

### 1 Introduction

- 1.1 This procedure provides a mechanism for addressing concerns and complaints raised by students promptly, fairly and effectively in order to help Escape Studios achieve the highest quality in its education provision.
- 1.2 Escape Studios aims to provide a high-quality student experience and views complaints as valuable feedback to enhance the quality of service. Escape Studios will seek to work in partnership with students in continuously improving its provision.
- 1.3 This procedure has been drafted with reference to the *The good practice framework for handling complaints and academic appeals* published by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator ("OIA", 2022), the Office for *Securing Students Student Success: Regulatory Framework for Higher Education in England* and the Quality Assurance Agency's *UK Quality Code for Higher Education* (2018).

### 2 Definitions

- 2.1 Escape Studios adopts the OIA's definition of a complaint as "an expression of dissatisfaction by one or more students about something a provider has done or not done, or about the standard of service provided by or on behalf of the provider."
- 2.2 Our definition of 'concerns' draws on the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (2018) and describes informal comments, made verbally or in writing, to Escape Studios representatives regarding the services of Escape Studios. Concerns raised on social media will be logged and referred to the responsible School Dean or head of service for resolution.
- 2.3 Escape Studios may dismiss complaints that it deems to have no serious purpose or that are intended to cause disruption or annoyance. Examples include complaints:
  - a) that the provider has previously considered and decided;
  - b) that are about something which a fair-minded person would consider to be trivial;
  - c) that the student is pursuing in a way that is having a seriously negative effect on the provider's staff or work;
  - d) where the student is looking for a remedy that lacks any serious purpose or value.

### 3 Guiding principles

- 3.1 Escape Studios seeks to minimise student complaints by ensuring that students have opportunities to participate in formal decision-making processes at all levels and by encouraging regular feedback such as through tutor meetings, surveys and, for students on credit-bearing programmes, Student Voice Fora.
- 3.2 In the event that a student or a group of students are dissatisfied with an Escape Studios service, Escape Studios commits to:
  - a) resolve the matter at the earliest possible opportunity;

- b) investigate fairly and thoroughly;
  - c) ensure the process is unbiased;
  - d) ensure that students will not experience disadvantage for raising genuine complaints;
  - e) maintain confidentiality and protect individual privacy throughout the complaints process.
- 3.3 To assist prompt resolution, Escape Studios asks that students raise problems as soon as they arise.
- 3.4 Remedies in response to complaints would, normally, aim to restore students to the position in which they would have been had the deficiency signalled in the complaint had not occurred.
- 3.5 In the interest of natural justice, all parties to a complaint will be entitled to put forward their case and to see all evidence under consideration.
- 3.6 If there is to be a hearing, everyone involved will have the right to attend and to be heard.
- 3.7 Students in need of additional support or guidance in making a complaint, or wishing to access counselling due to the adverse effect that the issues of the complaint have had on their wellbeing, should inform Student Services without delay.
- 3.8 Anonymous complaints or evidence will be investigated but the student who has raised the complaint will not receive information on how their complaint has been addressed.
- 3.9 If there are allegations of a criminal offence, Escape Studios may be obliged to refer the matter to the police, for example where there is a serious risk of harm to students or staff. Escape Studios may suspend its own proceedings until the outcome of any criminal proceedings are known.
- 3.10 If there are serious allegations made about the conduct of a member of staff, Escape Studios may refer the matter to Human Resources to investigate under its staff disciplinary procedure and suspend its own proceedings until the outcome of that investigation is known.
- 3.11 Escape Studios expects that students, their representatives and staff members should act reasonably and fairly towards each other and treat the complaint process with respect.
- 3.12 Where there are concerns about the authenticity of evidence provided by a student, Escape Studios may verify the evidence independently. If evidence is found not to be genuine, Escape Studios may invoke its disciplinary procedures.

#### **4 Application and Scope**

- 4.1 This procedure is for currently registered students at Escape Studios or those within one month of ceasing their student registration. This includes those on short courses. There is a separate procedure for applicants to Escape Studios.
- 4.2 A complaint in relation to the following is within the scope of this policy:
  - a) Escape Studios service or facilities (e.g. standard of teaching; resources available);
  - b) action or inaction by Escape Studios and its staff;
  - c) the conduct of a member of staff or another student (e.g. discrimination or harassment);
  - d) misleading information in handbooks, prospectuses or other promotional material;
  - e) services provided by Escape Studios partners or contractors;
  - f) any other matter which adversely affects the student(s) and which is within the control of Escape Studios.
- 4.3 This procedure does not cover academic appeals which are dealt with under the Academic Appeals procedure which can be found within the Policies and Regulations section on the

Escape Studios website. To assist with the decision of whether to submit a complaint or an academic appeal, Escape Studios publishes a document entitled “Do I have a complaint or an academic appeal” which is also available on the website.

- 4.4 Where several students share a concern and wish to raise the matter as a group, they should do so, in the first instance, by raising it with their Programme Leader/Head of Programme or at the relevant Student Voice Forum. Where this fails to resolve the problem, the complaint may proceed to the formal complaint stage (See 5.2.2).

## **5 Complaints Procedure**

### **5.1 Early Resolution Stage**

- 5.1.1 We hope that most issues will be resolved informally in regular discussions with staff or at Student Voice Fora. Should a student have a concern, they are encouraged to raise their concern as soon as possible with the responsible individual or Programme Leader as soon as possible after the event which is the subject of the concern. This is intended to be a largely oral process. The person with whom the concern has been raised will aim to resolve the issue. It is recognised that there may be exceptional circumstances in which students feel they cannot approach the individual concerned. In such cases, it is suggested that students seek help from someone else such as their Programme Leader, Personal Tutor or Student Experience.
- 5.1.2 In some cases it will be appropriate to refer a concern straight to the Formal Complaint Stage set out below, where the issues raised are complex and will require detailed investigation, e.g. where a concern includes the conduct of staff members or covers a number of different incidents.

### **5.2 Formal Complaint Stage**

- 5.2.1 If a student is dissatisfied with the outcome of early resolution and wishes to make a formal complaint, they can proceed to the formal stage. The formal complaint must be submitted in writing using the form available on the Escape Studios website and sent to the Dean of the relevant School or the Head of the relevant Department (a list of responsible officers is provided in Appendix 1). It must set out the student’s details, the details of the complaint, the remedy sought, with any supporting evidence attached.
- 5.2.2 As noted in 4.4. above, group concerns should first be raised with the Programme Leader or at a Student Voice Forum. Where members of the group remain dissatisfied and wish to escalate the concern, one person needs to act as a group representative and liaison with Escape Studios. The group representative must submit the formal complaint in writing using the complaints form available on the website. All students wishing to be party to the group complaint will be required to submit their name, student number and signature in support of the complaint.
- 5.2.3 The Formal Complaint is, normally, considered by the Dean of the relevant School or the Head of Department of the service to which the complaint relates. Where the respective Dean of School or the Head of Service have been involved at the early resolution stage, the Head of Governance will consider the complaint. In all cases, care will be taken to ensure that the complaint investigating officer has appropriate seniority and has not had prior involvement with the case.
- 5.2.4 Students can expect to receive an acknowledgment from the complaint investigating officer within one week of the formal complaint being received.
- 5.2.5 Escape Studios aims to resolve formal complaints within one calendar month of receipt. If there is likely to be a delay, students will be informed of this and the reasons for it.

- 5.2.6 The complaint investigating officer may undertake whatever investigation is considered appropriate in order to establish the facts of the case. They may call for additional evidence from the complainant and/or others, as appropriate. All information and evidence will be available to the complainant. Staff who are party to the complaint investigation will also have access to the case file. A meeting may be called to allow the complainant to explain their complaint and the reasons for remaining dissatisfied. A student is also entitled to request such a meeting. At that meeting, an administrator will be present to take notes. The complainant will be given a copy of these notes, and they will also be added to the case file. The complainant may be accompanied to this meeting by another student, or a member of Escape Studios staff, and they should inform Escape Studios of any accompanying party. A legal representative would not, normally, be permitted to accompany students to complaint meetings.
- 5.2.7 Following the meeting, the student will receive a written decision which addresses the points made in the complaint and gives reasons for the conclusion reached. The outcome letter would, normally, contain:
- a) steps taken to investigate the complaint;
  - b) summary of the evidence considered;
  - c) decision-making party;
  - d) proposed remedy, if applicable;
  - e) proposed measures to prevent the issue reoccurring.
- 5.2.8 The letter will also advise the student of their right to refer the matter to the Complaint Review Panel.

