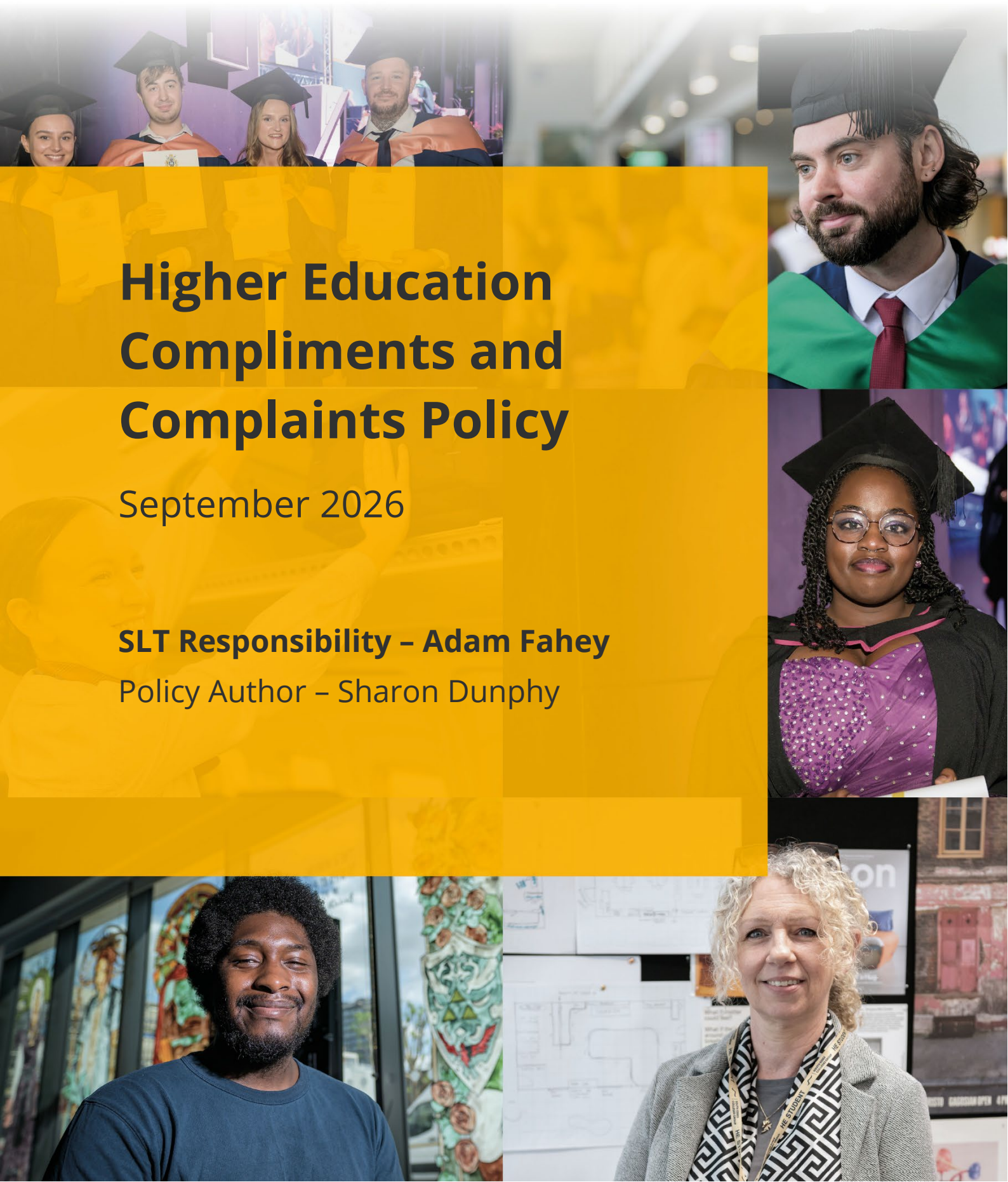


Higher Education Compliments and Complaints Policy

September 2026

SLT Responsibility – Adam Fahey

Policy Author – Sharon Dunphy



Significant Changes Following Review

PAGE NUMBER OR HEADING NAME	DETAILS OF SIGNIFICANT CHANGE	CHANGES MADE BY
All	Clarity of information regarding academic and non-academic complaints and which policy needs to be followed for the different awarding organisations	Sharon Dunphy
6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14	Freedom of speech added	Sharon Dunphy
8	Non academic complaints – student protection plan added	Sharon Dunphy

POLICY AVAILABILITY NOTICE

This policy is available in alternative formats upon request to accommodate different needs including word. To request an alternative format, please contact HE support at HEsupport@southessex.ac.uk

Equality Impact Assessment

The aim of an equality impact assessment (EIA) is to consider the equality implications of any new or amended policy, procedure, practice, project, function on different groups of staff, students and visitors to the college. This EIA tool provides a simple framework that helps evaluate whether the change may inadvertently disadvantage protected characteristics and identify ways to proactively advance and promote equality.

