



Dublin International Study Centre

Student Complaints and Appeals Policy

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Student Complaints and Appeals Policy

Section One: Scope and Purpose

1. This policy outlines the procedures available to learners of DISC) who wish to raise a complaint about a service, experience, or decisions affecting their studies. It also details the process for academic appeals, where a learner seeks to challenge an academic decision that they believe was made unfairly or incorrectly. This policy ensures fair, transparent, and timely resolution of all matters, in alignment with the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, and QQI Core Statutory QA Guidelines.
2. DISC recognises that learners will sometimes become dissatisfied with a service we have provided or failed to provide. For example, there may be disagreement regarding the outcome of a refund request or how the regulations have been applied. There may also be occasions where students have grounds to appeal a decision made by an assessment board.
3. This document has been written for both learners and DISC staff to outline the policy regarding any learner complaint or academic appeal. It also provides more information on how complaints or appeals should be considered by detailing each stage of the process. Regardless of when you use this document (whether it is from early consideration through to formal resolution and review), it has been designed to provide you with information about how an appeal or complaint can be made and what each person involved in the process can expect.
4. The emphasis of the process is on addressing the complaint and arriving at an acceptable outcome as quickly as possible. Complaints will be taken seriously and will be investigated thoroughly. Where necessary, swift and effective action will be taken to resolve a complaint, and every effort will be made to prevent a recurrence. Where, however, a complaint is made with spiteful or malicious intent, this will be viewed seriously and may result in disciplinary action. DISC will fulfil its obligations to the individual(s) against whom a complaint is made, and investigations will be undertaken impartially.
5. Learners who raise complaints should note that:
 - They will not suffer any disadvantage as a result of making a complaint.
 - Everyone who responds to, investigates, or makes decisions about complaints is required to do so impartially and is not permitted to be involved with investigating or resolving complaints where they have a potential conflict of interest.
 - Privacy and confidentiality will be respected as far as possible at all stages of the process; and
 - Complaints will be considered on their own merits, on their particular facts and circumstances so that natural justice may be done.
6. Learners are expected to put their name to any complaint they make. If a learner does not wish for their name to be disclosed, they may request that the investigator(s) anonymise their complaint. The investigator(s) will only agree to anonymise a complaint if there are sufficient and valid reasons for doing so. This is because

complaints made anonymously are difficult, and sometimes inappropriate or impossible, to investigate.

7. DISC's Head of Quality will keep a record of complaints and will use the outcomes to inform future service provision.

Section Two: Informal and Formal Complaints

8. A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction by one or more learners about DISC's (the provider) action or lack of action, or about the standard of service provided by or on behalf of the provider.
9. Learners should refer to the appeals section below for details of what constitutes grounds for appeal.
10. Learners should refer to the 'Student Disciplinary Policy' if they wish to appeal the outcome of a disciplinary case.

Stage 1: Informal Complaints

11. At DISC, learners are encouraged to raise complaints or concerns informally in the first instance. Informal resolution is often the most effective and timely way to address issues before they escalate into formal complaints. This approach supports open communication, mutual respect, and early problem-solving in line with QQI's emphasis on supportive learning environments.
12. The standard expectation is that a learner first attempts to resolve the issue directly with the person or department providing the service—whether academic (e.g. teaching or assessment) or non-academic (e.g. facilities, administration, or welfare). Issues should be raised as early as possible to enable a prompt and constructive resolution.
13. In cases where the learner feels uncomfortable approaching the individual directly, or where the issue involves a broader systemic concern, they may discuss the matter informally with the Centre Director, Programme Manager, or Welfare Officer. Alternatively, learners may seek support from their teacher(s) or another trusted member of DISC staff to help explore their options confidentially before deciding whether to make a formal complaint.
14. The focus of informal resolution is not on assigning blame but on finding a satisfactory and respectful solution as quickly and amicably as possible. Learners can expect their concerns to be taken seriously, handled with discretion, and supported by DISC staff throughout the process.
15. When attempting early resolution, the following questions may guide both learners and staff:
 - What exactly is the concern, and which service or area is involved?
 - What outcome does the learner seek, and is it reasonable and achievable?

