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Academic Queries, Complaints and Grievance Procedure Guideline



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Academic Queries, Complaints, and Grievance Procedure Guideline

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¹ Rules Owner: Head(s) of Responsibility Centre(s) in which the rules function.

² Rules Curator: Administrative head of the division responsible for the implementation and maintenance of the rules

Table of Contents

1.	Introduction	3
2.	The Grievance Procedure Context In Faculties.....	3
3.	Application of the Guideline	4
4.	Purpose of the Guideline	4
5.	Aims of the Guideline	4
6.	Guideline Principles	4
7.	Guideline Provisions.....	5
8.	Record Keeping	8
9.	Feedback.....	8
10.	Definitions.....	8

1. Introduction

Faculties at the Stellenbosch University are responsible for appropriately dealing with issues that may arise between registered SU students and lecturers during the academic year. To promote their autonomy and to respect the unique contexts within which these faculties operate, it is imperative that queries, complaints, and grievances are channelled appropriately on a faculty level. More importantly, preventing the escalation of matters to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Learning and Teaching ensures that the principle of separation of powers is not negated unnecessarily.

2. The Grievance Procedure Context In Faculties

Each faculty deals with a variety of complaints including but not limited to; assessments, assessment schedules, lecture content, and the conduct of lecturers in the learning and teaching environment. Historically, faculties have been able to exercise discretion where it comes to dealing with these grievances in a manner where both parties are mostly satisfied that the matter has been adequately resolved.

This discretion, however, has resulted in discrepancies in how grievances are dealt with across faculties. In some faculties, there is an established procedure that is clearly documented and facilitates a process that allows for issues to be ventilated and is inclusive of class representatives and faculty student committees to ensure that the grievance is resolved as close to the source as possible. However, other faculties do not employ procedures that are clearly documented and allow for class representative and faculty student committee participation. This does not only undermine the role that student representatives play in ensuring that grievances are handled satisfactorily, but it makes it more difficult for the procedures to be standardised and monitored. The relationship and interaction between students and faculty staff is a crucial factor in ensuring overall student success. Where students are in an environment where they can comfortably raise issues or challenges and are guaranteed a process that will facilitate the resolution of their issues, the learning environment becomes more

conducive, where students feel as though they are heard and that their reasonable academic needs are catered for.

3. Application of the Guideline

This Queries, Complaints, and Grievance Procedure Guideline (this guideline) applies to all faculties (excluding the Faculty of Law and Engineering) at Stellenbosch University, and this includes but is not limited to academic, support and technical staff, registered students, and student representatives, class representatives, module representatives, and faculty student committees.

4. Purpose of the Guideline

The purpose of this guideline is to promote the standardisation of grievance procedures across the faculties of Stellenbosch University. This guideline seeks to establish basic standards and principles that guides faculties in their contemplation of grievance procedures.

5. Aims of the Guideline

To contribute to the achievement of student success through strengthening the relationship and interaction between students and academic staff. This is achieved through the imposition of general guidelines that ensure that queries, complaints, and grievance procedures across all faculties are standardised, fair, impartial, and justiciable. Importantly, this guideline aims to ensure that academic grievances are dealt with in a standardised manner that is fair, transparent, and responsible. It is essential that there is a clearly defined and accessible process of action outlined for class representatives, staff, and faculty student leadership.

6. Guideline Principles

6.1. **Accountability:** to ensure that Faculties and staff accept the highest level of responsibility for any disruptions to a conducive teaching and learning environment for students.

- 6.2. **Respect:** where staff and student representatives not only have due regard for the feelings and frustrations of registered students but are also able to ensure their anonymity where this is specifically requested.
- 6.3. **Equality:** all procedures deployed must not unfairly discriminate against complainants and give equal opportunity to all involved to ventilate their issues and state their case.
- 6.4. **Accessibility:** all grievance procedures used by faculties must be readily and easily available to staff, faculty student leadership, and registered students.
- 6.5. **Transparency:** staff, students, and faculty student leadership must be informed of the outcome of the grievance, without compromising anonymity (if applicable), and it must be clear that it was dealt with in accordance with the process outlined in that faculty's grievance procedure.
- 6.6. **Consultation:** as the procedure will impact staff and students within the specific faculty it is recommended that the consultation on the procedure is as wide as reasonability possible within the faculty.

