

ST. MARY'S UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
A College of the
Queen's University Belfast

Admissions
Appeals/Complaints Procedure

1. **Introduction**

St. Mary's University College receives approximately 2,500 applications for admission to undergraduate programmes, and a further 200 applications for admission to postgraduate programmes. However, the undergraduate intake and Postgraduate Certificate in Education each year is dictated by a government-imposed cap, which means that not all suitably-qualified candidates can be accommodated. There is no government cap on in-service places, but the number allocated can be determined by the availability of funding, which is limited and awarded on a competitive basis.

College policy is formulated in line with the strategic plan. Admissions criteria - i.e. the entry qualifications and grades for individual courses - are determined by Academic Registry in consultation with Programme Co-ordinators for the purposes of implementing the strategic plan, within the overall constraints placed on student numbers by both government and professional bodies.

Most undergraduate admissions decisions are based on transparent academic criteria – e.g. GCSE and A Level performance. The admissions website (<http://www.smucb.ac.uk/admissions>) contains a detailed description of the various entrance qualifications and grades required for particular courses, but published grades are indicative only and an offer made to an applicant may vary from the published criteria. Some degree courses require additional evidence of a candidate's suitability – e.g. Interviews are sometimes used to identify whether candidates have the desired attributes, but in all such cases selectors are required to have clearly stated selection criteria.

Academic Registry staff are able to satisfy most queries about admissions decisions on a daily basis, and the vast majority of applicants are satisfied with the explanation given. The following procedure has been drawn up to cover cases where unsuccessful candidates do not accept the explanation offered.

2. **Scope of the Procedure**

This procedure is based on the University-wide Student Complaints Procedure. It covers all applicants to credit-bearing and non-credit-bearing courses, and thus can be used by persons who are not currently St. Mary's University College students.

The procedure covers the following types of appeal/complaint:

- complaints about the College's handling of a query or an application for admission;
- allegations that admissions criteria were not applied correctly or even-handedly.

The procedure does not cover strategic decisions relating to the overall size and shape of faculties or departments, or to caps on student numbers in particular courses whether imposed by the University, government or professional bodies. Any correspondence on these matters should be directed to the Senior Tutor who has overall responsibility for admissions.

In cases of collaborative provision, i.e. where a College programme is taught jointly with another institution, responsibility for admissions decisions may vary according to the terms of the collaborative arrangement, and enquiries should be directed in the first instance to Academic Registry at St. Mary's University College. Where the admissions query relates to a programme designed as an entry route to St. Mary's (e.g. an Access course for mature students), enquiries should be directed to the institution offering the entrance qualification (e.g. a college or institute of further and higher education, in the case of Access students).

3. Submission and Investigation of Enquiries/Complaints/Appeals

3.1 First Stage: Informal Resolution

Enquiries about admissions decisions should normally be made by the applicant in question and should be directed to the Academic Registry in the first instance (telephone 02890 268320, email admis@smucb.ac.uk or write to the Academic Registry, St. Mary's University College, 191 Fall's Road, Belfast BT12 6FE). If necessary, Academic Registry will consult with relevant staff before responding to the query. A written response will be made to every written enquiry (i.e. by letter or email), normally within 10 working days, and this written response will mark the completion of the informal stage.

3.2 Second Stage: Formal Letter to Senior Tutor

An applicant who is dissatisfied with the written explanation should put his/her concerns in writing to the Senior Tutor within 10 working days of the date of the Academic Registry letter (3.1 above). The formal letter to the Senior Tutor should set out the grounds for dissatisfaction with the response from the Academic Registry, and include any previous correspondence.

The Senior Tutor (or nominee) shall then consult with Academic Registry and academic staff as necessary, and shall undertake such further enquiries as are deemed necessary before providing a written response normally within 15 working days of receipt of the complaint. When a complaint is made about specific members of staff, those staff shall have the right to see copies of relevant documentation, to present evidence to the Senior Tutor or his/her nominee, and to be informed of the outcome of the complaint/appeal.

3.3 Third Stage: Appeal

- (i) Any student still dissatisfied after the second stage may appeal to the Principal within 10 working days of receiving the Senior Tutor's decision. A Review Panel shall then be convened, to meet normally within 15 working days of receipt of the appeal letter. However, there is no appeal against an admissions decision which, in the judgement of the Principal, results from the correct and impartial application of written criteria. In such cases, the Principal shall communicate this decision in writing to the appellant, normally within 10 working days of receipt of the appeal.
- (i) Where a Review Panel is deemed necessary, the Panel shall normally comprise:

The Principal (in the chair);
 - a Senior Tutor;
 - Personnel Officer;
 - the President or other sabbatical officer from the Students' Union;
 - Coordinator Student Guidance and Support.
- (ii) Panel members shall not have had any prior involvement in the case. The Panel membership shall be chosen as far as possible to reflect the diversity of the Northern Ireland community.
- (iv) The appellant should forward copies of previous correspondence and any supporting documentation to the Panel, and shall have the right to appear before the Panel accompanied by a member of teaching staff from the appellant's present or former school or college. No legal representation shall be permitted at any stage during the procedure.
- (v) The Panel may seek written evidence from any witness or person who in the Panel's judgement may have relevant information to contribute. Any such person shall have the right to see relevant documentation to be considered by the Panel, in advance of the hearing, and shall have the right to appear in front of the Panel if (s)he wishes, accompanied by a student or staff member of the College. However, neither the appellant nor any witness shall be required to appear in front of the Panel if they do not wish to appear.
- (vi) Should the appellant fail to appear before the Panel at an appointed time and without valid reason, the Panel shall have the right to reach a decision in the appellant's absence.
- (vii) The Panel's findings and recommendations shall be communicated to the appellant within 10 working days of the Panel's meeting. The Panel shall also send a report to the Senior Tutor and the Academic Registrar, summarising the Panel's conclusions and recommendations.

4. Deadlines

The deadlines set out in this procedure relate to investigations carried out in semester-time only, and may not prove possible to meet at particularly busy periods for the Academic Registry (e.g. August-September). The College will at all times strive to respond to enquiries as quickly as circumstances allow.

5. Confidentiality and Enquiries from Third Parties

All parties to a complaint are expected to maintain strict confidentiality, both during and after any enquiry/appeal/complaint. Enquiries about admissions decisions should normally be made by the applicant in question. When an admissions decision is queried by a third party (e.g. a school enquiring on behalf of a former pupil), the Academic Registry may supply a generalised answer on admissions policy but is precluded from discussing individual cases by the terms of the Data Protection Act. However, a more detailed response may be given when the applicant expressly states that the third party is acting on his/her behalf.

6. Central Monitoring of Admissions Complaints/Appeals

The Academic Registrar shall prepare an annual summary of the nature and outcome of any formal admissions appeals/complaints for the second cycle Learning & Teaching Committee meeting each year.