Student Complaints Policy and Procedures

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1. Purpose

1.1 This policy outlines the provisions and procedures in place at the Engineering College of Technology (ECT) for resolving complaints promptly, fairly and effectively. It applies to non-academic complaints only and operates in line with the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) Good Practice Framework.

2. Scope

2.1 This policy applies to all higher education students enrolled in an ECT programme, as well as former students who left ECT following completion of studies, interruption, withdrawal, termination or suspension. Eligible former students may submit a complaint within six months of leaving ECT.

2.2 The policy also applies to ECT staff involved in managing or responding to student complaints. Where a complaint concerns the conduct of an ECT staff member and may amount to misconduct, it must be reported to the Head of Academics and Operations. In such cases, the matter may be managed under the ***Staff Grievance and Appeals Policy*** or other relevant human resources policies.

2.3 ECT will respond to any eligible complaint regarding a student's dealings with ECT, or with any external party delivering courses or related services on behalf of ECT.

2.4 The policy is accessible to all students, including through the provision of alternative formats and reasonable adjustments where required. Complaints will be handled in accordance with UK GDPR and applicable data protection legislation.

2.5 Academic concerns are addressed under ECT's ***Academic Appeals Policy and Procedures.*** Illustrative reasons for a non-academic complaint include:

- Failure to follow or correctly apply ECT policies/procedures.
- Bias, prejudice or perceived unfair treatment.
- A penalty or decision that appears disproportionate to the circumstances.
- Negligent, inappropriate or unprofessional conduct.
- A decision made without considering relevant facts or evidence.
- Inaccurate, misleading or inconsistent information provided by ECT or a partner delivering services on ECT's behalf.

3. Principles

3.1 This policy is underpinned by the following principles, consistent with the OIA Good Practice Framework:

- The timely resolution of formal complaints relating to non-academic and administrative decisions, applied consistently, fairly, and without reprisal, with a strong emphasis on accessibility, independence and proportionality.
- To conclude complaints within 90 calendar days of receipt and provide students with regular progress updates (at least every 10 working days).
- Complaints should be lodged as soon as reasonably possible after the matter occurs.

- The policy must be easily accessible to students and the broader public, including in alternative formats where required, and students will not be charged for accessing the complaints process.
- No party will experience discrimination, disadvantage, or unfair treatment because of raising a complaint.
- Vexatious or malicious complaints will not be considered.
- All parties are expected to behave respectfully and courteously, with zero tolerance for intimidating or threatening behaviour.
- Where appropriate, informal resolution will be encouraged as the first approach to achieving a prompt and proportionate outcome.
- Staff will receive appropriate training to ensure adherence to this Policy
- Any staff member assigned to investigate or determine a complaint must formally confirm that they have no actual or perceived conflict of interest before commencing involvement.
- The principles of natural justice (procedural fairness) will be upheld for all parties.
- All parties must make genuine efforts to communicate clearly and develop a shared understanding of the issues raised.
- Any party may be accompanied by a support person, who is not a legal representative, when attending interviews, and reasonable adjustments will be made for accessibility needs.
- All parties to a complaint must be kept informed of progress throughout the process.
- All exchanges of information must be treated confidentially, except where disclosure is required by law.
- Once a decision is made, all parties must be notified in writing as soon as reasonably possible.
- All records relating to complaints must be securely stored for at least 5 years. Only proportionate, relevant, and necessary information will be retained, in accordance with UK GDPR data minimisation principles. Records will otherwise remain confidential, with access available to the parties involved.

4. Implementation

4.1 Complainants may have immediate concerns about the outcome or handling of an issue by ECT. In some cases, they may require assistance and advice before deciding how to proceed with a complaint.

4.2 Complainants have the right to seek advice from a professional who works in this area, such as a student advocate, a member of academic or professional services staff, or the OIA. This support can help the complainant understand whether their concern falls under this policy, or whether it should be handled under another policy or process.

4.3 The Student Experience Manager will review the nature of each complaint and determine whether referral is required to the Head of Academics and Operations and/or the Human Resources (HR) Manager, particularly where the matter may involve staff conduct. They may also refer complainants to appropriate professionals, such as counsellors, wellbeing practitioners or medical specialists, to ensure suitable support and appropriate case handling.