### **5.3 Complaint Review Panel (final) Stage**

- 5.3.1 If a student's formal complaint is not resolved following the issue of a written decision under 5.2.7 above, they may request a review. This must be submitted in writing to the Head of Governance.
- 5.3.2 A student may request a review on the following grounds:
- a) procedural irregularities at the earlier stages;
  - b) an outcome that is manifestly unreasonable;
  - c) new evidence that could make a difference to the outcome and which the student could not, reasonably, have provided earlier in the process.
- 5.3.3 The deadline for requesting a review is two weeks from the date of the written decision. Escape Studios aims to complete the review within two calendar months of receipt of the request. If there is likely to be a delay, students will be informed of the reasons.
- 5.3.4 In seeking a review, students should specify the grounds for requesting a review (see 5.3.2 above), the reason(s) for remaining dissatisfied with the outcome of the formal complaint, and the remedy they seek. No new ground of complaint may be raised, but students may submit further evidence in support of their case or suggest a new remedy.
- 5.3.5 The Head of Governance will convene a Complaint Review Panel.
- 5.3.6 The Complaint Review Panel will comprise:
- a) a senior member of Escape Studios who has not previously been involved in the case (Chair);
  - b) an internal member of the Governing Body;
  - c) a student representative.
- 5.3.7 No member of staff involved in the Panel will have been associated with the complaint or the person or service against whom the complaint has been lodged.

- 5.3.8 An Academic Quality Officer will act as Secretary to the Complaint Review Panel and will prepare the documentation for the Committee meeting which will consist of all paperwork relevant to the case. The student may submit further documents for consideration with an explanation as to why they were not submitted earlier.
- 5.3.9 The case documents will be made available to the student and all members of the Complaint Review Panel at least one week before the Committee is due to meet.
- 5.3.10 The student will be informed of the composition of the Committee ahead of the meeting and may raise objections against the impartiality of individual members to the Panel Secretary, who will then refer the objections to the Panel Chair for decision.
- 5.3.11 All parties to a complaint may call witnesses. If witnesses are to attend they will be asked to submit a written statement at least one week prior to the hearing. These statements will be circulated by the Panel Secretary to all parties as part of the case file.
- 5.3.12 The Panel Chair may, for good reason, refuse to allow a particular witness to be called. The Chair may also make a determination on whether to allow late evidence.

## **6 Complaint Review Panel Protocol**

- 6.1 The Panel will give fresh consideration to all matters which form the substance of the complaint as well as the way in which the complaint has been handled. However, it may not act as a disciplinary body.
- 6.2 The complainant may be accompanied to the meeting by a friend or other supporter who would usually be a student of Escape Studios or the Personal Tutor. The supporter may, at the discretion of the Chair, address the meeting or ask questions on the student's behalf. A legal representative would not, normally, be permitted.
- 6.3 At the meeting, the complainant will be asked to present their case and they may call witnesses whose testimony has previously been submitted. The student and any witnesses may be questioned by the Panel and the person or the representative of the person or service which is the subject of the complaint. Where the complaint involves the conduct of a member of staff, the Panel Chair will consider whether it is appropriate for a student to be questioned directly by the person who is the subject of the complaint. For the avoidance of doubt, where there is an allegation of sexual misconduct, the student will not be questioned by the person who is the subject of the complaint.
- 6.4 The representative of the service or person, which is the subject of the complaint, will, then, be allowed to present their case, respond to the points raised by the student, and may call witnesses whose testimony has previously been submitted. The representative and witnesses for the person or service concerned may be questioned by the student as well as the Panel.
- 6.5 Both sides will then be given the opportunity to sum up their case.
- 6.6 The burden of proof will be on the complainant.
- 6.7 The standard of proof will be on the balance of probabilities.
- 6.8 The Panel will then retire to consider its decision. The outcomes from a Complaints Review Panel may include the following:
  - a) upholding the complaint in full with a statement as to remedy; or,
  - b) upholding the complaint in part with a statement as to remedy, and reasoning for the aspects dismissed; or,
  - c) dismissed with an explanation.

