**Tips for complaint handling**

Complaint handling in a large and diverse organisation can be complex and challenging. All staff have a responsibility to handle complaints in a **constructive** and **respectful** manner and to exercise **good professional judgement**. Managing emotions and the communication process is critical to good complaint handling. The way we initially respond to complainants can have a big impact on complaint resolution.

Below are some practical tips that might assist if a complaint is reported to you. You will find that often complaint discussions will not follow a particular order, but the information below might assist you to keep things on track.

### Checklist – summary

- **Listen** to the person as they explain their concerns
- **Summarise** what you have heard and your understanding of the complainant’s key concerns
- What **outcome** is the person looking for?
- Assess **safety** – yours and theirs
- **Urgency**: consider if immediate action or escalation is required
- Discuss **confidentiality**
- What is **your role**? Do you need to **refer** or **escalate**? Decide if you have a **conflict of interest**
- Focus on **informal complaint resolution** options
- Is there **anything else** to consider?
- Wrap-up: identify **next steps** and conclude
- Make a **file note** (if appropriate)
- **Debrief** (if needed)
### Checklist – detailed description
(Remember – this checklist may be helpful but there is no ‘right’ order for these steps)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tips when receiving a complaint</th>
<th>Your behaviour</th>
<th>How to help – what to do</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Listen to the person as they explain their concerns</strong></td>
<td>Listen actively: Stop what you are doing Make eye contact Show empathy Ask open questions Summarise and paraphrase</td>
<td>Try to obtain the details of the complaint. Focus on the alleged ‘facts’ rather than the complainant’s ‘characterisation’ or labelling of conduct. See if you can find out “who”, “what”, “when”, “where” and “how” and try to get some specific details. (Specific detail can be useful in understanding the severity/seriousness of the issue and assist you in working out whether immediate action is required, what process/procedure applies and what the next step might be.) Stay neutral/impartial – don’t take sides or form conclusions - remember you are only getting one side.</td>
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| **Summarise what you have heard and your understanding of the complainant’s key concerns** | Use the complainant’s own words where appropriate Check with the complainant if they agree with your summary | Summarising the key points can be helpful in demonstrating to the complainant that you have been listening carefully to what they were saying. It can also be helpful in focusing the discussion on the issues, rather than the personal things. |

| **What outcome is the person looking for?** | Don’t make promises about what the University can do but check-in with the complainant about what they think would resolve the situation for them | It can often be important to understand what the complainant sees as being a solution to the issue. Again, this can help to move the discussion forward in a constructive and positive way. If you are aware of relevant policy, refer the complainant to that policy. Where appropriate, set realistic expectations. |

| **Assess safety – yours and theirs** | Are you feeling threatened? Is the health and safety of yourself, the complainant or another person at risk? Is the conduct being reported unlawful or similarly serious? | Consider if you need to obtain advice or assistance in responding to the situation? Consider whether you need to report the allegations? If there is foreseeable risk – think what the appropriate course of action is that you should take. Some examples include: |

  - Concerning behaviour requiring immediate action (e.g. physical or verbal abuse) - contact security urgently ext. 9999
  - Someone is mentally unwell (e.g. threatening suicide) - contact security ext. 9999 and Campus Wellbeing ext. 7497 urgently. Where serious misconduct needs to be reported or escalated, look into what procedure applies and/or contact the most appropriate advice point within the University. Consider: |

    - Your Manager/Supervisor
    - Security
    - Campus Wellbeing
    - Human Resources
    - Legal Office
    - Research Office

| **Urgency: consider if immediate action or escalation is required** | |

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## Complaint handling: Tips and information for staff