4.4 Advisors may also help the complainant determine whether informal resolution may be more effective and quicker, or whether a formal complaint is more appropriate. They may also help assess whether approaching the respondent directly could place the

complainant at risk and whether further confidential fact-finding is required before proceeding.

4.5 A complainant may initially choose to proceed with one of the following options:

- Take no further action.
- Attempt informal resolution with the person concerned (where safe and appropriate).
- Proceed to mediation with an impartial and skilled mediator (mediation is voluntary and does not replace formal rights).
- Submit a formal complaint, with or without support from a student advocate or other support person.
- Refer the matter to an external authority.

Stage One: Informal Resolution

4.6 Informal resolution is encouraged where appropriate to achieve early and constructive outcomes, but it is voluntary and does not affect a student's right to pursue formal procedures

4.7 All informal complaints should be submitted via email to hesupport@ect.ac.uk. The Learning Support Officer (LSO) will acknowledge receipt within 2 working days and begin assessment within 5 working days.

Process:

a) Acknowledgement and triage:
   - The LSO confirms receipt and outlines the next steps.
   - The LSO determines whether informal resolution is appropriate and safe, or whether the matter should proceed directly to the formal procedure (e.g. due to seriousness, risk or complexity).

b) Facilitated discussion or informal fact-finding:
   - The LSO liaises with the relevant team or individual to understand what occurred.
   - The LSO offers a mutually convenient time to speak with the student. Ideally this will be via phone or video call to avoid reliance on email alone.
   - The discussion will establish:
     - Areas of agreement and disagreement.
     - Relevant policies, procedures or expectations.
     - People who may need to be involved (e.g. Student Experience Manager, Programme Leader).
     - Whether informal resolution is likely to resolve the issue.

c) Written outcome:
   - The LSO provides a written response summarising the steps taken, findings and a proposed resolution (e.g. apologies, remedial actions, signposting or agreed adjustments).
   - The student will have 5 working days from the date of the written outcome to confirm acceptance or request escalation to the formal resolution procedure.

4.8 Timescales for informal resolution:

- ECT will begin assessing an informal complaint within 5 working days of receipt.

- Informal resolution should be concluded as soon as practicable and normally within 15 working days.
- Where justified delays occur (e.g., staff leave, semester breaks, illness), time may be extended by agreement up to a maximum of 20 working days.
- If informal resolution cannot be concluded within this period, the complainant may:
  - Withdraw the complaint, or
  - Proceed to the formal resolution procedure.

4.9 Progress updates and overall timeframe:

- While any stage remains ongoing, ECT will provide progress updates at least every 10 working days.
- ECT aims to resolve complaints (informal or formal) normally within 90 calendar days of receipt.

4.10 Support and Escalation:

- Complainants and respondents may be accompanied by a support person (not a legal representative) during informal meetings.
- If informal resolution does not resolve the matter, the formal resolution procedure will be initiated.

Stage Two: Formal resolution procedure

4.11 Stage two aims to carry out a proportionate, evidence-based investigation of the complaint and to explore resolution, including facilitated discussion where appropriate.

4.12 Stage two formal complaints can be initiated by:

- Direction submission: The complainant sends an email to the hesupport@ect.ac.uk for the attention of the Student Experience Manager.
- Escalation from informal resolution: If the complainant does not accept the proposed informal resolution within 5 working days of receiving the written outcome, they may request escalation to the formal procedure.

Process:

a) Acknowledgement and triage:
   - The Student Experience Manager acknowledges receipt within 2 working days and begins assessment within 5 working days.
   - Confirms the complaint falls under this procedure and that informal resolution has been exhausted or is inappropriate (e.g. due to seriousness, risk or complexity).

b) Investigation and conciliation:
   - The Student Experience Manager gathers relevant information from the complainant, respondent and any other parties (documents, emails, records).
   - Offers a mutually convenient time for discussion (phone or video call preferred) to avoid reliance on email alone.
   - Where appropriate, arranges a facilitated meeting to explore resolution.
   - Ensures the handling is impartial, confidential and proportionate to the complexity of the case.

c) Written outcome:
   - Provides a written summary of the steps taken, findings and a proposed resolution (e.g. remedial actions, training, mediation, apologies, adjustments, signposting).

4.13 The complainant has 5 working days to confirm acceptance of the proposed resolution or request escalation to Stage Three.

Stage Three: Internal Review and Investigation

4.14 Stage three aims to conduct an impartial review of the complaint, establishing findings of fact and determining appropriate recommended actions, led by an independent senior member of staff (Head of Academics and Operations).

