

There Is Ample Scope for the Student Consumer to Demand Better

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In, The 'Student as Customer' Phenomenon, Stephen McGlinchey argues that a minority of students make unreasonable demands that should be resisted on principle. Nevertheless, there is scope for students to reasonably demand better service from British universities.

A recent High Court judgment reveals the unfair treatment meted out to one former university student. The student concerned, a Newcastle medical student, had internally appealed the University's decision to fail him by one mark. According to a final mark calculation made on his behalf he had passed. The crucial information that an element of his practical examination had been double-weighted was withheld from the student during his academic appeal. His request for a review of the appeal process was rejected, despite it being evident that the failure to disclose this relevant information was a material unfairness.

Had the student been provided with a proper explanation for his final mark during the appeal he would have been enabled to present an informed case as to why he should be reconsidered for a pass. Such a case might have been based on an argument to the effect that it was unreasonable of the university not to have provided beforehand clear information as to how he was to be assessed, that the failure to reveal the assessment component weightings prior to the examination was a breach of implied contract, particularly given General Medical Council (GMC) guidelines, and that consequently he had been deprived of the opportunity to best prepare for his examination.

The University's decision not to disclose the calculation behind the student's final mark effectively placed him in a position akin to that of an accused who knows not the accusation against him. It is perhaps of little surprise that the student pursued the matter beyond the University. Had he been treated fairly then, while the original decision may have been sustained, the matter might never have reached the High Court.

The handling of academic appeals is not the only area in which a university's customer service may be defective. Poor academic provision or service might include such as harm to the student learning experience through inequitable access to academic study modules, and the unfair determination of students' degree classifications.

The student consumer might anticipate that universities adhere to high ethical standards but do they? A Times Higher Education (THE) story, Rosy prospectuses 'misleading' students, reveals that prospective students are being misled by university marketing materials, and the lack of an enforced standard is enabling universities to minimise complaint figures (THE).

Given the high price of a university education, and the likelihood of a life-style crimping loan to be repaid, the student consumer is naturally concerned to obtain value for money.

The Leeds Student newspaper asks, 9k fees, are you getting enough? This comment piece expresses broad concern over student loan repayments, fees for international students and funding for students from disadvantaged backgrounds before reporting on research carried out by Leeds University Union. It observes 'a significant shift in the demand for money advice, part-time jobs and career advice' and says 'money conscious students are evermore vocal about where their fees should be going', which is especially to 'libraries, teaching facilities, career services and co-curricular activities'. The comment concludes by asserting a necessity for 'a

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responsive culture for learning that shows a commitment to prioritising the needs of our students’.

A widely reported issue for many students is the number of face-to-face academic contact hours they receive as part of their learning experience. The Daily Mail tells of the ‘scandal’ of students who receive fewer than 100 hours’ teaching a year and reports wide variations in contact hours between corresponding degree programmes at different universities. A critic is quoted as saying, ‘Some students are getting a very raw deal’. A THE story declares: Students bare their teeth over contact time. According to survey evidence many undergraduates consider they are getting poor ‘value for money’ for their tuition fees, with those studying arts and social science subjects particularly dissatisfied over contact hours.

The subject of mental health is a recurring topic in student and other media. The York Vision story, Use your head: mental health is a real problem, implores students who feel they might be suffering from a mental health problem to seek help. The Independent asks if universities are doing enough to support students with mental health problems. It says that student welfare services are struggling to meet a rising demand and points out the importance of mental wellbeing to academic achievement. A Help Me Investigate story on student counselling reports an increase in the numbers of students seeking counselling and wide variations between universities in appointment waiting times.

Student journalism can be a powerful tool for transmitting recognised concerns to a wider audience. York Vision recently covered a York Student Think Tank (YSTT) report on ‘racial discrimination’ at the University of York. Vision’s story was drawn to the attention of The Guardian which subsequently asked how widespread is racism at university? YSTT sees its report as a contribution to ‘an important but under-reported social issue’.

It does not take too many words to skim through a range of issues which are of legitimate interest to university students. There are potential implications here for the regulation and accountability of universities and for their contractual relationship with students. The integrity of British universities is questionable and the quality of the student university experience requires improvement. Investigation results allied to forthright student journalism may help to create impetus for change. The student consumer has ample scope and good reason to demand better of our universities.

About the author:

Unileaks UK is an informal association of individuals who believe that our universities must be made more accountable to their students. Our immediate ambitions are to encourage British universities to treat students fairly and to demonstrate the need for a fair and balanced complaints system.