

## Appendix A: Postgraduate Research Student Complaints guide

This guide should be read alongside the University's full [Student Complaints Procedure](#). It explains how Postgraduate Research students can raise complaints, the support available, and the steps involved.

### Introduction

As a Postgraduate Research student, you might face problems with supervision, research conditions, or University support. Some students feel unsure about raising concerns due to fear of retaliation, unclear procedures, or cultural barriers. This guide explains how to raise a complaint, the support available, and how the process works.

### Who Can Help

Your first point of contact is usually your supervisory team. You should try to resolve issues informally where possible. Other sources of support include:

- **Graduate and Researcher College staff** – provide guidance on postgraduate research-related issues but do not handle formal complaints.
- **School Director of Graduate Research Studies** can support informal resolution and provide context to university staff.
- **Appeals, Conduct and Complaints Office staff** – manage formal complaints, investigations, and outcomes.
- **Kent Students' Union Advice Service** – offers independent guidance, advocacy, and confidential support.

### Complaints vs Academic Appeals

**Complaints:** A complaint is about non-academic issues that affect your experience as a research student. Complaints focus on the support and environment provided by the University and staff. They do not relate to academic judgement, such as thesis grades or viva outcomes. A student will normally be expected to have attempted to solve their issues informally in the School. It is only where there is no informal resolution that a formal complaint normally can be submitted (exceptions do apply).

You might make a complaint if you experience:

- Poor or inconsistent supervision, lack of feedback, or supervisors not fulfilling responsibilities.
- Unfair treatment or delays in administrative processes, funding, or ethics approvals
- Problems with research facilities or resources, or unsafe working conditions

- Harassment, bullying, or discrimination from a member of staff can be reported through the University's reporting tool [Report + Support](#). Students can report anonymously if they wish to do so. All students who report such behaviours receive specialist support and information via our specialist wellbeing team.
- Difficulties accessing counselling, wellbeing support, or guidance on work-life balance.

**Academic Appeals:** An academic appeal concerns formal academic decisions and focuses on whether the University followed its procedures correctly, not on disagreeing with academic judgment. Situations that may lead to an academic appeal include:

- Disagreement with assessment outcomes, such as thesis marks or feedback indicating procedural errors.
- Challenge to progression decisions, such as denial of transfer from MPhil to PhD or termination of registration
- Procedural errors, such as missing examiners, incorrect notifications, or administrative mistakes
- Extenuating circumstances that were not properly considered

Knowing the difference helps you choose the correct route. If you are unsure, seek guidance from the Kent Students' Union Advice Service or your supervisor.

### **Supervision and Progress Reviews**

Your supervisor's responsibilities and your role as a student are explained in the [Code of Practice for research Courses, Annex: H Supervision](#). Regular progress reviews allow you to raise concerns safely.

You may request to change or add supervisors outside of the complaints process without penalty but seek advice from the School Director of Graduate Studies first to avoid disrupting your research. A change in a supervisory team is not always guaranteed. Sometimes it is not suitable for a student to change and/or it cannot be facilitated with the expertise we have within the academic staff base.

More details can be found in the [Research Programmes Administration Guide – Your Studies](#).

### **How to Make a Complaint**

All complaints are treated confidentially and if a formal complaint is raised it is handled by an independent officer. Students raising a complaint will not face adverse academic, professional, or personal consequences. Support services are available throughout the process, including wellbeing services, counselling, and Report + Support for harassment, bullying, or discrimination. Accessibility support and reasonable adjustments are also available if needed.

## **Early Resolution**

You are encouraged to resolve issues via Early Resolution in the first instance, if appropriate to do so. Early resolution can help us understand and clarify misunderstandings between parties and lead to a quicker resolution.

This may involve discussing the matter directly with your supervisor or other relevant staff involved in the situation about which you have reason to complain. If you are unsure who to approach, you can raise your concerns with the relevant School Director of Graduate Studies or seek advice from the Kent Students' Union Advice service or Graduate Researchers College who can help you identify the most appropriate person to speak to. You can contact the Appeals, Conduct and Complaints Office, who can provide information on the formal complaints processes, co-ordinate Early Resolution discussions or facilitate mediation between you and the relevant party/parties.

## **Formal Complaint**

If Early Resolution does not resolve the issue, you can submit a formal complaint using the University's Student Complaints procedure form. Try to clearly describe the issue, provide evidence, and state your desired outcome. Complaints are acknowledged within 5 working days and normally resolved within 90 working days. Complex cases may take longer, with updates provided.

## **Complaints regarding serious staff misconduct**

Complaints from students regarding serious staff misconduct or sexual misconduct by university staff towards students or imbalances of power within staff/student relationships should be reported through the [Report + Support](#) tool in the first instance. This is to allow students to receive support and information on reporting mechanisms available to them. Students who wish to report incidents anonymously or wish to report historical incidents regarding staff are encouraged to also do so via [Report + Support](#).

## **Review**

If you are not satisfied with the outcome of your formal complaint, you may request a Review, details of how to submit a Review can be found in the Student Complaints Procedure. The Review checks whether the complaint was handled correctly and the findings were reasonable. It does not re-investigate the substantive issues of the complaint. Once this stage is complete you will be issued a Completion of Procedures letter.

## **External Review by the OIA**

If you remain dissatisfied you can escalate the complaint to the [Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education \(OIA\)](#), once your Completion of Procedures letter is received.

## **Support Services**

Support is available throughout the process:

- Supervisors
- [Kent Students' Union Advice Service](#)
- [Wellbeing services, counselling, and mental health support](#)
- Mediation support (contact [acco@kent.ac.uk](mailto:acco@kent.ac.uk))
- [Report + Support for harassment, bullying, or discrimination](#)
- Accessibility support and reasonable adjustments

### **Timelines, and Flexibility**

Clear timelines are set for each stage. Time sensitive issues, such as visa requirements or funding deadlines, are prioritised. Complex cases may take longer, but we aim to complete the formal stage of the complaint within 90 calendar days. Updates will be provided to you throughout the formal complaints process.