4.15 Stage three formal complaints can be initiated by:

a) Referral:
   - If Stage two of the formal process does not resolve the matter or escalation is requested, the case is referred to the Head of Academics and Operations (or an alternative member of staff if a conflict of interest exists) and will act as the investigator.

b) Investigation:
   - The investigator interviews the complainant and/or respondent within 5 working days of referral.
   - Further interviews and evidence gathering may occur over up to 15 working days, including any relevant witnesses or documentary review.
   - Confirms no prior involvement and no actual or perceived conflict of interest before commencing.

c) Report and decision:
   - The investigator prepares a written report within 5 working days of the final interview, setting out findings, rationale and recommended actions.
   - The decision is communicated in writing to all parties involved, including reasons and any required actions and timeframes.
   - The complainant will have 5 working days from the date of the written outcome to confirm acceptance of the decision or indicate that they wish to proceed to external review via the OIA.

d) Implementation and monitoring:
   - The Head of Academics and Operations ensures implementation of agreed actions and monitors compliance, coordinating with relevant teams (e.g. HR Manager, line managers) where needed.

e) Once internal procedures are complete, ECT issues a Completion of Procedures Letter (COP) letter, enabling the complainant to refer to the case to the OIA within 12 months of the date of the COP letter.

Stage Four: External Review

4.16 If the complainant is not successful or not satisfied with the outcome of ECT's internal complaints handling procedure, ECT will notify the complainant within 10 working days of concluding the final internal stage of their right to escalate the matter to an external complaints body at no cost.

4.17 At the conclusion of ECT's internal procedure, the complainant will be issued with a Completion of Procedures (CoP) Letter. This letter confirms that all internal stages

have been exhausted and provides the information required for the complainant to refer their case to the OIA, within 12 months, if they remain dissatisfied. The COP letter will be provided in a durable format and in accessible formats where required, with reasonable adjustments offered.

4.18 The Head of Academics and Operations will authorise the COP letter at the conclusion of the formal process. The Student Experience Manager may prepare and issue the letter on their behalf, ensuring it meets CMA and OIA requirements.

4.19 Students also have the right to access any additional redress routes available through the Office for Students (OfS), which may direct them to third-party organisations such as the Competition & Markets Authority (CMA), Citizens Advice, or other appropriate bodies, depending on the nature of the issue.

4.20 In most cases, the purpose of the external process (including the OIA review) is to assess whether ECT followed its policies and procedures fairly, reasonably, and proportionately, rather than to substitute its own judgment for ECT's academic or operational decisions.

Handling Urgent Matters

4.21 In some cases, complaints may require urgent action to ensure the matter is resolved swiftly, particularly where there is a risk of serious harm, physical safety, mental health or wellbeing of the complainant or others. Examples include safeguarding concerns, threats of harm, harassment, serious misconduct, or any situation indicating that a student or staff member may be at immediate risk.

4.22 Where an urgent concern is identified, students, staff or any other person who becomes aware of the matter should refer the issue immediately via one of the following routes:

- hesupport@ect.ac.uk (Learning support Officer)
- Designated Safeguarding Lead
- Head of Academics and Operations or HR Manager for serious operational or staff-related matters.

4.23 The referral must clearly indicate that the situation requires urgent consideration and explain the reason swift action is necessary.

4.24 If the concern involves potential safeguarding risks, (e.g. harm to self, harm to others, abuse, exploitation, or serious wellbeing deterioration) it must be referred directly to the Designated Safeguarding Lead in line with ECT's ***Safeguarding Policy and Procedures*** and statutory requirements.

4.25 The person receiving the notice will:

a) Acknowledge receipt immediately and assess the urgency and level of risk,
b) Take appropriate and proportionate immediate action to protect those at risk,
c) Consult relevant ECT managers as required (e.g. Head of Academics and Operations, HR Manager, Student Experience Manager),
d) Where necessary, escalate safeguarding concerns to external agencies, in line with statutory duties,
e) Make a decision regarding next steps within 2 working days

4.26 Urgent safeguarding or wellbeing concerns may override normal complaints timescales and will be handled in accordance with ECT's Safeguarding Policy, Student Support Procedures, and any associated statutory requirements. The handling of urgent safeguarding or wellbeing concerns will uphold the principles of fairness, confidentiality, independence and proportionality. Reasonable adjustments and alternative formats will be provided where required.

