

GIRTON COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE

Procedure for dealing with comments, suggestions and complaints from students

(Approved by Council. Issued by the Secretary to Council, tel. 38944/38951, 15.7.05.)

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Overview

1 The College welcomes comments and suggestions from students about any aspect of College provision. A student wishing to make a **suggestion** or **comment** about the College's provision, either academic or non-academic, can do so informally at the point of delivery, or by contacting the person in charge of the relevant area, or where it seems appropriate by raising the matter with his/her Tutor or the Senior Tutor.

2 Occasionally, however, a student may wish to make a complaint about College provision. The College subscribes to the guidelines agreed by the Senior Tutors' Committee for the handling of student complaints, and this document sets out the procedure for making a complaint to the College. It is in three parts: informal procedure, formal complaints procedure, and guidance on matters falling outside the complaints procedure or for which there is supplementary provision.

3 The College recognises that it has a duty to provide fair and objective procedures for examining and resolving complaints, and to ensure that its procedures are free from partiality arising from personal or institutional conflict of interest or other sources of bias. No student will be disadvantaged by having raised a complaint in good faith, even if it is not upheld, but the College expects that students will not make frivolous, vexatious or malicious complaints.

4 The College anticipates that complaints will normally be dealt with **informally** in the first instance. A student with a complaint should seek to bring it to the attention of the College using the procedure outlined here *as soon as possible* following the occurrence of a problem and ideally within one calendar month. Many complaints can be dealt with

quickly and effectively in this manner, without recourse to formal procedure. The College's procedures have been developed with this in mind.

5 Every attempt will be made to maintain the **confidentiality** of a complainant. However, where a complaint is of a personal nature against an individual, it is likely that the complainant's identity will have to be revealed at some stage in all but the most exceptional cases in order for there to be a fair investigation. The College will endeavour to inform an individual complainant of the extent to which her identity is likely to be revealed at each stage of the procedure.

6 To assist in the process of auditing the quality of its services and responsiveness to student comments, suggestions and complaints, the College will **monitor** complaints. The College undertakes to respect the confidentiality of complainants in this exercise.

7 A student may of course wish to complain about a matter that is not within the control of the College but within that of **another institution**, e.g. the University or another College. The University has a student complaints procedure which covers Faculties, Departments, and other University institutions, and all Colleges have comparable written procedures. In this case the first thing to do will be to identify the appropriate point of contact within the Faculty, Department or College. You may either contact that person directly or ask your Director of Studies, your Tutor, or the Senior Tutor of Girton to take up the matter on your behalf. The College has a responsibility to help students to identify mechanisms and to offer appropriate assistance in making a complaint within the University. If it is unclear to you where responsibility for the matter lies, you may seek advice from any of the persons listed in Appendix 1.

8 Complaints relating to the behaviour of **contractors and others** working for the College should not be taken up directly with the individual concerned but should be made either by the student personally or through a Tutor to the College Office responsible for the contract (generally the Maintenance Office).

9 Complainants will be invited at the outset to indicate the form of **remedy** they are seeking, without prejudice to the final remedy determined. Where a complaint is upheld, appropriate remedies may include one or more of the following:

- (a) A written and/or oral explanation or apology;
- (b) A change in practice or policy;
- (c) Financial compensation;
- (d) Disciplinary or other appropriate action against students, staff or Fellows.

10 A student who is considering making a complaint may wish to seek help or advice from the persons listed in Appendix 1.

I. Informal procedure

11 Stage one: Students who experience a problem with any aspect of College provision should where possible first raise the matter with the individual who has handled the matter or the person responsible for the area to which the complaint relates, either directly or, if preferred, through a College Tutor. A prompt response can be expected.

12 Stage two: In cases where a student feels that the nature of the complaint is too serious to be dealt with informally by himself/herself or through a Tutor, or where, after

the relevant Head of Department/Service has been approached, a satisfactory conclusion has not been reached, a complaint should be made in writing to the **Complaints Officer** (who shall normally be the Senior Tutor), who will investigate the matter as soon as possible, and will invite a written statement from the person or persons complained against. An initial response to any complaint can be expected within seven days of its receipt, and a considered response to the complaint, in writing giving reasons for the decision, and setting out the details of any remedy, should be received within three weeks. Any subsequent remedy will be implemented with the minimum of delay.

13 There may be occasions when several students wish to make a **joint complaint** (e.g. about a problem affecting a number of people in College accommodation, or about a teaching problem). It is generally not helpful in such cases for the whole group to approach the person responsible for the problem. If no member of the group is willing to act as spokesperson, it is suggested that the help of a student representative (i.e. someone not involved in the matter concerned) should be enlisted to act for the group at stage one of the informal procedure outlined above, and this person could be accompanied by one or two other members of the group.

