

A3 Beaumaris 2 Wednesday 5 December 12.00-12.30

Parental Involvement in Student Complaints: help or hindrance? (0297)

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An examination of the literature on complaints reveals a limited body of empirical research in this area. Existing literature tends to focus on student experiences of dissatisfaction and complaint (e.g. Cooper-Hind and Tayler, 2012), with almost no literature on the experiences and opinions of faculty and advisory stakeholders. In particular, parents as stakeholders have received little attention despite their involvement in other areas such as open days and contacting faculty staff (Wartman and Savage, 2008; Levine and Dean, 2012). The intention of this paper is to share the experiences of UK academic staff, complaints and appeals staff, and Student Union (SU) advisory staff in relation to parental involvement. In doing so we hope to highlight pertinent issues about the potential impact this has on the student experience and complaint handling processes more widely.

Parental involvement as a phenomenon is known to many through the pejorative term 'helicopter parent' (and other labels such as snow-plough and bubble-wrap parents). The expression is thought to have been first defined in the literature by Cline and Fay (1990) in relation to children rather than young adults. However, the term is often used loosely and can diverge into studies on over-parenting rather than parental involvement. Those examining parental involvement in higher education have reported positive outcomes such as higher levels of engagement, increased self-efficacy, higher levels of support/guidance, and better careers intentions/outcomes (NSSE, 2007; Padilla-Walker and Nelson, 2012; Bradley-Geist & Olson-Buchanan, 2014; Hamilton, 2016). Ratelle et al (2013) discuss the role of parents as one source of positive 'autonomy support' that students make use of whilst at university. Other studies raise the issue of parental involvement as empowering or disempowering. For example, in Hamilton's (2016) study, students of 'bystander' parents had the poorest outcomes in terms of degree attainment and career prospects.

Higher education staff from across the UK from three different stakeholder groups were invited to complete an anonymous online questionnaire (n = 132). The three

stakeholder groups surveyed were: Complaints and Appeals staff; Student Union advisory staff; and academic staff. To attain a national response to the questionnaire, relevant groups were contacted including SEDA (Staff and Educational Development Association), HEDG (Heads of Educational Development Group), the Practitioners Group for Student Complaints and Appeals who are within the Academic Registrars Council (ARC) professional body, and the NUS (National Union of Students). Requests were made to forward the email on to relevant staff.

Responses were received from across the UK (apart from N. Ireland) and from across the sector, including Russell group, old (pre-92), New (post 92) and college-based HE. As part of this questionnaire, staff were specifically asked if they had experience of parental involvement in complaints procedures. The analysis was informed by a critical realist approach (Bhaskar, 1978). Critical realists believe that there will always be many possible explanations for investigation and that the primary aim of social science is to be critical of the actions that lie behind false explanations (Archer, 2007; Scott, 2005). Crucially, it also takes as its starting point that social reality is stratified, incorporating both structural and agential strata.

The findings suggest an increase in parental involvement in complaints which may reflect developments within higher education. For example, some responses suggested that parents were motivated by their financial investment. Indeed, the concept of parents as co-consumers of higher education has been acknowledged in some areas (e.g. Cutright, 2008) yet challenged in others (e.g. Haywood and Scullion, 2017). Williams (2010) makes the point that the relationship between parents and higher education is reinforced in other ways. For example, via resources targeted at parents to help them support their child in applying for university (Which?, 2018), open days designed to accommodate and cater for parents, university webpages and resources aimed at informing parents, and in the United States, the role of parent officer – a specific role to address communication with parents (Coburn, 2006; Cutright, 2008; Galsky and Shotick, 2012).

There were mixed views about the impact of parental involvement in complaints procedures, also reflecting the literature (NSSE, 2007; Padilla-Walker and Nelson, 2012; Bradley-Geist & Olson-Buchanan, 2014; Hamilton, 2016; Ratelle et al 2013). However, this depended to an extent on the level and timing of involvement. For example, according to some staff parents were involved mainly in the early rather than later stages of the complaints process. In these cases, it was thought that parents wanted to ensure that their children were receiving sufficient support. Adopting a critical realist approach will help to uncover and describe the mechanisms at play around parental involvement from the perspective of those overseeing processes and procedures. This has important implications for supporting students should a complaint arise.

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