4.27 Urgent action does not replace the complaints process. Once immediate risks are addressed, the matter will proceed under the formal complaints procedure if applicable, including issuing a Completion of Procedures (COP) letter where required.

5. Simultaneous Complaints

5.1 If a complainant submits multiple complaints, or if several issues arise that appear to be connected, the Student Experience Manager will review the matters to determine whether they should be combined into a single investigation. The decision will uphold the principles of fairness, independence, timeliness and proportionality as set out in the OIA Good Practice Framework.

5.2 Complaints may be combined when:

- The issues are factually or contextually related.
- The same respondent(s), staff, or departments are involved.
- Combining the matters would avoid duplication, conflicting outcomes, or unnecessary delay
- Consolidation would not disadvantage any party.

5.3 Where appropriate, the Student Experience Manager may also consult with the Head of Academics and Operations, HR Manager, or Designated Safeguarding Lead to identify any safeguarding, wellbeing, or risk considerations that may affect how the complaints should be structured or prioritised.

5.4 Complaints will not be combined where this would:

- prejudice the fairness or independence of the investigation.
- delay urgent safeguarding or wellbeing-related matters.
- cause confusion, distress, or disadvantage to the complainant or respondent
- involve unrelated allegations requiring separate expertise or separate decision-makers.

5.5 If complaints are combined, all parties will be informed in writing of:

- Which issues are being included,
- The rationale for combining them,
- Any changes to timescales (while maintaining the overall aim of resolution within 90 calendar days)
- The process that will be followed.

5.6 Where combining is not appropriate, the Student Experience Manager will ensure that each complaint is handled separately but in a coordinated and proportionate manner.

5.7 Combining complaints does not affect any party's rights to escalate under the formal procedure or to receive a Completion of Procedures (COP) letter at the conclusion of the process.

6. Withdrawal of Complaints

6.1 A complainant may withdraw a complaint at any point during the procedure. In many cases, withdrawal occurs because the matter has been informally resolved, or conciliatory discussions between parties have led to a satisfactory outcome.

6.2 Where a complainant withdraws the complaint, the matter will normally be deemed to have been resolved, and no further action will be taken.

6.3 However, ECT reserves the right to continue to review or investigate the matter where:

- Safeguarding concerns are identified.
- There is evidence or indication of serious misconduct by a member of staff or student.
- The issue poses a risk to the safety or wellbeing of the complainant or others; or
- The Head of Academics and Operations HR Manager, or Designated Safeguarding Lead determines that the matter requires further action in accordance with statutory obligations or internal policies.

Process:

- The complainant must confirm withdrawal in writing (alternative formats and reasonable adjustments will be provided where required).
- All parties will be notified of the withdrawal and any actions already agreed will continue to be monitored where appropriate.
- ECT will ensure that the withdrawal was voluntary and the complainant was not coerced, pressured or subjected to victimisation or retaliation. Any such action may lead to disciplinary action.
- If ECT continues investigating due to safeguarding or misconduct concerns, the complainant will be informed, and the matter will proceed under the formal complaints procedure.
- Where the complainant has reached the formal stage, ECT will issue a Completion of Procedures (COP) letter confirming closure, enabling the complainant to refer the matter to the OIA within 12 months of the date of the COP letter, if they wish.

6.4 Withdrawal handling will uphold principles of fairness, independence, confidentiality and proportionality, and will not affect the overall aim to conclude maters within 90 calendar days where investigation continues.

7. Record Keeping

7.1 ECT will maintain accurate and secure records of all complaints procedures in line with the principles of fairness, transparency, independence and proportionality set out in the OIA Good Practice Framework and UK GDPR requirements.

Requirements:

- All participants in a complaint's procedure should keep confidential notes of their discussions with other parties.

- Copies of such notes, together with any associated findings, must be made available to ECT for inclusion in the relevant student file and/or staff file, where appropriate.
- To ensure accuracy, parties attending meetings or interviews should confirm in writing that the author has truthfully and accurately recorded the proceedings. Alternative formats and reasonable adjustments will be provided where required.

