

Scottish Quality Concerns Scheme in context: Student guide

A resource for students, developed by sparqs to give context to QAA Scotland's Scottish Quality Concerns Scheme.

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Introduction

The Scottish Quality Concerns Scheme provides an opportunity for students, staff and other parties to raise concerns about the quality and standards of Scottish higher education to the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Scotland. QAA Scotland is Scotland's quality body for higher education. Its role is to safeguard academic standards and improve the quality of the student experience.

This resource has been developed by sparqs to provide some **context for students** around the Scheme and the guidance published in July 2022 by QAA Scotland. It outlines where and when the Scheme is the appropriate route for concerns and provides examples of issues that would be eligible for consideration under the Scheme.

What do I do if something's gone wrong during my studies?

If something's gone wrong during your studies, there's a lot of different ways in which you can take things forward.

In the first instance, you can **raise the issue directly with a member of staff**. Depending on the issue, this may be an academic member of staff, such as your course director or head of subject area, or it may be a professional services member of staff, such as a student support officer, a course administrator, or a member of an institution-wide service such as the disability service, careers team, or estates and facilities. Hopefully, the issue has a simple solution which can be enacted immediately or put in place for next year's cohort.

You can **speak to your course rep**, who can raise the issue with staff in your department on your behalf. Your rep can then raise the issue at a committee meeting with staff and will then feed back to you on the outcome. The role of the course rep is to collate feedback on students' learning and teaching and their academic experiences and discuss this feedback with staff. It's important to know that your reps are not responsible for handling anything related to an individual student's grades or supporting a student to engage with formal complaints or appeals processes.

If you believe a decision about a mark or final course award should be reconsidered, you may be eligible to **use your institution's appeals process**. Your institution will have detailed information on their website to assist you in navigating appeals, and you can also ask your students' association for help with this process. Institutions have specific criteria under which you can submit an appeal, so check these before submitting to ensure you're eligible.

If you're unhappy about any part of your student experience, you can **contact your students' association**. You can contact your sabbatical officers, who are elected to represent you and to work with the institution on solutions to issues raised by the student body. Your students' association may also have a dedicated advice team. Professional advisors can support you with your issue and direct you through the next steps. If the issue you raise is something that suggests there is a wider issue with the institution's policies or practices, your students' association can work with the institution to update and improve policies to better the experience for all students.

If you have spoken to your institution or your students' association about an issue, but the situation remains unresolved, or you are unhappy with the outcome, then you can **utilise your institution's complaints procedure**. As with the appeals process, your institution will have detailed information on their website to assist you in navigating the complaints procedure, and you can also ask your students' association for advice and support. Your institution's guidance on complaints will likely include a list of what can be considered under their process and what is not eligible for consideration.



If you have been through your institution's complaints procedure and you are unhappy with the way the complaint was handled, you can **contact the [Scottish Public Services Ombudsman](#)** (SPSO). The SPSO is the final stage for complaints about colleges and universities in Scotland. The SPSO's role is to look at whether the institution has a reasonable complaints or appeals procedure in place and if this has been followed correctly. The SPSO is not able to appeal an institution's decision or to look at matters related to grades or the quality of teaching or assessment.

As you can see, there are many different people and organisations you can speak to, and processes you can follow, if you want to highlight an issue at your institution. Where your issue is handled depends on several factors, including the type of issue, for example, whether it is an academic issue or related to the broader student experience; whether it affects only you as an individual or impacts multiple students; and whether you have already tried to resolve the issue with the institution.

When do I use the Scottish Quality Concerns Scheme?

So where does the **Scottish Quality Concerns Scheme** sit within all of this? QAA Scotland uses the word 'concern' to refer to a serious issue about how higher education institutions manage their academic standards, the quality of learning opportunities and the information that they make available about their provision.

The Scheme does not resolve individual complaints and does not provide redress or compensation to any individual submitting a concern. The Scheme does look at concerns which indicate serious weaknesses in the institution's approach to the management of quality and standards. Although the Scheme will not investigate individual complaints, you should raise a concern if you believe it provides evidence of broader failings in the management of academic standards or quality. The Scheme will therefore consider issues which indicate that there are possible serious systemic issues and where the circumstances described have the potential to be repeated.

The Scheme will only consider issues which have already been raised with the institution and gone through its internal complaints procedures. This means that any concern submitted to the Scheme should only focus on outstanding issues which have not been rectified.

How will I be kept informed throughout the process?

Information gained by QAA Scotland through this Scheme is used to identify where the issues raised indicate serious systemic or procedural problems. As such, it is not appropriate to share detailed outcomes with those raising quality concerns, as the matter will go beyond the individual issue raised.

