

	PAPER NO: EC.04(12)
Committee:	Educational character sub-committee
Date:	Wednesday 1st February 2012
Subject:	Understanding student complaints and reporting
Author:	Janet Lewis, Student Liaison Officer
Executive sponsor:	James Stevenson, University Secretary and Clerk to the Board of Governors
Recommendation by the Executive:	That the report on student complaints is discussed by the committee twice yearly

Executive summary

The following is a summary of the nature of complaints by students. There are two main categories of complaint: (i) via the internal complaints procedure or (ii) to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA). Statistics are provided for both categories.

Following the creation of the educational character sub-committee of the board of governors, it is recommended that a summary of complaints is reported twice yearly, in February and October, both to the executive and to the education sub-committee. This will aid understanding of the reasons why students are making complaints and actions to resolve them satisfactorily.

The board of governors will continue to note the annual report of the academic board, which includes an annual report on the complaints and academic appeals system.

	Board/Committee	Date
Matter previously considered by:	Executive	18 th January 2012
Further approval required?	N/A	N/A

Communications – who should be made aware of the decision?	Pro Deans and other senior staff who resolve complaints
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Understanding student complaints and the reporting process in LSBU

The university receives two different types of complaint:

- (i) via the internal complaints procedure; and
- (ii) externally from the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA).

Given the number of students at the university and the nature of the services that the university provides, a certain level of complaints by students will be expected. In addition, a number of courses lead to professional qualification (e.g. nursing, social work, law) and students who invest time and money in such courses may be sooner to act to hold the university to account as their professional status and career chances are at stake. As a consequence, if they are unhappy, they may be more ready to invoke “formal” procedures against the university.

It is important to understand the nature of complaints so that the university can learn from genuine mistakes and continuously improve its services.

1. Internal Complaints Procedure

Internal complaints are submitted directly by a student where they are unhappy with any aspect of the university’s behaviour. They may be broadly categorised as follows:

1.1 Financial

Complaints arise because the student may not understand the financial implications when they sign the enrolment form. They may not realise that they have entered in to a legal contract.

Other aspects of this area of complaint include:

- additional charges: for example: a credit charge or late payment charges under the tuition fee regulations. Students often dispute why they have to pay such charges.
- discounts: students dispute why they not been given a discount.
- payment for repeat units: the student loan company (SLC) refuses to pay for repeat tuition fees and the debt falls to the student to pay. They may not have the resources to pay and are prevented from re-enrolling or are excluded.
- tuition fee assessment: students dispute the fee status (“home” or “overseas”) that the university applies to them and claim they should be classified at the advantageous “home” rate.

- outstanding debt: former students who owe money offer various reasons for not paying, which include: not receiving value for money; loss or change of job; or illness. This situation mainly affects home students who pay their own fees or are sponsored by their employer, usually part-time undergraduate or post-graduate.

1.2 Failed expectations

Students may believe that their experience has fallen short of their own expectations about their course. This may be as a result of incorrect information being provided to a student prior to starting, or at interruption/withdrawal stage and in response to an individual student's circumstances or change of circumstances.

1.3 Conflict with a member of staff

Unfortunately, this sometimes may occur as a result of a clash of personalities or conflicting information provided to the student.

1.4 Perceived lack of support from the university

- Supervision: the student perceives problems with access to or the response from staff; or from learning resources, e.g. Blackboard (the online information portal for students) or learning materials.
- Field trips / residential courses: sometimes issues are raised about field trips and teaching residential courses, e.g. costs or ability to attend.

1.5 Problems with placements

Placements are mandatory for a number of professional courses. Placement issues arise mainly from students in the Health Faculty who are on NHS placements; and in the Arts & Human Sciences Faculty who are on teaching placements.

1.6 Lack of expected career progression

Unfortunately, where a student does not progress in their chosen field, they sometimes blame the university for the qualification that they have attained.

1.7 Immigration matters

Existing International students need a confirmation of acceptance for study (CAS) number to enable them to renew their visa. On occasion, the university is not able to allocate a CAS where there is a question over the student's academic

ability or where the student owes the university money and they are in “bad financial standing”. The university has Tier 4 Highly Trusted Status criteria, which is important to maintain.

1.7 Enrolment

As a result of the university applying its student number control, on occasion, applicants who were partially enrolled may find their LSBU place being withdrawn.

1.8 Internal complaints procedure

Student complaints are received by the University Secretary’s Office through various channels:

- direct from student;
- indirectly via Vice Chancellor, Pro Vice Chancellor, Student Relations Officer, other member of staff, or student union; or
- from parent, MP, solicitor.

Complaints are categorised into 15 themes: academic, access, appeal, accommodation, administration, disabilities, exam board, exclusion, fees, finance, member of staff, suspension, visa, other, outside remit.

The complaints are progressed under the complaints procedure, which is available to all students and staff on the student gateway. Complaints are co-ordinated by the Student Liaison Officer, who will liaise with the Pro Dean in the relevant faculty in order to investigate and, where possible, resolve the complaint.

After investigation, students are sent a decision about their complaint. They may be satisfied, but if not, they are entitled to request to progress to the next stage (up to three stages).

Students who have completed all stages and who remain dissatisfied, may complain to an external body, the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA).

Appendix 1 shows internal complaints statistics.

2. Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA)

OIA cases arise from a failed academic appeal or a formal complaint that has exhausted the internal complaints procedure. The student must submit a complaint to the OIA within 3 months from the completion of internal procedures.

Students submit complaints directly to the OIA. The OIA make an initial judgement as to whether the complaint meets their complaint criteria.

If it does not meet the criteria, the OIA closes the case. In this situation, sometimes the student may start legal proceedings against the university. The student will have to fund any proceedings that they may start. The consequences for the university are management time, legal costs and potentially damages.