7.2 ECT will ensure that all records generated as part of a complaint's procedure are:

- Accurate, relevant, and limited to what is necessary for the purpose of managing and resolving the complaint (UK GDPR data minimisation and proportionality).
- Stored securely for at least 5 years following the conclusion of the procedure, unless a longer retention period is required by law or regulatory obligations.
- Accessible only on a strict need-to-know basis, limited to staff who require the information to carry out their duties in relation to the complaint, safeguarding, HR, or governance oversight.
- Kept confidential, with all access logged and appropriately restricted in accordance with ECT's Data Protection Policy and UK GDPR.
- Inclusive of all official documentation, including outcome letters and Completion of Procedures (COP) letters.
- After the prescribed retention period, records will be securely destroyed in line with ECT's data retention schedule and statutory requirements.

Responsibility:

- The Student Experience Manager will maintain records for student complaints.
- The HR Manager will maintain records for staff-related matters.
- Complaints data will be reviewed periodically to identify themes and inform service improvements.

8. Legal rights and obligations

8.1 This policy does not remove the right of students, or former students (within scope) to take further action under the UK's consumer protection laws, nor does it prevent any individual from pursuing other legal remedies that may be available to them.

8.2 ECT must continue to comply with all applicable requirements under:

- UK Consumer Protection Law
- UK GDPR and Data Protection legislation
- Equality and discrimination law
- Safeguarding law
- Contract law
- Any other UK law or regulation relevant to the management, investigation or outcome of complaints.

8.3 Nothing in this document supersedes, replaces, or diminishes any rights or duties established under these laws. Information about legal rights and external redress routes will be provided in a durable format and in accessible formats where required, with reasonable adjustments offered.

8.4 ECT will not require students to sign confidentiality or non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) as a condition of resolving a complaint, in line with good sector practice.

8.5 Compliance with these obligations will be overseen by the Head of Academics and Operations and reported to the Governance Board as part of ECT's quality assurance and continuous improvement processes.

9. Definitions

Academic appeal

"A request for a review of a decision of an academic body charged with making decisions on student progress, assessment and awards. This may include a request to change marks or progress decisions, or final award classifications." (OIA: 29)

Complainant

The party who has lodged a complaint.

Complaint

"An expression of dissatisfaction by one or more students about a provider's action or lack of action, or about the standard of service provided by or on behalf of the provider." (OIA: 8)

Natural justice principles

Decision makers under this policy must adhere to the following principles:

- All parties, including the respondent(s), have the right to be heard before a decision is made, including the right to respond to any statements or evidence that may prejudice their case.
- All relevant submissions, information and evidence to be considered by the decision-maker should be disclosed, where requested, to all parties prior to the hearing. Matters that are irrelevant should not be taken into account.
- Decision makers must not be biased or appear to be biased (as judged by a reasonable and informed bystander), nor have any vested interest or personal involvement in the matter.
- Complaints and appeals must be handled without undue delay.
- All parties have the right to be accompanied by a representative of their choice, other than a currently practising solicitor or barrister (unless permitted in exceptional circumstances by the Chair).

Representative

Another member of staff, a trade union representative, or another support person, provided they are not a currently practising solicitor or barrister (unless permitted in exceptional circumstances by the Chair).

Respondent(s)

One or more individuals alleged to have contributed to or caused the subject of the complaint.

Student

"The term 'student' includes those undertaking a course of study… It includes those on an interruption of study, temporary withdrawal or temporary exclusion or suspension, and those who have recently left a provider." (OIA: 31)

Student Advocate

An independent person who provides objective, unbiased advice to a student about a proposed complaint, the resolution process, and potential outcomes.

10. Accountabilities

10.1 The Governance Board is responsible for the review and approval of this policy. The policy will be explained to students during the compulsory induction and will be implemented through staff induction, staff training, and distribution to students and the wider ECT community via the website and other publications.

10.2 The Governance Board will also monitor complaints data, including emerging themes and any identified risks, on an annual basis. This monitoring supports continuous improvement, informs enhancements to student experience and service delivery, and provides assurance to the Governing Body regarding the effectiveness of ECT's complaints process.

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Revision History		
Version	**Date**	**Description of key changes**
1.1	October 2023	Align the document to the UK higher education context
1.2	April 2024	Minor corrections in line with input received from the Academic and Governance Boards and reviews by ECT staff
1.3	April 2025	Created separate policies and procedures for dealing with students' complaints and appeals relating to academic matters
2	January 2026	Amalgamation of the Students Complaints Policy and Student Complaints Procedures. Updated to ensure compliance with regulatory frameworks