

## **The Impact of Discontent**

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### **Context**

The student voice is central to raising standards in Higher Education. The ability to complain, both formally and informally, has been promoted and facilitated over the last decade (Behrens, 2013). Coupled with an increasing consumer culture, this has resulted in a three-fold rise in complaints to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) between 2005 and 2013 (OIA, 2014). For the first time in this period, 2013 saw a small decline in the number of complaints received by the OIA but this is thought to be due to an increase in the percentage of cases that were settled by institutions as a result of the improved internal complaints processes operating within institutions.

For obvious reasons, universities are not keen to openly discuss official complaints made against them and how these complaints are impacting on practice. We also need to remember that official complaints are only part of the story and do not represent an accurate measure of dissatisfaction (Cooper-Hind and Taylor, 2012, p77). Informal and semi-formal complaints represent a much greater pool of discontent, but the extent of these cannot be quantified.

Data from the OIA (2014) are useful in its disclosure of key factors in the landscape of complaints. There are disciplinary differences in the number of complaints received. Business and administrative studies, subjects allied to medicine, and law represent the top subject areas for complaints (ibid, p18). The OIA identify a number of persistent themes from the complaints they receive. By far the greatest number of complaints (64%) relate to 'academic status', including academic appeals, progression and grades. Service issues and academic misconduct, plagiarism and cheating, and complaints relating to the accuracy of information are also common. Also, international students from outside the European Union are proportionately more likely to complain than EU and home students in relation to a variety of issues.

Additionally, the OIA (2013 and 2014) has identified a number of emerging issues. These are problems in relation to:

- ◆ Cases that relate to partnership programmes between an HEI and a partner college;
- ◆ How institutions take into account the needs of students with disabilities;
- ◆ The use of social media, particularly in relation to bullying and harassment and, in a disciplinary context, in relation to fitness to practice;
- ◆ Fees and financial issues;
- ◆ Visas;
- ◆ Professional placements.

Despite the developing regulatory back-drop, there is a paucity of evidence on the impact of student complaints on improving teaching and learning in HE. There is a growing body of literature on the rising ‘consumer culture’ in HE, written from policy and regulation-based perspectives (e.g. Palfreyman, 2012) but little on complaints specifically. What does exist looks at the topic of complaints from a student rather than a staff perspective (e.g. Cooper-Hind and Taylor, 2012; Bates and Kaye, 2014). Given the rise in complaints reported by the OIA (2014), student (and parental) complaints look set to rise into the foreseeable future. This study therefore contends that this significant gap in our understanding should be addressed. This paper will seek to explore both these formal and informal aspects.

## **Research Methods**

Data are being gathered using questionnaires distributed across the UK HE sector. Three questionnaires are being used to target different stakeholder groups, these being: 1. staff who work in the area of complaints and appeals (focusing on how the outcomes of the complaints are used to inform practice and ideas for improvements to systems to make them more effective); 2. student unions (focusing on how the SU feeds back to the institution and exploring at what point students are advised to make complaints official); 3. academic staff (focusing on their experience and opinions of how the complaints shape their practice and behaviours).

Questionnaire responses are being analysed qualitatively and quantitatively with the assistance of appropriate analysis tools (e.g. NVIVO and SPSS). In addition to exploring the data in relation to the stated research objectives, the purpose of the analysis will be to draw out cross-cutting themes and identify examples of good practice in using complaints and appeals for enhancement purposes.

## **Findings**

This paper presents the preliminary findings from this study. Findings will be discussed in relation to the objectives of the research project which are:

- ◆ how student complaints are improving teaching practice and raising standards
- ◆ the unforeseen impacts that student complaints have on teaching practice and standards
- ◆ the ways that complaints are used to improve practice
- ◆ staff perceptions and experience of student complaints in terms of staff behaviours, practice and staff-student relationships

## References

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