7. Guideline Provisions

7.1. Drafting of Procedures

- 7.1.1. Each faculty should have a procedure established for the resolution of queries, complaints, and grievances lodged by students. This procedure may be operational on a faculty level, departmental level or module level depending on the context of the individual faculty.
- 7.1.2. Where a succinct procedure does not exist, one should be drafted, and the following may be applicable.
- a. Where it is to be drafted by faculty staff, the relevant faculty student committee must be granted an opportunity to review the draft and make representations before it is presented for final approval by the relevant faculty board.
 - b. Where it is to be drafted by a faculty student committee, the relevant faculty staff members must be granted an opportunity to review the draft and make representations

before it is presented for final approval by the relevant faculty board.

7.1.3. Where a grievance procedure has already been drafted and is subject to review, the following may be applicable.

- a. Where the procedure was drafted by faculty staff, adequate representation of the relevant faculty student committee must be allowed to serve on the review committee. If no such committee is mandated, at least the faculty student committee must be granted an opportunity to review the amendments and make representations before it is presented for final approval to the faculty board.
- b. Where the procedure was drafted by a faculty student committee, the relevant faculty staff members must be consulted during the amendment process and granted an opportunity to make representations before it is presented for final approval by the faculty board.

7.2. Procedure Provisions

7.2.1. Each faculty procedure should feature a clear and easily identifiable process whereby complainants are required to lodge their complaints with their class representative or faculty committee student leadership where applicable.

7.2.2. Where a faculty may categorise grievances according to their academic or administrative nature, the procedure should clearly identify the persons with whom or e-mail address to which the complaint must be initially lodged or directed and to whom it must be escalated.

7.2.3. The complainant(s) should be allowed to lodge a complaint, query or grievance anonymously should they request anonymity and where it shall not impede on the resolution of the complaint, query, or grievance.

7.2.4. For both academic and administrative complaints or queries, it is preferable that complainants (individually or collectively) approach their class representative as their first point of call and such class

representative must attempt to resolve such complaint or query by meeting with the lecturer.

- a. Should the query or complaint remain unresolved after escalation by the class representative, the complaint or query becomes a grievance that must be escalated to the faculty student committee.
- b. Where the faculty student committee is unable to ensure the resolution of the grievance, it must be channelled appropriately to the necessary division or department leadership.

7.2.5. The Dean and relevant Vice-Dean may only be approached to assist in the resolution of a grievance within the faculty where all other mechanisms are deemed to have left the matter unresolved.

- a. The Vice-Dean may only be approached once the grievance has been channelled appropriately to the necessary division or department leadership without resolution.
- b. The Dean may only be approached, in extraordinary circumstances, where the matter requires further escalation from the Vice-Dean or where there are unreasonable delays in the finalisation of the matter.

7.2.6. The Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC): Academic may only be approached once all mechanisms to resolve the grievance, including the Dean and Vice-Dean, have not yielded resolution or where a reasonable time has lapsed and no outcome was reached, and further intervention is needed.

7.2.7. Should the complainant(s) be unsatisfied by the outcome of the grievance after it has been rightly escalated to the DVC: Academic the complainant(s) may approach the Office of the Ombud for consideration.

7.2.8. In all instances where the grievance has been resolved without escalation to the Office of the Ombud, the procedure must make provision for a feedback mechanism that requires the complainant(s) to be informed of the outcome of their grievance.

8. Record Keeping

- 8.1. Faculties should devise a mechanism for which complaints and queries that are escalated to grievances must be recorded—there is no specific manner in which these should be recorded but such record keeping should be done in line with the faculties' capacity and capabilities.
- 8.2. It is not necessary for all general complaints and queries to be recorded but a faculty may choose to record some or all of them should they wish to do so.

9. Feedback

- 9.1. At the end of each semester, where complaints and/or queries were lodged in relation to a particular module, the class representative should meet with the respective lecturer to discuss these complaints and/or queries with the purpose of considering whether any changes must be made, or further action must be taken.
- 9.2. At the end of each semester, class representatives must provide feedback to the faculty student committee on the efficacy of their complaints, query and grievance procedures and may make recommendations on the process where appropriate.
- 9.3. All faculty student committees must provide feedback to the Academic Affairs Council on the efficacy of this guideline.
- 9.4. Where any proposed changes or revisions of this guideline are presented to the Academic Affairs Council, they must be tabled with the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Academic for consideration and approval.

10. Definitions

The follow specific terms are used in this policy and concise definitions of the terms are as follows:

Complaint – an expression of dissatisfaction however made, about actions taken or a lack of action.

Grievance – a complaint, that has not been resolved by the intervention of a class representative, about actions taken or a lack of action.

Query – a question, often expressing doubt about something or looking for an answer from an authority.