- 6.9 The Secretary to the Panel will aim to inform the student of the outcome of the hearing within one week. A formal report of the Panel will be sent to the student as soon as possible but no later than three weeks after the notification of the Complaint Review Panel outcome.
- 6.10 For students on credit-bearing programmes only, the formal report will be accompanied by a Completion of Procedures letter. This will confirm that Escape Studios' internal procedures have been exhausted. If the student on a credit-bearing programme remains unhappy with the outcome, they may refer the complaint to the relevant validating body or other external body (see section 10 below). Additionally, the student (on credit-bearing programmes only) will be advised of their right to refer their complaint for review by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) (see section 11 below).
- 6.11 If the complainant is unable to attend the Panel meeting or comply with the timescales, this will not automatically invalidate the proceedings and the meeting may be held in the student's absence.

## **7 Exceptional Circumstances**

- 7.1 Escape Studios recognises that making a complaint may cause undue anxiety and stress to students.
- 7.2 Escape Studios undertakes to resolve complaints as expeditiously as possible, and within the timescales outlined in this policy. If the matter requires urgent attention, students are encouraged to signal so on the Complaints Form, with the reasons for urgency, evidenced as appropriate. Where possible, Escape Studios will aim to accommodate requests for expediting the complaints procedure.
- 7.3 Escape Studios reserves the right to expedite resolution, or to defer, and even suspend the process if there is a health, wellbeing or safeguarding concern regarding the student making the complaint. Such action will seek to be in the interest of the student.

## **8 Equality and Diversity**

- 8.1 If a complainant requires reasonable adjustments due to disability to attend a hearing or otherwise engage with the complaint process, they should notify Escape Studios in advance via the Complaints Form. All practical steps will be taken to accommodate such requests.
- 8.2 In accordance with the Equality and Diversity Policy, Escape Studios is committed to developing and maintaining a working and learning environment that is free from unfair and unlawful discrimination and harassment. We will not tolerate any individual being subject to abuse, harassment or bullying. If such behaviour is displayed by either party at any point during the Complaints Procedure, Escape Studios reserves the right to suspend the complaints process and invoke disciplinary proceedings instead.

## **9 Service improvement**

- 9.1 Where recommendations are made by a Complaint Review Panel for service improvement, the service concerned will inform the Dean of Academic Affairs of the steps that have been taken to remedy the situation within two months of the date of the Complaint Review Panel's report.
- 9.2 Each year, the Dean of Academic Affairs will prepare an annual report to Academic Board on the numbers of formal complaints and reviews, highlighting any trends, patterns, and recommendations for improvement. The report will be shared with Governing Body in the Annual Quality Report.

## **10 Further Redress**

10.1 This document represents Escape Studios' internal procedure for the handling of student complaints. Once Escape Studios' complaints procedure has concluded, students on credit-bearing programmes may, additionally, choose to avail themselves of the complaints procedure of our validating partner.

## **11 Office of the Independent Adjudicator**

11.1 Escape Studios is subject to the scheme of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIAHE.org.uk). Students on credit-bearing programmes are, therefore, entitled to ask the OIA to review their complaint once Escape Studios' internal procedure has been exhausted, within twelve months of the date of the Completion of Procedures letter. Students may seek guidance from Student Services on how to make a referral to the OIA. Student Services will advise students on any time-sensitive considerations warranting a prompt referral, e.g. programme closure.

## Appendix 1

### Contact details

Complaints regarding	Name of person to send complaint to	Contact details
Student Services, including admissions, counselling, support for students with additional learning needs	Kim Robinson (Head of Student Administration and Support)	kim.robinson@escapestudios.com
Quality Assurance Office	Branislav Kotoc (Head of Academic Quality)	branislav.kotoc@escapestudios.com
Business School programmes Study Skills, Library and OLE	Alphonse de Klyuver, Acting Dean of, Business School/ Dean of Assessment and Academic Support	alphonse.dekluyver@escapestudios.com
Marketing/Student Recruitment	Teila Smith, Director, of External Relations	teila.smith@escapestudios.com
Escape Studios Animation and Visual Effects programmes and short courses	Alex Williams, Dean of Animation and Visual Effects	alex.williams@escapestudios.com
Escape Studios Interactive and Real-time programmes and short courses	Simon Fenton, Dean of Interactive and Real-time	simon.fenton@escapestudios.com



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