

The Students' Association's Full Time Officers (FTOs) have conducted a rapid consultation with student representatives regarding the proposed Student Code of Conduct. While we appreciate the university's efforts to update conduct policies, we have highlighted our concerns about some provisions within the draft code and the lack of initial student consultation. This document outlines our feedback, co-created with students and elected student reps on the SDC panel, and provides our recommendations for moving forward.

Key Concerns and Recommendations

1. Expanded Authority for Heads of Department (Priority Issue)

The draft code significantly expands the scope and authority of Heads of Department to handle Level One breaches, encompassing both academic and non-academic misconduct. This creates several critical problems:

Concentration of Power: Too much authority is placed in individual hands without adequate checks and balances, creating potential for inconsistent and biased decision-making across departments.

Absence of Peer Representation: The proposed structure excludes student representatives from conduct panels, and the principle of "trial by peers" in disciplinary processes.

Lack of Accountability: No training, support, or accountability measures are specifically outlined for Heads of Department making conduct decisions, risking inconsistent outcomes for students facing similar infractions.

Disproportionate Consequences: Heads of Department would have the authority to impose severe sanctions, including removal from university or student accommodation, with minimal oversight or standardisation.

Uncontrolled Sanction Powers: The draft allows Heads of Department to create their own sanctions, which completely lack proper safeguards.

Our Recommendations: Restrict departmental hearings to academic misconduct only; prevent Heads of Department from removing students from university/accommodation or creating novel sanctions; mandate annual training; include student representatives on panels; ensure the presiding Head is not from the student's department; include detailed investigation processes in the code itself.

2. Artificial Intelligence Policy Gaps

The code disciplines students for AI usage despite the university lacking comprehensive AI policies or consistent teaching on appropriate usage. Students are being held accountable to standards that have never been clearly communicated or taught. While we understand AI policy development is underway, disciplining students before proper guidance is developed, implemented, and taught is fundamentally unethical and puts the cart before the horse. This creates an impossible situation where students may face sanctions for violating unclear or non-existent standards. It is recommended to pause the further inclusion of AI such as proofreading tools, until the university has a clear policy on AI usage which is included in the curriculum in every programme.

3. Overly Broad Social Media Provisions

The policy's "inappropriate use of social media" language grants sweeping, undefined powers that could restrict students' lawful free speech rights. This vague standard could be applied arbitrarily to suppress legitimate criticism or unpopular opinions. Other universities use more precise, legally defensible language. Glasgow University specifically targets "threatening, offensive or indecent language" while Strathclyde references "violent, indecent, disorderly, threatening or offensive behaviour." We strongly recommend adopting similar specific language that protects legitimate expression while addressing genuine misconduct.

4. Inequitable Treatment of London-Based Students

Using online panels for London-based students creates fundamental unfairness in the conduct process. Students should not receive inferior treatment based on their geographical location. A London-based sub-panel should be established or majority of panel members should be London-based to ensure equitable treatment and proper consideration of local context. It could also be considered to make hybrid access the default, with options for in-person support on request.

5. Anonymous Complaints Provisions

Section 2.7.1 allows anonymous complaints to trigger conduct panels without sufficient evidentiary safeguards, creating potential for abuse and malicious reporting. Anonymous complaints should only proceed when credible and corroborated evidence is independently available, not based solely on unverified allegations and this should be reflected in the code.

6. Restrictive Appeal Provisions

The appeal process is restrictive and removes important protections for students. The minimised investigation process makes it difficult for students to identify and appeal procedural irregularities, while removing "unduly harsh" as appeal grounds abandons the compassionate approach currently practiced. We recommend solidifying compassionate principles in the policy and maintaining comprehensive appeal rights with clear investigatory process embedded into the code to that ensure fair treatment.

7. Restricting Access to Students' Association Activities

While we are open to working with the university to ensure safeguarding of all students, we feel that the inclusion of this as a possible sanction is overstepping the independence of the Students' Association.

Positive Aspects and Additional Recommendations

We acknowledge several positive elements: renaming conduct panels for clarity, explicit inclusion of gender-based violence provisions, inclusion of relevant staff in panel discussions, and incorporation of mitigating and exceptional extenuating circumstances in decision-making.

We recommend changing "Level One" and "Level Two" terminology to location-based naming such as "Departmental/Local" and "Central/University" to avoid hierarchical implications.

Conclusion

We view this feedback as a starting point for constructive dialogue and look forward to working together to create a Student Code of Conduct that has broad support across our university community. After consulting with 10 student reps, 4 FTOs and 2 Students' Association staff, we welcome the opportunity to discuss these concerns and our recommendations in detail and stand ready to engage constructively in a revised consultation process.

Whilst we appreciate that Senate confirmed the opportunity for student consultation on the revised policy, given the limited timeframe to respond and at this point in the academic year we need to ensure that a proactive and timely approach to genuine student consultation takes place going forward.

This document represents the collective feedback of the Students' Association's Full Time Officers, developed in consultation with student representatives.