

# Australian Competency and Ethical Framework For Complaint Professionals for Complaints Professional Certification





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# Introduction

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In the past two decades, within Australia, there has been an increasing focus on the policies and processes used in complaint handling. Australian Standards and industry and government guides have been developed to create better approaches in recognition that effective complaint handling requires systems, processes and people oriented towards the responsive, respectful and meaningful resolution of issues. This body of work is underpinned by the acknowledgment that good complaint handling systems save time, money and relationships and can help organisations function more effectively.

However, despite this work, there has been little focus on the people who deal with complaints. An important dimension in supporting effective complaint handling is recognising that those who deal with complaints need the relevant knowledge, skills and ethical understandings to do this work and that these competencies serve to reinforce and promote the professionalism that exists in the sector. It is this 'human' dimension of complaint handling that is the focus of this Framework, and accompanying SOCAP Australia Complaints Professional Certification Scheme (Scheme) and it is designed to support positive human interaction by recognising and building levels of competency in those who deal with complaints.

This Framework accompanies the SOCAP Australia Complaints Professional Certification Scheme and is used throughout the Scheme application and assessment to identify the knowledge, skills and ethical understandings and competencies required by professional complaint handlers and consumer affairs professionals.

The material in this Framework recognises that there is a range of different complaint process models in use across Australia and that complaint processes can take place in a wide variety of situations. Often, complaint processes will be influenced by law, policy and other external factors. This Framework is not an attempt to replace existing frameworks or to capture every situation where a complaint process may take place. Rather, it is designed to enhance and add value to the effectiveness of existing processes and systems where possible.

This Framework has been adapted for use for the SOCAP Australia Complaints Professional Certification Scheme from an original project supported by a grant from Professional Standards Councils to the Society of Consumer Affairs Professionals in Business Australia

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*“Being a good complaint handler is all about the ability to develop good relationships with people.”*

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*“In this sector, your attitude really matters.”*

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Incorporated (SOCAP) and the Australian Centre for Justice Innovation at Monash University (ACJI) for the development of a framework for professional standards for consumer affairs and complaints management professionals. The professional standards project was part of a broader project that also involved the development of a toolkit for small and medium sized organisations to assist with complaint handling. Information about the professional standards project can be found at <http://www.law.monash.edu.au/centres/acji/projects/complaints-handling-Framework/>

Throughout this document, quotes have been used from those who work in the sector, and who were consulted in the professional standards project. These quotes have been noted as they highlight the important attitudinal approaches of effective complaint professionals.

# 1. Developing the Framework

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- 1.1 The Framework has two components:
  - 1.1.1 Recognition and Certification
  - 1.1.2 Standards and Competencies
- 1.2 The recognition and certification scheme sets out the minimum requirements for certification as a 'complaint professional.'
- 1.3 The standards and competencies set out the knowledge, skills and ethical requirements that must be met to be considered a 'complaint professional' and will be the subject of continuing professional development.

## 2. Recognition and Certification

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2.1 A person that supports individuals or entities to manage, settle or resolve complaints is referred to in this Framework as a 'complaint professional'.

2.1.1 A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction made to or about an organisation, related to its products, services, staff or the handling of a complaint, where a response or resolution is explicitly or implicitly expected or legally required.

2.2 The Framework applies to any person seeking to be recognised by SOCAP as a 'complaint professional'. Those recognised may use the post nominal 'SOCAP Complaint Professional' or 'SOCAP CP'.

2.3 Applicants for certification (applicants) must be of good character and possess appropriate personal qualities and experience to conduct a complaint process competently and professionally. Applicants must:

2.3.1 provide written references from a supervisor and a peer (where this is applicable) who have known them for more than one year to the effect that they are of good character, meet the competencies and display emotional intelligence;

2.3.2 disclose any serious criminal conviction which may influence their capacity to meet the competencies of the framework and demonstrate these in the workplace.

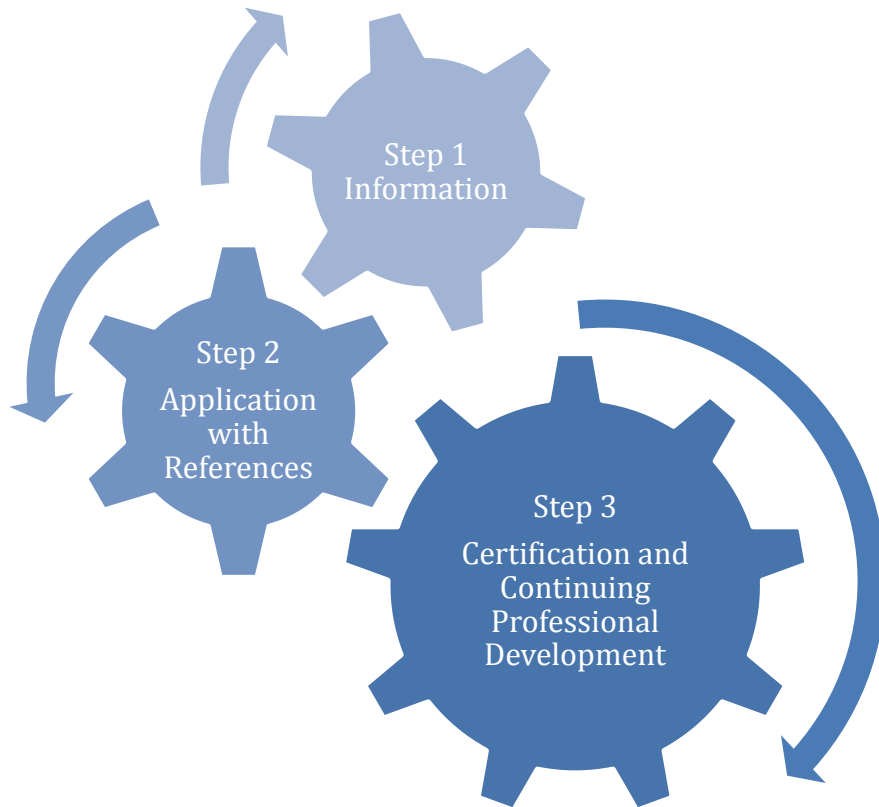
Applicants must undertake to:

2.3.3 Comply with any relevant legislation, professional standards and any other requirements that may be relevant to them.

2.4 Applicants for certification must have completed training or have competencies in the areas set out in the knowledge, skills and ethical areas of the Framework.

2.5 Once certified by SOCAP as a complaint professional, applicants must provide evidence every two years that they have completed 100 credit points of continuing professional development (CPD) in the knowledge, skills and ethical areas of the Framework. Up to 10 hours over two years may entail the mentoring of others

or conducting CPD. In addition, they must undertake to continue to meet the Standards.





# 3. Scope of the Framework

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- 3.1 The Framework is intended to govern the relationship of a complaint professional with participants in the complaint process, their professional colleagues and the general public so that all will benefit from high standards of practice.
- 3.2 The Framework sets out minimum requirements for those working as complaint professionals and recognises that some professionals who work with particular complaint management models may choose to develop or comply with additional guidelines or requirements.
- 3.3 Where a complaint professional practises under existing regulatory, industry or legislative frameworks and there is a conflict between the requirements of the Framework and any legislation, the respective regulatory requirements will override those of the Framework to the extent of any inconsistencies.

# 4. Role of the Complaint Professional

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- 4.1 The role of the complaint professional is to manage the complaint process and ensure that issues are resolved in a timely and responsive manner.
- 4.2 A complaint professional supports constructive negotiation, working wherever possible in a cooperative and non-tactical way to reach a mutually beneficial outcome.
- 4.3 A complaint professional assists complainants to identify interests and issues, develop options, consider alternatives, and where possible, make decisions about resolution.
- 4.4 A complaint professional assists their organisation to track and report systemic issues identified through the complaint process to reduce complaints and improve products and services.

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*“Connecting with customers is vital.”*

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*“Systemic issues need to be identified and addressed; they need to know how to identify and record systemic issues for the business.”*

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# 5. Starting a Complaint Process

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- 5.1 The objectives at the beginning of the complaint process include:
- 5.1.1 determining whether the complaint process is appropriate and whether variations are required (for example distinguishing a request for service from a bona fide complaint or using an interpreter if there is a language barrier);
  - 5.1.2 managing the expectations of the complainant regarding the complaint process; and
  - 5.1.3 referring the complainant to helpful resources, recognising that participants who are prepared may be in a better position to make an informed decision.
- 5.2 A complaint professional should, where appropriate:
- 5.2.1 discuss pathways and process options with the participants in light of their particular circumstances;
  - 5.2.2 describe and explain the practices and procedures involved in the complaint process;
  - 5.2.3 discuss the confidentiality of the process and any limitations on such confidentiality;
  - 5.2.4 advise the participants of the professional's role in relation to the provision of advice or other services; and
  - 5.2.5 advise the participants how they or the complaint handling professional can suspend or terminate the process.

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*“They need to know how to guide customers; broad knowledge and referral options are important”*

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*“Take ownership of the call right at the beginning – and if it's not appropriate for them to take the call then give them information and send them on empowered”*

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## 6. Information provided by the Complaint Professional

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- 6.1 A complaint professional may provide participants with information and advice that the professional is qualified by training or experience to provide.
- 6.2 A complaint professional should only provide information within the limits of their expertise and competence while conducting the complaint process.

# 7. Impartial Practice

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- 7.1 A complaint professional must conduct the complaint process in an impartial and objective manner.
- 7.2 A complaint professional will disclose actual and potential grounds of bias and conflicts of interest.
- 7.3 A complaint professional will not use information about participants obtained in the complaint process for personal gain or advantage.

# 8. Confidentiality

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- 8.1 A complaint professional will respect the confidentiality of the complainant.
- 8.2 A complaint professional shall not disclose information obtained, except:
  - 8.2.1 for necessary administrative, research, supervisory or educational purposes;
  - 8.2.2 with the consent of the complainant;
  - 8.2.3 when required by law; or
  - 8.2.4 where permitted by existing ethical guidelines or requirements.
- 8.3 A complaint professional should maintain confidentiality in the storage and disposal of records and ensure that office staff maintains such confidentiality.

# 9. Procedural Fairness

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- 9.1 A complaint professional will conduct the complaint process in a procedurally fair manner.
- 9.2 A complaint professional will provide complainants with an opportunity to speak and to be heard.
- 9.3 A complaint professional will support complainants to reach agreement freely and voluntarily, without undue influence and on the basis of informed consent.
- 9.4 A complaint professional should ensure that participants have sufficient time and opportunity to access sources of advice or information
- 9.5 A complaint professional should not knowingly withhold or misrepresent information material to the complaint process.
- 9.6 A complaint professional should encourage and support negotiations and be able to recognise manipulative or intimidating negotiating tactics.
- 9.7 If a complaint professional believes that a complainant is unable or unwilling to participate in the process, the professional may suspend or terminate the complaint process.

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*“Procedural fairness is important, maybe even more important than the outcome.”*

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# 10. Knowledge, Skills and Ethical Understandings

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- 10.1 A complaint professional must be competent and have relevant knowledge, skills and ethical understandings.
- 10.2 A complaint professional should participate in continuing professional development training.
- 10.3 A complaint professional should participate in programs of peer consultation and should help train and mentor the work of less experienced professionals.
- 10.4 A complaint professional should seek regular debriefing to address matters relating to skills development, professional issues and ethical dilemmas, and to ensure the ongoing well-being of the professional.
- 10.5 A complaint professional must ensure that ongoing professional development is focussed on achieving and maintaining the following:

## KNOWLEDGE, in areas including, but not limited to:

- The principles, stages, and functions of the complaint process
- The roles and functions of a complaint professional
- Communication styles and negotiation techniques, particularly in the context of complaints
- How to begin, conduct and terminate a complaint process
- Procedural fairness
- Language and cultural differences that may affect the complaint process
- The needs of disadvantaged or vulnerable persons
- Mental distress and its effect on behaviour
- Power imbalance and its effect on negotiations

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*“Need to know how to manage the expectations of the caller, empower them, and how to terminate the call appropriately and professionally”*

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- ☑ The internal rules, products and systems of the professional's organisation and how the complaint process relates to internal structures
- ☑ Referral options, pathways and process alternatives
- ☑ Case management, reporting, and data capture techniques that track complainants, complaints and systemic issues of the organisation
- ☑ The legislative, regulatory and industry frameworks that govern complaints
- ☑ Legal ramifications and other risk factors that may be present in the complaint process

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*"You need to know how to ask the right questions"*

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## SKILLS, in areas including, but not limited to:

- ☑ Communication, including listening, questioning, reflecting and summarising
- ☑ Tone of voice and demeanour
- ☑ Connecting with customers and colleagues
- ☑ Problem solving
- ☑ Flexibility with process
- ☑ Analysis and systems thinking
- ☑ Issues diagnosis and identifying 'root' causes and interests
- ☑ Resourcefulness
- ☑ Negotiation
- ☑ Matching a complainant with effective referrals and pathway options
- ☑ Responding appropriately to those who speak different languages, the disadvantaged and the vulnerable
- ☑ Identifying when a complainant may intend harm to self or others
- ☑ Recognising when the complainant or the organisation is acting in bad faith
- ☑ When and how to terminate the complaint process
- ☑ Self-awareness and self-management; social awareness and social management (i.e. emotional intelligence)
- ☑ Resilience and self-care

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*"Resilience is vital"*

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- ☑ Respect for self and others
- ☑ Patience

## ETHICAL UNDERSTANDINGS, in areas including, but not limited to:

- ☑ Neutrality and impartiality
- ☑ Transparency and fairness
- ☑ Conflicts of interest and bias
- ☑ Balancing the needs of the customer with those of the organisation
- ☑ Cultural differences and the vulnerable and disadvantaged
- ☑ Confidentiality, privacy and reporting obligations
- ☑ Withdrawal from and termination of the complaint process
- ☑ Anonymous complaints
- ☑ Unethical or illegal conduct of the professional's organisation

### What Makes a Great Complaint Handler?

Fairness	Empathy	Analytical skills	Common sense
Communication skills	Confidence	Diplomacy	Efficiency
Emotional Intelligence	Flexibility	Honesty	Humility
Impartiality	Independence	Integrity	Knowledgeable
Likes people	Maturity	Natural curiosity	Objectivity
Open-minded	Outcome focused	Patience	Proactive
Problem solving skills	Negotiation skills	Resilience	Wisdom
Systems thinking	Tenacity	Tolerance	Tone
Root cause identification			

# 11. Inter-Professional Relations

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- 11.1 A complaint professional should respect relationships with colleagues and other professionals that complement their practice.
- 11.2 A complaint professional should promote cooperation with other professionals and encourage complainants to use other resources when appropriate.
- 11.3 When a complaint involves more than one decision making process, a complaint professional will keep themselves and other professional colleagues informed.
- 11.4 A complaint professional should seek advice from other professionals, where appropriate.
- 11.5 A complaint professional will provide relevant information to the appropriate authorities about colleagues who are the subject of a complaint.

# 12. Termination of the Complaint Process

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- 12.1 The complaint professional may suspend or terminate a complaint process if they consider the process no longer useful or effective.
- 12.2 A complaint professional should be alert to situations where a party is acting in bad faith and seeks to misuse the complaint process.
- 12.3 If the complaint process is suspended or terminated, a complaint professional should, where possible, provide reasonable notice to the complainant.
- 12.4 Where appropriate, upon termination of the complaint process, a complaint professional should refer the complainant to other avenues of resolution and resources.