You will need to consider each of the equations and provide information as to consideration and any changes made in relation to Equality, diversity and inclusion.

Date EIA completed.	August 2026
Name of person responsible for completing the EIA	Sharon Dunphy
Role of person responsible for completing the EIA	Deputy Executive Director HE and Quality
Who is affected by the policy / decision / change?	Student, Staff, Visitors and External Partners
What's the reason for the new policy / change in policy, practice, process etc.?	Annual update of policy

You will need to consider whether its possible that the proposed new policy / change in policy /procedure/practice etc could discriminate or unfairly discriminate or disadvantage people. You should consider:

Who gets to participate?	Who does not, or who now does not due to the changes proposed / made.
Who is at an advantage?	Who is at a disadvantage, and again has this changed?
Who will benefit?	Who will not benefit (or who did and now doesn't due to the changes proposed in policy
Who can access the policy?	Who cannot, or now cannot.

Protected Characteristic	What degree of impact does the change have (score 1-5 with 1 the lowest and 5 the highest)	What is a potential positive, neutral or negative impact? Include what you have considered. Are there any barriers?	What action will be taken to address any negative impact or remove any potential barriers identified? Note if we are not able to resolve anything identified.	Date by when and whom will this action be taken.
Age	2	Positive. The policy provides all students, regardless of age, with access to a clear complaints and appeals process. Some mature students may require flexible communication methods due to work or caring responsibilities.	Ensure complaints can be submitted through multiple routes and responses are provided in accessible formats where required.	Ongoing. Deputy Executive Director HE and Quality
Disability	4	Positive but higher impact due to potential barriers in accessing complaint processes, meetings, documentation or appeals. Students with physical, sensory, learning difficulties, mental health conditions or neurodiverse needs may require reasonable adjustments.	Ensure reasonable adjustments are offered throughout the complaints and appeals process, including accessible documentation, alternative communication methods, support persons and extended timescales where appropriate.	Ongoing. Deputy Executive Director HE and Quality
Gender (Sex)	1	Neutral. The policy applies equally to all students irrespective of sex.	Monitor complaints data to identify any emerging trends or disproportionate impacts.	Ongoing. Deputy Executive Director HE and Quality
Gender Reassignment	2	Positive. The policy provides an avenue to raise concerns relating to discrimination, harassment or unfair treatment. Confidentiality is important when handling complaints.	Ensure confidentiality is maintained and staff handling complaints are appropriately trained in equality and diversity matters.	Ongoing. Deputy Executive Director HE and Quality
Marriage or Civil Partnership	1	Neutral. No specific adverse impact identified.	None required beyond ongoing monitoring.	N/A
Pregnancy / Maternity	2	Positive. Students may need flexibility when engaging with the complaints process due to pregnancy, maternity leave or caring responsibilities.	Ensure reasonable flexibility with meetings, communication and deadlines where appropriate.	Ongoing. Deputy Executive Director HE and Quality

Protected Characteristic	What degree of impact does the change have (score 1-5 with 1 the lowest and 5 the highest)	What is a potential positive, neutral or negative impact? Include what you have considered. Are there any barriers?	What action will be taken to address any negative impact or remove any potential barriers identified? Note if we are not able to resolve anything identified.	Date by when and whom will this action be taken.
Race	2	Positive. The policy supports students wishing to raise concerns regarding discrimination or unequal treatment. Language and cultural barriers may impact engagement.	Provide support for students whose first language is not English and ensure complaints are handled fairly and consistently.	Ongoing. Deputy Executive Director HE and Quality
Religion or Religious Belief	1	Neutral. The policy applies equally to individuals of all faiths and beliefs.	Ensure scheduling of meetings takes account of religious observance where reasonably practicable.	Ongoing. Deputy Executive Director HE and Quality
Sexual Orientation	1	Positive. Students may use the policy to raise concerns relating to discrimination, harassment or victimisation.	Ensure confidentiality and fair treatment throughout all investigations.	Ongoing. Deputy Executive Director HE and Quality
Any other element that needs to be considered.	3	Positive. The inclusion of freedom of speech and student protection plan complaints broadens access to redress and supports students from diverse backgrounds. Some students may be reluctant to complain due to concerns about repercussions.	Maintain a transparent process, clear information, signposting to support services and assurances that students will not be disadvantaged for raising genuine concerns.	Ongoing. Deputy Executive Director HE and Quality

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1 Introduction

University Centre South Essex is a community of professionals who inspire learners to be extraordinary in all they do. We encourage not only our learners to perform to the peak of ability but ourselves. As part of that ethos we encourage constructive criticism from all our stakeholders in order to ensure that the high standards we set ourselves are maintained

2 Scope

This Policy applies to students studying on higher education programmes. Please see below for further details on which policy you should follow for Non-Academic or Academic Complaints by Validating Partner.

2.1 Programmes Validated by The Open University

- **Non-Academic Complaints:** Covered by this policy.
- **Academic Complaints:** Students should refer to The Open University section on the website for guidance. [HE Policies, Procedures and](#)

[Downloads](#) | [South Essex College](#)

2.2 Programmes Validated by The University of East Anglia (UEA)

- **Non-Academic Complaints:** Covered by this policy.
- **Academic Complaints:** Students should refer to The University of East Anglia section on the website for guidance. [HE Policies, Procedures and](#)

[Downloads](#) | [South Essex College](#)

2.3 Programmes Validated by University of the Arts London (UAL)

- **Academic and Non-Academic Complaints:** Covered by this policy.

2.4 All Other Higher Education Provision

- **Academic and Non-Academic Complaints:** Covered by this policy.

3 Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom

University Centre South Essex is committed to securing freedom of speech within the law and protecting academic freedom in accordance with its statutory duties and Freedom of Speech Code of Practice.

This policy may also be used to raise concerns relating to:

- restrictions on lawful freedom of speech;
- restrictions on academic freedom;
- cancellation or restriction of events or visiting speakers;
- restrictions on lawful research activity;
- decisions which may adversely affect an individual's freedom of lawful expression.

Students should continue to use this policy for complaints relating to freedom of speech. Staff, applicants for academic posts, visiting speakers and other eligible persons should refer to the relevant College procedures and the Freedom of Speech Code of Practice.

4 Complaints Categories and Examples

4.1 Academic Complaints

- **Quality of Teaching or Learning:** Issues with lecturer, seminars or educational services.
- **Assessment and Feedback:** Disputes over exam results, grades, or feedback delays.
- **Course Content or Structure:** Issues with curriculum, materials, or course changes.

- Academic Support: Concerns about access to tutors.

4.2 Non-Academic Complaints

- Facilities or Resources: Issues with libraries, IT, accommodation, or study spaces.
- Administrative Services: Complaints about processing delays or errors in administrative tasks.
- Welfare and Support Services: Complaints regarding counselling, careers advice, etc.
- Financial Issues: Disputes regarding fees, refunds, or financial aid.
- Student protection plan: Complaints relating to the implementation of the Student Protection Plan, including concerns about communication, support arrangements, changes to programmes, course closure, suspension, relocation, transfer opportunities, or other measures intended to protect students' interests.

4.3 Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom Complaints

Complaints may include:

- restrictions on lawful freedom of speech;
- concerns regarding academic freedom;
- cancellation, restriction or refusal of events or visiting speakers;
- restrictions on lawful academic discussion, teaching or research;
- concerns that a College decision has not appropriately considered freedom of speech obligations;
- concerns relating to implementation of the College Freedom of Speech Code of Practice.

5 Implementation

This policy will be published on the College website and communicated to all staff.

6 General Roles and Responsibilities

- All College staff have a responsibility for receiving compliments, suggestions and complaints, treating them seriously and dealing with them promptly and courteously in accordance with the policy.
- The Deputy Executive Director – Higher Education and Quality is responsible for resolving complaints on behalf of University Centre South Essex. They may appoint a Manager to investigate and respond on their behalf but will maintain overall responsibility.
- The Customer Services Officer coordinates the Compliments and Complaints process. They also provide support and guidance on all matters relating to this Policy.

7 Procedure for Logging a Complaint

The Executive Assistant to the Deputy Group Chief Executive Officer (DGCEO) is responsible for logging all complaints. A complaint can be made either via:

1. email to Yoursay@southessex.ac.uk
2. the online compliments and complaints form via [Contact us | South Essex College](#)

8 Complaints Procedure

Informal Complaint - If there is concern about an aspect of a course, or any of the College's services, it is recommended that you speak to your tutor, programme leader or a member of the HE support team. If other students share the concerns then the student course representative should be approached.

If the issue cannot be resolved within the Department/Team a formal complaint can be made following the procedure for logging a complaint, as above.