- Is the concern straightforward and capable of quick resolution without formal investigation?
- Can it be resolved immediately through explanation, information, an alternative approach, or an apology?
- Can another person support the informal resolution (e.g. administrative, academic, or support staff)?
- Would voluntary and confidential mediation or conciliation be appropriate?
- What additional supports (e.g. language assistance, emotional support) may help the learner progress?

Stage 2: Formal Complaints

16. Where a complaint cannot be resolved informally, or if a learner feels unable or unwilling to address the issue directly with the individual(s) involved, a formal complaint may be submitted. This process is designed to ensure a structured, fair, and timely resolution of more serious or unresolved issues.

Submission Process

17. Learners should submit formal complaints in writing using the official Stage 2 Student Complaint Form, available from the DISC Student Services Office or via the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). The complaint should include:
 - A clear statement of the issue or concern.
 - Steps taken to resolve the matter informally (if applicable).
 - The outcome the learner is seeking.
 - Any supporting evidence (e.g. emails, witness statements, relevant documents).
18. The completed form should be submitted to the Centre Director or their designated representative.
19. DISC will only accept complaints made directly by the learner, unless the learner has submitted written authorisation permitting a third party to act on their behalf.
20. Where a complaint involves multiple learners with the same concern, a group complaint may be submitted. In this case, the group must nominate a representative to coordinate communication on behalf of all involved parties.

Acknowledgement and Timescale

21. All formal complaints will be acknowledged in writing within five working days of receipt. Learners will be informed of the expected timeline for resolution, typically within 20 working days, and will be kept informed of any delays. Investigations will be conducted as promptly and fairly as possible.

Investigation and Meetings

22. The Centre Director (or a suitable delegated senior staff member) will oversee the investigation and ensure relevant staff are informed and consulted. Where necessary, meetings may be arranged with:
 - The learner and/or their authorised representative.
 - The person(s) who are the subject of the complaint.
 - Relevant witnesses or contributors.
23. Participants may be accompanied at meetings:
 - Learners may be supported by a peer, tutor, or student representative.
 - Staff may be accompanied by a colleague or union representative.
24. To protect confidentiality and encourage candid contributions, personal details from witness statements will not be disclosed to the subject of the complaint unless required for fair process and with appropriate safeguards.
25. A written record of all meetings and actions taken will be retained securely in accordance with DISC's Data Protection Policy and GDPR.

Considerations for Centre Director

26. When reviewing a Stage 2 formal complaint, the Centre Director may consider the following:
 - Is the matter a complaint or an academic appeal (and therefore better addressed via a different procedure)?
 - Was informal resolution attempted, and should it be revisited?
 - Has the learner clearly outlined the complaint and submitted any available evidence?
 - What resolution is being sought, and is it reasonable and achievable?
 - Could mediation or conciliation be appropriate?
 - What support may be needed to help the learner through the process?

Urgent or Serious Complaints

27. Some complaints may warrant immediate action, such as:
 - Threats of serious harm or safety concerns.
 - Situations involving significant mental health distress.
 - Complaints related to disability supports or accommodations.
 - Repeated service failures or significant institutional delays.
 - Highly sensitive issues (e.g. discrimination, harassment).

- In such cases, the Centre Director may consult with the Executive Dean or Quality Assurance and Enhancement Office to ensure appropriate and timely handling.

Outcome and Next Steps

28. Upon conclusion of the investigation, the learner will be issued a written outcome letter detailing:
- The actions taken to investigate the complaint.
 - The final decision, including reasons if the complaint is not upheld
 - Information about the learner's right to escalate the matter

Stage 3: Independent Review

29. If the learner does not escalate their complaint within 10 working days of the decision letter, they may request a Completion of Procedures (COP) Letter, confirming that DISC's internal complaint processes have concluded. COP letters will only be issued upon request and are typically used when a learner wishes to escalate a complaint externally (e.g. to QQI).
30. If a learner remains dissatisfied with the outcome of a Stage 2 formal complaint, they may request an independent review. This final internal stage of the process ensures that complaints are handled fairly, with accountability and transparency, and in compliance with DISC's Quality Assurance Framework and national education standards.