The person raising the concern will be updated as to the action taken at the eligibility review and concern assessment process stages. QAA Scotland will also publish a report when a targeted peer review is initiated, as well as an annual summary report of all quality concerns.

Queries and further information

If you are considering utilising the Concerns Scheme, your students' association can support you with this process. Contact them to ask for further assistance.

The [QAA Scotland website](#) (where this document also sits) contains more information on the Concerns Scheme, including QAA Scotland's guidance on the Scheme and how to submit concerns.



Examples of issues that would be eligible for consideration under the Scottish Quality Concerns Scheme

Example 1

A student was dissatisfied with an aspect of their programme and struggled to find out how to make a complaint, as the process was not accessible or signposted to students. After numerous enquiries, the student was provided with the complaints policy and submitted a formal complaint to the university, but the complaint was not processed in line with policy. A Core practice of the Quality Code Expectations for quality is that: *The provider has fair and transparent procedures for handling complaints and appeals which are accessible to all students.* This example may be an eligible cause for concern if the university has not met this aspect of the Quality Code or if the lack of a transparent and fair complaints process is a systemic failing of the university. To determine eligibility, QAA will seek information from the university on the institutional processes and approaches to complaints, as well as any ongoing or proposed changes the institution is making.

Examples of evidence that may be provided by a student to support this concern:

- Copies of correspondence sent to the institution asking about the complaints policy and/or where to find the policy – this may be copies of emails, other written correspondence or notes of direct communication with staff, including dates, names, etc.
- A copy of the complaints policy.
- Correspondence received from the university in respect of the complaint that was submitted.
- A summary of why the student feels the complaint was not processed in line with the policy – such as dates of correspondence noting if published timescales were adhered to; roles of the staff that dealt with the complaint if it is felt it was not actioned by the appropriate member of staff.
- Any correspondence from the university once the student reported that they felt they had not been treated in accordance with complaints policy.



Example 2

Teaching on a postgraduate programme is suspended due to exceptional circumstances. The students are told that there will be no more in-person lectures or seminars but are not provided with appropriate guidance as to how to complete their studies or alternatives to ensure the programme contact hours are met. After numerous communications with the relevant academic department, the students receive guidance and signposting to online resources and assessment, but for some it is too late to make up the time missed and they fail the course. The students have completed the university internal complaints and appeals procedures. This may be an eligible cause for concern as it presents wider questions about institutional processes for supporting students when exceptional circumstances occur. To determine eligibility, QAA will seek information from the university on the institutional processes and approaches to the issue raised, as well as any ongoing or proposed changes the institution is making.

Examples of evidence that may be provided by a student to support this concern:

- Copies of the correspondence sent to the student notifying of the suspension of teaching, noting the date of the correspondence.
- Copies of correspondence sent to the institution asking about how to complete their studies, noting dates and the role of the staff member(s) to whom these were addressed.
- Copies or screenshots of information provided to students of what to do if they have a problem with their course – this may be information in a course handbook or on a VLE.
- Copies of the information sent to students with guidance and signposting to online resources and assessment and dates on which this was provided.
- Information about the periods of time for which teaching was suspended, noting the start date of teaching for the year and the dates for assessment, to put into context the amount of teaching time lost and the time between when guidance was received and assessments were scheduled.
- A copy of the complaints policy.
- Correspondence received from the university in respect of the complaint that was submitted and the subsequent appeal.



Example 3

A group of students studying a degree programme at a college provide evidence that their assignments are not assessed fairly in line with the awarding university's assessment policy and regulations. The matter was raised through the assessment appeals process. This issue identifies potential systemic issues in relation to the management of collaborative provision and whether the university meets the Quality Code Expectations for standards: *Where a provider works in partnership with other organisations, it has in place effective arrangements to ensure that the standards of its awards are credible and secure irrespective of where or how courses are delivered or who delivers them.* The Scottish Quality Concerns Scheme is not directly applicable to colleges, but if the validating university is a Scottish Higher Education Institution then there is potential for this to be in scope. To determine eligibility, QAA will seek information from the university on the institutional processes and approaches to collaborative provision and arrangements in place between the university and partner college, as well as any ongoing or proposed changes the institution is making.

Examples of evidence that may be provided by a student to support this concern:

- Copies of the relevant assignments and feedback detailing the reasons the assessment is not meeting the awarding university's assessment policy.
- A copy of the university's assessment policy.
- A copy of the course handbook, including any information in the handbook or on the student's VLE about how assignments will be assessed and references to the university's assessment policy.
- Copies of the information submitted to the college and/or the university for the assessment appeal.
- Correspondence received from the college and/or the university in respect of the appeal that was submitted.