The Executive Assistant DGCEO will acknowledge receipt of a complaint within 2 working days and will inform the investigating manager.

The investigation manager (Member of Executive Board/Deputy Executive Director Higher Education/ Programme Partnership Manager) will contact the complainant within 2 working days to introduce themselves and offer a meeting to resolve the issue. Initial contact and the proposed meeting may include:

- Gaining information about the concern or complaint
- Providing information or context to a complainant
- Suggesting various solutions including arranging a facilitated discussion
- Giving an apology where it seems appropriate to do so, although advice must always be sought before issuing an apology to allay any concerns with regards to legal liability
- Confirming resolution or next steps

Where a complaint may engage freedom of speech within the law or academic freedom:

- the investigating manager must specifically consider the College's freedom of speech duties;
- any restriction must be shown to be necessary, proportionate and evidence-based;
- alternatives to restriction should be considered where appropriate;
- the final outcome must clearly explain how freedom of speech and academic freedom considerations have been taken into account.

9 Appealing the Outcome of a Complaint Decision

If a complaint is not resolved using the complaints policy there is the right to appeal. Please see below information for the next step.

9.1 Students Enrolled on University of the Arts London (UAL) Higher Education Programmes

Once the college appeal stage has been completed students can request a final Stage Review with UAL by emailing complaints@arts.ac.uk.

9.2 Students Enrolled on UEA, OU or Other Higher Education Programmes

If a complainant is dissatisfied with the outcome of the formal investigation, they can request a review or submit an appeal. This may include but is not limited to:

- A review of the procedures followed at the formal investigation
- A consideration of whether the outcome was reasonable
- New material evidence which the complainant was unable to, for valid reasons, provide earlier in the process.

An appeal will not usually consider the issues afresh or involve a further investigation. A request setting out the grounds for an appeal must be submitted in writing to the Deputy Group CEO at

Yoursay@southessex.ac.uk

The Executive Assistant of the Deputy Group CEO will acknowledge the appeal request within 2 working days and a different investigating manager (IM) will be appointed by the Senior Leadership Team.

The IM will contact the complainant by phone within 2 working days to introduce themselves, to determine the key points of the appeal and to ensure that the complainant understands the scope of the appeal process.

The IM must complete their review in 15 working days and consider these key questions as part of the process:

- Were the required procedures followed during the formal stage?
- Was the outcome reasonable in the circumstances?
- Has the complainant received clear reasons why the complaint was rejected at the formal stage?
- If new material evidence has been provided, has the complainant given valid reasons for not supplying this earlier?

9.3 Referral to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator

Once the appeal/review against complaint outcome stages have been completed, you are entitled to ask the [Office of the Independent Adjudicator \(OIA\)](#), the independent ombudsman service of last resort, to look at your complaint. All applications to the OIA must be made within twelve months of the date of the Completion of Procedures letter issued by the College or Validating University to the student. The OIA considers complaints from people who remain dissatisfied at the conclusion of the complaints procedure. The OIA looks at issues such as whether the College followed its policy, and whether the final decision was reasonable in all the circumstances. The OIA cannot normally look at complaints:

- where the student has not progressed through all stages of the complaints process
- where the complaint refers to matters more than three years old
- where the Completion of Procedures letter is received outside the twelve month time limit
- Where matters have been or are being considered in court. Full details of the scheme are available at www.oiahe.org.uk.

10 Office for Students (OfS) Freedom of Speech Complaints Scheme

The Office for Students operates a Freedom of Speech Complaints Scheme.

Following completion of the relevant internal procedures, eligible complainants may be able to refer complaints relating to freedom of speech within the law or academic freedom to the OfS.

The OfS scheme may apply to:

- members of staff;
- applicants for academic posts;
- visiting speakers;
- certain non-student members.

Students should normally continue to use the College complaints procedure and, where applicable, the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA).

Information about the OfS Freedom of Speech Complaints Scheme can be found on the Office for Students website.

11 Monitoring and Evaluation

The College will keep a log of all compliments and complaints. In order to secure ongoing improvement, the overall process will be monitored for consistency, quality of response and compliance with policy.

Information with regards to the number of complaints received/resolved/not resolved may be shared with our validating partners for reporting and monitoring purposes.

Personal data will be handled according to the General Data Protection Regulation 2018. For further information in regards to Data Privacy and GDPR, please see our website on the following link:

<https://www.southessex.ac.uk/gdpr>

Senior Leadership Responsibility	Adam Fahey
Policy Author	Sharon Dunphy
Roles Responsible for Reviewing	Deputy Executive Director HE and Quality
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