Grounds for Independent Review

31. An independent review may be requested on one or more of the following grounds:
- A procedural breach occurred during Stage 2 that may have affected the outcome.
 - The reasons provided for rejecting the complaint were unclear or insufficient.
 - There is evidence of bias or prejudice on the part of decision-makers at Stage 2.
 - The outcome of the complaint was unreasonable in the circumstances.
 - New, material evidence has emerged that the learner could not reasonably have submitted earlier.
32. Reviews will not re-investigate the complaint from the beginning, but instead will examine how the original complaint was handled and whether the process and outcome were fair, appropriate, and within policy.

How to Submit a Stage 3 Complaint

33. Learners must complete a Stage 3 Complaint Form and submit it to the DISC's Head of Quality within 10 working days of receiving their Stage 2 outcome letter. Acknowledgement of the submission will be sent within 5 working days.
34. The QA Office will:
 - Confirm that the submission is within the permitted timeframe.
 - Assess whether it meets one or more of the valid grounds for review.
 - Notify the learner in writing if the request is not accepted, including an explanation and advice on external recourse (e.g. QQI Learner Complaint Form, ICOS, Citizens Information).

Independent Reviewer Appointment

35. If accepted, the Head of Quality will appoint an Independent Reviewer—a senior academic or manager not previously involved in the case and with no conflict of interest. Where required, a small independent panel may be convened to support the reviewer in reaching a decision.

Review Process and Outcome

36. The Independent Reviewer may:
 - Request additional information from the learner, Centre Director, or relevant staff.
 - Refer the case back to the Centre Director if new material evidence warrants reconsideration.
 - Uphold or reject the Stage 3 complaint.
37. A final written outcome will normally be issued within 20 working days of the submission of the Stage 3 form. The outcome will include:
 - A summary of the review.
 - The final decision.
 - Any corrective or remedial actions to be taken (if the complaint is upheld).
 - Guidance on the learner's right to escalate the matter externally.
38. If the complaint is not upheld, the learner may request a Completion of Procedures (COP) Letter confirming that all internal stages have been exhausted. This letter may support further external review (e.g. through QQI's learner complaints procedures or ICOS).

External Review

39. If still dissatisfied, the learner may submit a complaint to the Irish Council for International Students (ICOS) or Citizens Information.

- External complaints should be made within the timeframes outlined by those bodies.

Record Keeping

40. The DISC Quality Assurance Office will maintain a secure case file of all documentation, communications, and decisions relating to Stage 3 complaints. Upon conclusion, the Independent Reviewer must forward all relevant materials to the Head of Quality for logging and review. These records may be used in future audits, evaluations, or QQI engagements.

Frivolous or Vexatious Complaints

41. DISC is committed to providing all learners with a fair and transparent complaints process. However, the Centre also has a duty to protect staff and resources from misuse of the system. As such, DISC reserves the right to terminate the consideration of any complaint deemed to be frivolous, vexatious, or manifestly unreasonable.
42. Examples of such complaints may include:
 - Repeated or harassing complaints targeting individuals or teams without new evidence.
 - Pursuit of complaints that are clearly lacking in merit or substance.
 - Seeking unrealistic or unreasonable outcomes beyond the scope of institutional authority.
 - Repeatedly pursuing a matter in an aggressive or disruptive manner, even where an issue has been addressed.
 - Complaints submitted with the intent to cause disruption, annoyance, or reputational harm.
 - Demands for redress that lack serious purpose, clarity, or supporting evidence.
43. This approach is supported by QQI's emphasis on proportionality, fairness, and responsible learner engagement.

Procedure for Managing Frivolous or Vexatious Complaints

44. Where a complaint is assessed to fall into one of the above categories, the Head of Quality will:
 - Notify the learner in writing within 20 working days of the receipt of the complaint that the matter will not be pursued further.
 - Provide a clear rationale for the decision, including reference to the criteria used to reach it.
 - Inform the learner of their right to escalate the matter to the Academic Registrar for a secondary review, if they remain dissatisfied.