If it does meet the criteria, the OIA passes the case back to the university to investigate. This is not a quick process and the OIA often have a backlog of 3-6 months. As this route is not a “quick fix” for the student, it can cause additional problems for students on courses with completion time restraints, e.g. nursing and law.

As the OIA is free for the student, it is understandable that complainants often wish to pursue a complaint as far as possible.

Appendix 2 shows OIA complaint statistics.

3. Conclusion

In the context of the whole student body, the number of complaints made annually continues to be relatively low.

Even so, it is important that the university applies any learning from the complaints that have been made in order to continuously improve student satisfaction and the student experience, where possible.

Members of staff directly involved in resolving a complaint will clearly be able to reflect on the experience. The mistake is unlikely to be repeated in that department or faculty. What is important is the dissemination of this learning to all other parts of the university.

4. Recommendations

The yearly report on complaints, OIA matters and academic appeals will continue to be included in the annual report of the Academic Board to the Board of Governors.

In addition, it is recommended that a summary of complaints is reported twice yearly to both the Executive and the Educational Character Sub-committee of the Board.

The reports will be for the following periods:

- 1st August – 31st January
- 1st February to 31st July.

These reports will provide visibility to Governors and the Executive of the reasons why students are making complaints.

In addition, the report will be discussed with members of staff who lead on resolving student complaints so that learning is shared throughout the university and continuous improvement is facilitated.

University Secretary and Student Relations Officer
26th January 2012

Appendix 1

Complaints Procedure – statistics:

The following data is for academic periods:

- 1 Sept 2009 – 31 Aug 2010
- 1 Sept 2010 – 31 Aug 2011
- 1 Sept 2011 – 31 Dec 2011

- **Number of complaints received**

Number received	2009 – 2010	2010 – 2011	2011 – 2011
Total	123	111	46

- **Complaint made via**

Submitted to	1 Sept 2009 – 31 Aug 2010	1 Sept 2010 – 31 Aug 2011	1 Sept 2011 -31 Dec 2011
Vice Chancellor	30	31	9
Complaint Office	52	38	23
Pro Vice Chancellor	6	0	-
Member of Staff	19	10	3
Uni Sec's Office	2	2	1
Student Relations Officer	14	30	10
Total	123	111	46

- **Issue of complaint**

Issues	1 Sept 2009 – 31 Aug 2010	1 Sept 2010 – 31 Aug 2011	1 Sept 2011 -31 Dec 2011
Academic	24	28	27
Accommodation	1	2	-
Access	2	-	-
Administration	12	16	2
Appeal	3	3	-
Disabilities	1	3	-
Exam board	3	2	-
Exclusion	1	-	-
Fees	38	20	8
Finance	9	16	6
Member staff	12	2	1
Other	13	9	-
Outside remit	4	8	2
visa	-	2	-
Total	123	111	46

- **Type of student**

Mode of Attendance	1 Sept 2009 – 31 Aug 2010	1 Sept 2010 – 31 Aug 2011	1 Sept 2011 -31 Dec 2011
Full time	76	71	36
Part-time	37	35	9
Not known	10	5	1
Total	123	111	46

- **Complaint Decisions**

Decisions	1 Sept 2009 – 31 Aug 2010	1 Sept 2010 – 31 Aug 2011	1 Sept 2011 -31 Dec 2011
Upheld	23	17	7
Partly Upheld	7	6	3
On-going	-	-	6
No Decision required	29	31	6
Reject	38	28	8
Internal Referral	26	29	16
Total	123	111	

- **Faculty**

Student from	1 Sept 2009 – 31 Aug 2010	1 Sept 2010 – 31 Aug 2011	1 Sept 2011 -31 Dec 2011
AHS	39	46	17
BS	29	27	5
ESBE	30	24	16
HSC	23	12	7
Not known	2	2	1
Total	123	111	46

- **Level of student**

Level	1 Sept 2009 – 31 Aug 2010	1 Sept 2010 – 31 Aug 2011	1 Sept 2011 -31 Dec 2011
Undergraduate	80	87	34
Post graduate	41	19	9
Research	-	2	1
Not known	2	3	2
Total	123	111	46

- **Status of student**

Status	1 Sept 2009 – 31 Aug 2010	1 Sept 2010 – 31 Aug 2011	1 Sept 2011 -31 Dec 2011
Home	85	88	38
EU	12	5	3
Overseas	18	15	5
Not known	8	3	-
Total	123	111	46

- **Compensation cost paid to students**

Further detailed work will be required to calculate the compensation and reimbursement of fees paid to complainant or sponsor or the student loan company.

Appendix 2

Office of the Independent adjudicator – statistics

The following data is for academic periods:

- 1 Sept 2009 – 31 Aug 2010
- 1 Sept 2010 – 31 Aug 2011
- 1 Sept 2011 – 31 Dec 2011

The Following table relates to the number of OIA cases received by LSBU:

Number received	2009 – 2010	2010 – 2011	2011 – 2011
Total	37	29	18

The original LSBU source, outcome and costs are shown in the following table:

Year/Source/Number			Outcomes					
2009/2010	Source	No	Justified	Partly Justified	Not Justified	No Case	On-going	Comp ** Costs £
	Appeal	32	3	8	21	0	0	4,200
	Complaints	5	1	1	1	2	0	10,000
2010/2011	Appeal	24	2	6	14	0	2	500
	Complaints	5	1	1	2	0	1	400
2011/2011	Appeal	17	0	3	1	0	13	-
	Complaints	1	0	0	0	0	1	-

** Compensation recommended by OIA and paid by LSBU under terms of settlement or mediation.