| **Discuss confidentiality** | Be sincere  
Show respect for confidentiality  
Be clear about the limitations on confidentiality and the circumstances in which you might need to discuss the complaint with someone else, get someone else involved or otherwise report the matter | Assess your obligation with regards to confidentiality.  
Explain that you will keep the matter confidential unless the complainant consents to you communicating with another person about the matter or it is necessary for you to discuss the matter with another person.  
Situations where it might be necessary for you to discuss the matter with another person include where:  
- you need to seek advice as to how to handle the complaint  
- you are required to refer the complaint to another person in accordance with applicable policy/procedure  
- the matter is very serious (e.g. fraud, assault, threats of violence) requiring that you report or escalate the complaint, or  
- there is a serious risk to the health and safety of the complainant or any other person. |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **What is your role?** | Think what the complaint is about? And what is your role? | It is important to take responsibility and be pro-active in responding to complaints, however, there will be times when you need to refer the complainant to another person.  
- Does a specific University Procedure apply that will guide how the complaint should proceed?  
- Do you need to escalate the complaint?  
- Is there another person who is better qualified or responsible for handling the complaint?  
- Do you have a conflict of interest which means that it is not appropriate for you to be involved? If so, it would be best to refer the complaint to someone else. |
| **Do you need to refer or escalate?** | --- | --- |
| **Decide if you have a conflict of interest** | --- | --- |
| **Focus on informal complaint resolution options** | Encouraging a complainant to resolve an issue directly with the other person can:  
- Provide a fast outcome  
- help people to develop their dispute resolution skills;  
- improve everyone’s understanding | Complaints are best resolved as close to the source as possible and in a timely manner – this means that self-help and informal resolution mechanisms should be utilised where appropriate. Informal complaint resolution options might include:  
- the complainant raising the issue directly with the other person  
- seeking assistance from Student Advocacy (if a student complainant) or a facilitator (if the complainant is a member of the public) or HR (if the complainant is a staff complainant).  
The University’s complaint procedures include a variety of informal resolution options that may be appropriate in different situations. |
| **Is there anything else to consider?** | Think about what you have heard. Is there anything else you feel you need to know or do? | Like many tasks and responsibilities, receiving and handling complaints involves the exercise of good professional judgement. You should think about what you have heard, whether you need any more information and consider what might need to happen next in properly responding to and dealing with the issue. |
## Wrapping up: Identify next steps and conclude

Always offer an outcome even if it is what the next steps or actions are that you (or they) need to take. When people don’t know what will happen next they can feel stressed or angry.

### Clarify the next steps, which might include:
- no further action
- complainant to reflect and consider how they wish to proceed
- complainant to review applicable policy or procedure
- complainant to progress their complaint through one of the University’s procedures
- matter to be escalated or reported to appropriate person
- providing contacts for support/counselling services:
  - Staff – Employee Assistance Programme EAP tel. 1800818728
  - Students – Campus Wellbeing 7497
- agreeing with the complainant how you will communicate further with each other, should this be required.

### Make a file note (if appropriate)

Keep a confidential electronic file note where possible in case you need to refer back to the discussion. Keep notes factual as your notes may be accessed if the matter escalates in the future.

#### Debrief (if needed)

- Debrief – especially if it was a difficult case. Look after yourself!
- Ensure that you respect confidentiality, so far as possible.

### Seek support and advice for yourself – even if it is just to offload- especially if it was a difficult complaint. However, ensure that you respect confidentiality, as much as possible.

If you need to report the matter or seek advice, think who is best placed to help you (Legal, HR, Research Office etc.). You can also speak with your supervisor if you need guidance or support.
Macquarie University – complaint and conduct framework

Ensure that you are familiar with the University’s multiple procedures for dealing with complaints and conduct. This framework has been developed to ensure compliance with the University’s legal and regulatory obligations and to ensure that complaints and conduct issues are managed in an effective and responsible way.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University policy/procedure, including</th>
<th>Brief summary of what this policy or procedure covers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Complaint Management Procedure for Students and Members of the Public</td>
<td>Complaints by students and members of the public</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student Discipline Framework</td>
<td>Concerns about student conduct or behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporting wrongdoing: Public Interest Disclosures Policy</td>
<td>Reports of fraud, corruption and other serious wrongdoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Responsible Conduct of Research Code</td>
<td>Issues of research integrity and research misconduct</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enterprise Agreements</td>
<td>Provisions for dealing with:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- disputes about the application or interpretation of the enterprise agreement</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- managing staff misconduct</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- managing unsatisfactory performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and Safety policies and procedures</td>
<td>Health and safety matters, including report of an injury, illness or hazard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grievance Management (Staff) Policy</td>
<td>Complaints by staff about their work or role with the University</td>
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</tbody>
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**Note:** For ease of reference, many of the available frameworks have been centralised on the MQ complaints management portal on the University’s website.

**Improve your knowledge and skills**

There are many ways to increase your skills, knowledge and confidence in dealing with complaints. The University offers a number of courses. You could speak with your supervisor about ways in which you could build on your knowledge and skills.

The University offers a range of courses which can assist with complaint management. These include communication skills, managing conflict and building resilience. For information on current courses available please refer to the following link:

staff.mq.edu.au/human_resources/development_opportunities/

You may also find the following online resources helpful:
