

# **2025 Complaints Procedure for Durham University access programmes: Supported Progression, Sutton Trust and Space to Explore Potential (STEP)**

## **Key terms**

- “SP” = Supported Progression
- “ST” = Sutton Trust
- “STEP” = Space To Explore Potential
- “Person” = The applicant or participant wishing to make a complaint
- “the University” = Durham University

## **Introduction and Principles**

1. The University aims to provide a high standard and quality of service for applicants and participants of Supported Progression (SP), Sutton Trust (ST) and Space To Explore Potential (STEP) and to deliver an admissions process that is consistent, fair and professional but recognises that occasionally things may go wrong. As part of its commitment to enhancing the programme experience, this procedure has been established to deal with complaints from applicants and participants in a fair and transparent manner. The University recognises that complaints may provide useful feedback from applicants and participants and, where appropriate, will be used to improve the programmes.

2. These procedures explain how applicants to, and participants of, the Supported Progression, Sutton Trust and STEP programme may make a complaint at both informal and formal stages. Person(s) who have a complaint to make should raise it as soon as possible, as matters that are dealt with informally at an early stage have the best chance of being resolved effectively. Only when the informal procedures have been exhausted and the Person remains dissatisfied should a formal complaint be made.

3. It is recognised however that there may be occasions where the applicant may consider that an informal complaint is not appropriate and wishes to proceed to the formal stage in the procedure, giving their reasons for doing so. In such situations, the University, taking account of the complaint's particular nature and circumstances, will consider whether an attempt to resolve the complaint informally is appropriate or allow the complaint to be investigated formally.

4. The Person(s) are encouraged to discuss their complaint with parents or other family members, advisers or teachers. Separate advice before and during any dispute will help an applicant reach an informed opinion. University staff can provide clarification on the process but are unable to provide support in constructing a complaint as this will represent a conflict of interest.

5. Complaints should be brought forward by the Person as soon as possible after the events or actions (or lack of actions), which have prompted the complaint. The University will not consider complaints that are made more than three months after the events complained about unless the applicant provides evidence of an exceptional reason for the delay. The

decision on whether to consider an appeal made more than three months after the events will be made by the Academic Registrar or nominated deputy.

6. In order to ensure that complaints are considered in an appropriate manner and time lines are adhered to, the Person is expected to provide a concise and clear summary of their complaint, their desired outcomes and any relevant additional information to support their complaint at the time it is submitted to the University. Only in exceptional circumstances will the University accept additional supporting information from the Person once the investigation has started, save for new information which was not previously available or if specifically requested by the officer considering the complaint.

7. The University expects Persons, being best able to communicate any issues of dissatisfaction or adverse effects, to raise matters of complaint with the University directly and will only accept complaints raised by third parties on the Person's behalf in exceptional cases (evidence of mitigation may be required) and only then with the written permission of the Person to deal with a named third party.

8. The University reserves the right to refuse to investigate or suspend any investigation underway where it becomes aware that legal, court or tribunal proceedings have been initiated in relation to the issues raised in the complaint. Where the Person wishes to have legal representation, the University will involve its own legal representation and will not continue with discussions as part of this Complaints Procedure.

9. Staff at Durham University who have a role in Supported Progression, Sutton Trust, and STEP are required to know, understand, and follow the University's Complaints Procedure which is supplementary to the University's Complaints Procedure for Applicants.

10. Every reasonable effort will be made to deal promptly and efficiently with all complaints, to investigate them thoroughly, objectively and independently and to seek to resolve them satisfactorily. If a complaint is upheld, the University will seek to provide an appropriate response and correct any mistakes or misunderstandings and take any other action as deemed appropriate by the investigating officer. If a complaint is not upheld then reasons for that decision will be given.

11. All complaints will be dealt with in confidence. The University will however need to make enquiries to investigate the matters complained about. An individual (or individuals) against whom a complaint is made has the right to be supplied with a copy of the complaint and to comment on it. A complaint cannot be investigated if the Person does not wish the substance of the allegation to be made known to the individual(s) concerned. If an investigation is undertaken, the investigating officer may also need to speak to other relevant third parties. All individuals involved in an investigation will be reminded of the requirement to keep the matter confidential.

12. The effectiveness of any complaints procedure depends on the University being able to collect appropriate information from the parties involved in order to investigate the matter. Information about a complaint will only be circulated to appropriate staff on a need-to-know basis. The University expects the Person to keep information relating to the complaint confidential except to those people directly advising or supporting them. No information is disclosed to anyone outside the University, including the Person's family and key

influencers, without the express permission of the applicant/participant or as required by law. Records of the processing of formal complaints will be held centrally and retained in accordance with University records keeping policies.

13. For the reasons outlined in paragraphs 8 and 9, the University will not investigate anonymous complaints formally under this procedure.

14. The University will treat complaints seriously and Person(s) will not be discriminated against in any further application or matter relating to Supported Progression/Sutton Trust/STEP should they make a complaint under the University's policies and procedures.

15. In all cases considered under this procedure, the balance of probabilities is the test that is applied in determining the outcome of the complaint.

16. An investigation will deal with the main issues of complaint identified by the Person but it is not expected that the investigator's findings will be able to address in detail all matters raised.

17. Where a complaint is shown to be frivolous, vexatious or motivated by malice, it will not be investigated.

18. The time limits set out in this procedure will be followed as it is in the best interests of the applicant/participant, staff and the University to investigate and conclude matters of complaint as quickly as possible. However, where, for good reason, the University is unable to keep to the normal time limits, all parties will be kept regularly informed of progress and should inform the University where they do not consider extension to timelines reasonable. All parties are expected to comply with reasonable deadlines set by the University and advise the University about any difficulties they may face during investigation. Any delays by one party may impact on other time lines within this process.

## **Scope of the Procedure**

19. This Procedure is for complaints from Person(s) relating to the Supported Progression, Sutton Trust or STEP programme at Durham University. A complaint is defined as a specific concern related to a procedural error, irregularity or maladministration in the application stage or as a result of participation on the programme or where relating specifically to the programmes during the regular admissions procedures or policies.

20. This Procedure does not cover appeals, which are defined as a request for a formal review of an admissions decision, including the allocation of a college. Further information can be found at footnote 1 below and at <https://www.dur.ac.uk/collegiate.office/allocations/>.

21. This procedure is only available for applicants to, and participants of, the Supported Progression programme, Sutton Trust Summer School Programme and the STEP Programme at Durham University.

## **Informal Stage (Stage 1)**

22. The University is committed to resolving matters of applicant dissatisfaction informally as this enables a prompt investigation and resolution to the mutual agreement of all parties. The University believes that most matters of applicant/participant dissatisfaction can be resolved informally and applicants/participants should raise these matters as close and soon as possible to the source of their dissatisfaction. Applicants/participants should, therefore, initially discuss the matter with those directly responsible.

23. The list below highlights those members of staff who may be approached by the applicant/participant to seek an informal resolution:

- Complaints relating to an application to Supported Progression/Sutton Trust/STEP should be discussed with the Project Manager of Supported Progression/Sutton Trust/Supported progression via email to [access.participation@durham.ac.uk](mailto:access.participation@durham.ac.uk). The informal stage should follow a request for individual feedback on the decision that has been made. The request for feedback should be made to the team using the email addresses provided at the bottom of this policy. This will ensure that the applicant understands the reasoning behind the decision before deciding whether or not to challenge it.
- Complaints relating to the events, activities and other matters considered to be related to participation on the access programme should be discussed with the project manager or with a nominated Deputy.
- Complaints relating to an application made to the University will be dealt with in accordance with the **University's Complaints Procedure for Applicants**.

24. If there is no readily identifiable individual to address the complaint to then the Person should contact the Deputy Head of Widening Access and Participation: Richard Coldwell at: [richard.coldwell@durham.ac.uk](mailto:richard.coldwell@durham.ac.uk).

25. Staff handling matters at the informal stage should understand the nature of the Person's dissatisfaction and the outcome the Person seeks.

26. Wherever possible, a Person's complaint should be resolved at this local level, without the need to resort to formal proceedings. Where appropriate, staff should record the resolution reached and, as necessary, confirm the resolution in writing with the Person for both parties to refer to later if further issues arise. Persons may request that they be notified of the resolution in writing. It may also be appropriate to inform the Person of Stage 2 of this procedure. Where it is not possible to reach a satisfactory resolution to an informal complaint the Person should be informed of their right to submit a formal Stage 2 complaint. A Person will be recommended to proceed to the formal Stage 2 if the staff member believes that it would be unprofessional to continue informally, for example if the complaint is on the grounds of discrimination against a protected characteristic under the Equality Act.

## **Formal Stage (Stage 2)**

27. If the Person is not satisfied with the response at the informal stage or did not consider informal resolution to be appropriate in their circumstances, they may initiate a formal complaint by completing all sections of the Complaints Form within three months of the events complained about. The Complaint Form should be submitted to the Head of Widening

Access and Participation, in the Student Recruitment and Admissions Office (contact details below).

28. In order that the University can investigate complaints in a timely, fair and transparent manner, the information provided by the Person must be clear and concise. To facilitate this, the University has a Complaint Form where the Person should provide:

- (a) A short (500 word or fewer) statement describing the main issues to be addressed or areas of dissatisfaction. This is the most critical section of the complaint form as any investigation will focus on the main issues raised here;
- (b) A statement detailing actions already taken by the Person to resolve the matter informally and why the response provided was considered unsatisfactory or reasons why informal action was not considered appropriate in the circumstances;
- (c) The form of resolution or redress sought by the Person in relation to the main issues.
- (d) If necessary and as briefly as possible, additional related background or contextual details or descriptions of incidents and events raised as the main issues and their impact on the application or participation. Any details or descriptions provided should directly relate to the main issues. Person(s) should not expect that any details and descriptions provided here will be directly responded to;
- (e) A list and copies of any documents or information provided in support of the main issues of the complaint. In some cases the University may request to see original documents.

29. The Complaint Form should be signed and submitted electronically or in paper form to the address listed on the form together with any supporting information. The Head of Widening Access and Participation in the Student Recruitment and Admissions Office will acknowledge receipt of the Complaint Form within ten working days.

30. Upon receipt of a Complaint Form, the Head of Widening Access and Participation in the Student Recruitment and Admissions Office will conduct a formal investigation into the issues raised in the complaint, in consultation with appropriate staff as necessary. The raising of the complaint and any communication between the Person and the Head of Widening Access and Participation will be in writing.

31. It is expected that the formal procedure should be completed and a written response sent to the Person within 42 days of receipt of the completed Complaints Form. The possible outcomes include:

- (a) The complaint is upheld in relation to one or more of the main issues specified by the Person. A formal review of any SP, ST, or STEP decision may follow if deemed appropriate. Recommendations will be communicated to the relevant staff member within the University on how those upheld main issues should be addressed. The Person will be informed in writing of the decision and any resolution;
- (b) The complaint is dismissed in relation to all the main issues specified by the Person and reasons are given to the applicant in writing.

32. In all cases where the Person remains dissatisfied with the outcome, they will be informed of their right to request a review of the decision under Stage 3 of this procedure,

the timescales for doing so and the grounds on which they may request a review. Where the University does not receive additional enquiries or requests from the Person within the applicable timescales it will consider the matter closed and the Person will not be permitted to progress their complaint to Stage 3.

33. A copy of the letter to the Person informing them of the outcome of their complaint and all information relevant to the decision of the Head of Widening Access and Participation in the Student Recruitment and Admissions Office will be retained by the Student Recruitment and Admissions Office for a period defined by the University's Records Retention Policy.

### **Review Request (Stage 3)**

34. If the Person remains dissatisfied with the outcome of the Stage 2 complaint and believes that the complaint has not been handled properly or fairly according to these procedures, the Person may request for a review by writing to the Deputy Academic Registrar for Access, Recruitment, and Admissions ( within 14 days of receipt of the Stage 2 outcome. The request must state the grounds for requesting a review and include details of the resolution they are seeking.

35. The grounds for review of a Stage 2 complaint outcome are limited to the identification of a procedural irregularity during Stage 2, provision of new material evidence together with a valid reason for why it was not previously submitted and consideration of whether the outcome reached was reasonable in all the circumstances.

36. Receipt of the request for a review will be acknowledged within ten working days. The Deputy Academic Registrar will review the case in light of the review request submitted by the applicant and all the information considered by the Head of Widening Participation<sup>1</sup> in the Student Recruitment and Admissions Office in reaching an outcome at Stage 2. The Deputy Academic Registrar may decide to seek further information from the Person and/or others concerned or to inform the Person of any limitations on the scope of a review.

37. Taking account of the substance of the review request and the outcome of Stage 2, the Deputy Academic Registrar will then decide on an appropriate outcome. The Person will be notified of the decision within 28 days of receipt of the request for a review and provided with a response that clearly sets out the reasons for each decision.

38. If the Deputy Academic Registrar upholds one or more aspects of the review request the Person will be provided with information about implementation of any remedy.

39. If the Deputy Academic Registrar dismisses the complaint there shall be no further opportunity for the complaint to be pursued within the University. The Person will be provided with a completion of procedures letter.

### **Monitoring:**

40. An annual report on Supported Progression, Sutton Trust and STEP complaints will be made in writing to the Deputy Academic Registrar to be available upon request by the University's Education Committee.

## **Contacts:**

Contact details for access programmes at Durham University, including the Director of the Programme, are:

### **Supported Progression**

- Email: [supported.progression@durham.ac.uk](mailto:supported.progression@durham.ac.uk).
- Post: Supported Progression, Schools Outreach and Widening Participation Office, Durham University, Palatine Centre, Stockton Road, Durham, DH1 3LE.

### **Sutton Trust**

- Email: [sutton.trust@durham.ac.uk](mailto:sutton.trust@durham.ac.uk).
- Post: Sutton Trust, Schools Outreach and Widening Participation Office, Durham University, Palatine Centre, Stockton Road, Durham, DH1 3LE.

### **STEP**

- Email: [step@durham.ac.uk](mailto:step@durham.ac.uk).
- Post: Sutton Trust, Schools Outreach and Widening Participation Office, Durham University, Palatine Centre, Stockton Road, Durham, DH1 3LE.

Contact details for the head of service of one of the University's administrative or support services can be found at [www.dur.ac.uk/directory/units/admin/](http://www.dur.ac.uk/directory/units/admin/).

Contact details for the Head Widening Access and Participation:

- Email: [Ross.Wilkinson@durham.ac.uk](mailto:Ross.Wilkinson@durham.ac.uk)
- Post: Head of Widening Participation, Student Recruitment and Admissions Office, Durham University, Palatine Centre, Stockton Road, Durham, DH1 3LE.

Contact details for the Deputy Academic Registrar: Access, Recruitment, and Admissions:

- Email: [jonathan.batty@durham.ac.uk](mailto:jonathan.batty@durham.ac.uk)
- Post: Deputy Academic Registrar, The Mountjoy Centre, Durham University, Stockton Road, Durham, DH1 3LE.

*This procedure is based on the University's Complaints Procedure for Applicants and where appropriate, the latter will take precedence.*

(Last updated May 2025, to be reviewed annually.)