- Outline the method and timeline for submitting such a request.
45. DISC recognises the importance of protecting the integrity of the complaints system while also ensuring that learners are not discouraged from raising genuine concerns. Each case will be assessed on its individual merits, and all parties involved will be treated with respect and impartiality.

Section Three: Appeals

46. DISC recognises the right of all learners to appeal academic decisions where they believe that an error has been made or where extenuating circumstances were not adequately considered. The appeals process is governed by principles of natural justice, fair procedure, and alignment with the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, QQI Core Statutory QA Guidelines, and DISC's internal quality assurance framework.
47. Appeals may relate to:
- Results issued by an Assessment Board.
 - Decisions of an Academic Misconduct Panel.
 - Outcomes of mitigating, extenuating, or personal circumstances applications.

Stage 1: Submission of an Appeal

48. All appeals must be submitted in writing using the official Stage 1 Student Appeal Form, available from the DISC Student Experience Team or VLE. Appeals must be submitted to the Centre Director or their designated representative, accompanied by any relevant supporting documentation (e.g. medical certificates, academic evidence, correspondence).
49. Key requirements include:
- **Timeframe:** Appeals must be submitted within 10 working days of receiving the official Record of Results or outcome letter.
 - **Grounds:** The learner must clearly outline the grounds for appeal and the outcome sought (e.g. opportunity for reassessment, reconsideration of mitigating circumstances, removal of a penalty).
 - **Supporting Evidence:** All documentation must be securely submitted and clearly linked to the appeal grounds.
 - **Late Evidence:** If the appeal is based on new circumstances that were not disclosed earlier (e.g. medical or personal issues), the learner must provide a valid explanation for the delay in presenting this evidence.
50. DISC reserves the right to reject appeals that do not meet the criteria or are submitted outside the permitted timeframe unless there are exceptional and clearly evidenced

reasons.

51. Once a valid appeal is submitted:
 - 1) A decision will normally be made within 20 working days of receipt.
 - 2) If additional time is required, the learner will be informed of the delay and given an expected timeline.
 - 3) The outcome will be communicated in writing and will include:
 - A summary of the appeal grounds and evidence.
 - The decision taken and rationale.
 - Any applicable next steps or available further review.
52. The appeal may result in:
 - The original decision being upheld.
 - A modified decision (e.g. granting an opportunity for reassessment).
 - Referral to a further stage (e.g. escalation to a review panel or Academic Board).
53. This process ensures that learner appeals are treated with respect, diligence, and procedural fairness. All appeal records are securely maintained in accordance with DISC's Data Protection Policy and GDPR.

Procedure for the Consideration of Appeals

Acknowledgement and Initial Review

54. Upon receiving a valid appeal submission, the Head of Quality (or designated representative) will issue an acknowledgement to the learner within:
 - 5 working days during term time.
 - 10 working days during non-teaching periods or holidays.
55. If any delay is anticipated (e.g. key staff members are unavailable), the learner will be informed as early as possible with a revised timeline for resolution.

Preliminary Assessment

56. The Centre Director will perform a preliminary check to determine:
 - Whether the appeal has been submitted within the permitted timeframe.
 - Whether the learner has clearly stated the grounds for appeal (see Section 3).
 - Whether sufficient documentation has been submitted to allow for consideration.
57. The Centre Director may request further information from the learner if any of the above elements are missing. If the appeal is deemed inadmissible, the learner will be:
 - Informed in writing of the reason for rejection.

- Advised of their right to escalate the matter to the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Office for secondary review.

58. The Centre Director's role at this stage is administrative and procedural. They are not permitted to make a decision about the substance or merit of the appeal. Only the Appeals Panel may do so.

Referral and Comment by Academic Staff

59. If the appeal is deemed admissible, the Head of Quality will:

- Forward the appeal documentation to the relevant tutor or academic staff member(s) to provide a written response.
- Permit those staff to consult colleagues or carry out additional checks to clarify any facts relating to the appeal.