14 In some cases the first stage of the informal procedure set out above may already involve the Senior Tutor as Head of Department. Should the complaint remain unresolved at the end of that stage, or in the event that a complaint is against the Senior Tutor, the complaint should be put in writing to the Mistress, who will appoint another Senior Member of the College to act as Complaints Officer.

II. Formal complaints procedure

15 It is hoped that very few complaints will remain unresolved after this stage. However should this be the case, the complainant can request that the Complaints Officer refers the matter to the Mistress. The Mistress will ask the College Council to appoint a Student Complaints Committee to undertake an independent assessment of the case and come to a conclusion on the matter. The Committee shall consist of the Mistress and either two Fellows, or one Fellow and one junior member of the College (who shall normally be the President of the JCR or the MCR) it being for the complainant to decide whether or not he/she wishes there to be student representation on the Committee. No person who has had, or may have, any personal involvement in the matter to which the complaint relates shall be a member of the Student Complaints Committee. In the event that the Mistress is thus debarred from acting, her place on the Committee shall be taken by the Vice-Mistress, or by another Fellow chosen by the College Council; in the event that the President of the JCR or the MCR is debarred from acting, her place shall be taken by another junior member chosen by the College Council.

16 The Student Complaints Committee shall receive a copy of all documentation relating to the informal stage of the complaints procedure. The Mistress (or her deputy on the Committee) shall write to the complainant informing him/her of the composition of the Committee and the date on which it is to meet, and soliciting any further submissions in writing which the complainant may wish to make. The Mistress (or her deputy) shall at the same time write to any person or persons against whom the complaint is made, informing them of the complaint which has been made, of the composition of the Committee and the date on which it is to meet, and inviting them to make

submissions in writing for the Committee to consider. The complainant and any person or persons against whom the complaint is made shall have the right to challenge the appointment of any person as a member of the Committee. The College Council shall consider any such challenge and may remove and replace the Committee member concerned if they think it appropriate to do so. Copies of all written submissions and other paperwork relating to the complaint shall be sent both to the complainant and to any person complained against at least seven days before the meeting of the Committee.

17 Both the complainant and any person against whom the complaint is made shall have the right to attend in person at the meeting of the Committee in order to make oral submissions, although the Committee's deliberations, following hearing of the submissions, shall be held in private. The complainant and any person against whom the complaint is made shall, if attending in person, be entitled to be accompanied by another person of her/his choosing: this might be, e.g., a Tutor or other senior member, a student including one of the officers of the JCR or MCR, an officer of CUSU or the Graduate Union, or any other person. The Committee may require the attendance of, and hear evidence from, any other person or persons as it thinks fit.

18 The Committee shall come to a decision as soon as possible after the hearing of the case, and shall, within four weeks of Full Term of the date when the matter was first referred to the Mistress under this procedure, give to the complainant and to any person or persons against whom the complaint is made a full written statement of its response to the complaint, giving reasons for its decision, and setting out the details of any remedy. Any such remedy shall be implemented with the minimum of delay.

External Review

19 Should a complainant wish to appeal against a decision made by the Student Complaints Committee under this formal procedure, an appeal may be made to a Student Grievance Committee consisting of three persons selected from a panel of external members to be appointed annually by the Governing Body. At least one member of the Grievance Committee should have appropriate legal training. A complainant who is dissatisfied with a decision of the Grievance Committee may make a complaint to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education. Any student contemplating such a complaint should seek the advice of the Secretary to Council, who can supply copies of documents relating to the Office's jurisdiction and procedures. Information can also be obtained from the Office's web site: www.oiahe.org.uk.

III. Matters falling outside the complaints procedure

Academic Appeals

20 Information about the College's policy and procedures in relation to students who fail University examinations is contained in the *Students' Guide*.

21 Students should be aware that a separate procedure exists for appealing to the University in a case where a student feels that he or she has been disadvantaged or unfairly classified in a University examination. Further information on examination appeals will be circulated by the University Registry in due course.

Harassment

22 A student with a complaint relating to harassment of any kind can find additional

information in the College's Code of Practice on Harassment. This code contains a suggested process for dealing with such issues at the informal stage. Formal complaints about harassment may be made under the 'formal complaints procedure' detailed above.

Criminal offence

23 Where a complaint includes an allegation that an offence of a criminal nature has been committed, it may of course be reported by the complainant to the police. In so far as there is no conflict of interest, the College will seek to offer advice and support in such cases, and the complainant may wish to seek legal advice.

Matters of College Policy

24 Complaints on matters of College policy should be directed to the appropriate College committee (see Appendix 2) through student representatives. These may be contacted through the JCR and/or the MCR.

Appendix 1 & 2 - to be issued shortly. In the interim please contact the Senior Tutor:
senior.tutor@girton.cam.ac.uk