaise with another office, it is good practice to introduce the student to the person who will deal with the concern.”

3. **Keep communication channels open.** Communicating proactively with students about what has been and will be done can help set minds at rest and reduce anxiety. Be as open as possible about how the programme/School/Faculty/University is dealing with the students’ concerns and explain why this approach is being taken and what they can expect. Let students know if you think their expectations cannot be met, and explain why. Information about changes to exams, assessments, placements, and study opportunities should be updated regularly and publicised as much as possible.

4. **Keep good records.** It’s important to keep records of teaching that has been missed and of what has been done in mitigation, and to explain to students what alternative provision has been/will be put in place in terms of teaching, learning and assessment. If these details are not available at the time that a student approaches you with an informal complaint, try to explain when the information is likely to be available and how they will be informed of it. It’s a good idea to keep brief notes of any meetings with students, e-mail trails and other records, as these records may be needed should the student progress a complaint to the formal stage.

5. **Recognise that some students may need more support than others.** For example, some students with a disability, such as those with a specific learning difference, mental health difficulties, autism, and/or some physical health conditions, may be more seriously affected by disruption to their studies. Such students may need additional support and communication that is tailored to their individual circumstances.

6. Please try not to direct students to the formal stage without first attempting to address and resolve their concerns. Every effort should be made to try and do so at a local level through discussion, reassurance and communication. However, if a student does wish to pursue a formal complaint, they will need to do so following the steps and within the timeframe set out in the Regulation.

Finally, Frequently Asked Questions for students on both the [Industrial Action](#) and [COVID-19](#) have been published on My Manchester News, and both you and students may find these a useful source of information.

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