60. In cases where the learner alleges bias, prejudice, or inadequate assessment, the Centre Director may also consult with relevant staff (e.g. examiners, programme leaders) to gather objective background information and ensure procedural fairness.

Constitution of the Appeals Panel

61. An Appeals Panel will be convened with the following safeguards:

- Panel membership will be impartial and independent.
- Individuals previously involved in the learner's case will be excluded from the panel.
- The panel will include individuals with sufficient authority and expertise to review the matter and make a balanced decision.

62. The panel will:

- Consider all grounds for appeal raised by the learner.
- Review the appeal documentation and any staff responses.
- Request clarification or further evidence where necessary.
- Reach a reasoned, fair decision based solely on the evidence provided.

63. If the panel decides that one or more of the learner's grounds for appeal do not apply, they will provide a clear explanation as to why certain aspects were not upheld.

Confidentiality and Fairness

64. Throughout the process:

- All parties are entitled to confidential and respectful treatment.
- The appeal will be handled in line with DISC's Data Protection Policy and GDPR.
- A written record of all actions, decisions, and correspondence will be retained securely for internal audit and external quality assurance purposes.

Learner Attendance and Appeals Panel

65. The Appeals Panel may invite the learner to attend a meeting as part of its review of an appeal. This offers the learner an opportunity to present their case in person and respond to any points raised. At the discretion of the Panel, remote attendance (e.g. via video conference) will be facilitated where necessary to ensure accessibility and flexibility.

Notification and Representation

66. The learner will be notified in writing at least 5 working days in advance of the meeting. This notification will include:

- The date, time, and location (or digital access details).
- The purpose and format of the meeting.
- Instructions on how to submit supporting information or confirm attendance.

67. The learner has the right to be accompanied or represented at the meeting. This may include:

- A personal tutor, student support advisor, or other member of DISC staff.
- A family member or external support person, subject to prior notification.

68. The learner must inform the Panel in advance of the name and role of any person who will accompany or represent them. To protect the internal nature of academic appeal processes, legal representation is not normally permitted, unless there are exceptional circumstances, and this must be approved by the Panel in advance.

Meeting Format

69. If the learner attends the meeting:

- The learner (or their representative) will be invited to present their grounds for appeal.
- The Panel will consider whether any new grounds or evidence introduced during the meeting can be admitted, based on relevance and procedural fairness.
- The Panel may ask clarifying questions to better understand the student's case and supporting documentation.

70. The meeting will be conducted in a respectful, non-adversarial manner, and in line with DISC's commitments to equity and inclusion.

Outcome of Stage 1 Appeal

71. Following the meeting and any final deliberations, the learner will receive a written outcome of the appeal within 20 working days of the original submission, outlining:
- The decision of the Appeals Panel.
 - The reasons for the decision (particularly if the appeal is not upheld).
 - Any applicable actions, remedies, or changes in outcome.
72. If the appeal is upheld, the learner will be informed in writing of:
- What remedy or redress has been granted.
 - How and when it will be implemented.
73. If the appeal is not upheld, the learner will be advised of their right to escalate the matter to Stage 2 by submitting a written request for review to the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Office.
74. The learner must do so within 10 working days of receiving the Appeals Panel outcome. If they do not, they may request a Completion of Procedures (COP) letter confirming that DISC's internal appeal process has concluded. COP letters are issued only upon request and are necessary for external escalation.

Stage 2: Independent Appeal Review

75. If a learner remains dissatisfied with the outcome of their Stage 1 appeal, they may escalate the matter to Stage 2: Independent Appeal Review. This stage ensures that the integrity, transparency, and fairness of the appeals process are maintained through an impartial review conducted by a senior academic or QA staff member not involved in earlier stages.

Grounds for Review

76. An independent appeal review may only be requested on one or more of the following grounds:
- New material evidence has emerged which, for valid reasons, could not have been submitted during Stage 1.
 - There is evidence of bias or prejudice on the part of the Stage 1 Appeals Panel.
 - The outcome of the appeal was unreasonable in light of the evidence presented.
 - There was a breach of procedure during the handling of the Stage 1 appeal, as outlined in this policy.

How to Submit an Independent Appeal

77. A learner must complete the Stage 2 Student Appeal Form and submit it to the DISC Quality Assurance Office within 10 working days of the Stage 1 appeal outcome letter. Submissions received after this deadline will not be accepted unless exceptional circumstances are clearly explained and accepted by the Quality Assurance Office.
78. All appeals must include:
 - A completed Stage 2 appeal form.
 - A copy of the Stage 1 appeal and outcome.
 - Any supporting evidence (e.g. medical documentation, correspondence).
 - A clear explanation of the relevant grounds and the remedy sought.
79. Acknowledgement of receipt will be issued within 5 working days, and the learner will be advised of any unavoidable delays (e.g. if personnel are unavailable).

Section Four: Independent Review Process

80. The Quality Assurance Office will verify that the appeal is admissible (appropriate grounds and submitted within timeframe).
81. The Quality Assurance Office will inform the learner in writing if the appeal is rejected and advise them of:
 - External review options (e.g. QQI, ICOS, Citizens Information).
 - Time limits for making an external complaint.
82. If accepted:
 - An independent senior member of staff, external to the programme team or academic unit in question, will be appointed to carry out the review.
 - This person may request additional information from the Appeals Panel and/or the student.
 - In complex cases, a small panel of impartial reviewers may be convened to support the process.
83. The independent reviewer will not typically reinvestigate the appeal in full but will assess:
 - Whether the correct procedures were followed.
 - Whether the outcome of Stage 1 was reasonable.
 - Whether valid explanations were provided.
 - Whether new evidence, if applicable, should alter the outcome.

Outcome and Communication

84. A decision will normally be issued within 20 working days of receipt of the Stage 2 appeal. The outcome letter will include:
 - The result of the review.
 - The reasoning behind the decision.
 - Details of any remedy or corrective action to be taken.
85. If the appeal is upheld, the letter will explain what action will be taken and within what timeframe. If the appeal is not upheld, the learner will receive a Completion of Procedures (COP) letter explaining that internal processes have concluded. The COP letter will also provide information on how to seek external redress through bodies such as QQI or ICOS.
86. Where new material evidence was the basis for the appeal and is accepted as valid, the case may be referred back to the Stage 1 Appeals Panel for reconsideration. The learner will be notified of this outcome in writing.
87. A COP letter may be issued on request where the appeal is upheld, to facilitate external reporting.

Section Five: Monitoring and Review

88. DISC is committed to the continuous improvement of its quality assurance processes, including those governing learner complaints and appeals. To ensure that the policy remains fit for purpose, fair, and effective, it is subject to regular monitoring and periodic review.

Ongoing Monitoring

89. The Head of Quality maintains a central log of all formal complaints and appeals, including details of outcomes, timeframes, and any follow-up actions.
90. This log is reviewed on a quarterly basis to:
 - Identify emerging trends or systemic issues.
 - Monitor adherence to published timelines.
 - Ensure consistency of decision-making across cases.
91. Anonymised data and trend analysis are presented to the Academic Board and Management Team as part of DISC's internal quality assurance reporting cycle.

Formal Review

92. This policy will be formally reviewed at least every two years or earlier if:
- There are changes in legislation, QQI guidance, or sectoral best practice.
 - Internal evaluations or stakeholder feedback highlight areas for improvement.
 - A significant issue arises that warrants immediate policy revision.
93. The review process will include consultation with:
- Student representatives (e.g. SSLC).
 - Academic and support staff.
 - External reviewers or partners where appropriate.

Responsibilities for Oversight

94. The Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee oversees the review process and recommends updates to the Academic Board for approval.
95. The Centre Director is responsible for ensuring that all staff are informed of policy updates and that the most recent version is accessible to learners and staff via the VLE and staff handbook.

Document Control

Document name	Student Complaints and Appeals Policy		
Document owner	Head of Quality		
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Policy applies to	All DISC learners and academic/support staff		
Related documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - DISC QA Manual - Student Disciplinary Policy - Academic Appeals Policy - Data Protection Policy - QQI Core QA Guidelines - ELE Code 		
Version	Date	Update by	Details