

Prevention Reporting

This is a discussion paper setting out the rationale for piloting a mechanism enabling postgraduate students to anonymously raise matters of concern to the University. The system would enable the University to learn from student experiences and attempt to avoid further student dissatisfaction, where students are uncomfortable using formal procedures.

Background

All students at the University have access to the Student Complaint Procedure (<https://www.studentcomplaints.admin.cam.ac.uk/student-complaints>); a formal mechanism enabling students to have complaints investigated and, where necessary, be provided with an appropriate remedy. If students are dissatisfied with an aspect of their University experience, most feel able to use this Procedure and raise complaints either locally or through the University's Office of Student Conduct, Complaints & Appeals (OSCCA).

However, there is considerable anecdotal evidence that postgraduate students, who rely on significant relationships with individual staff members in order to pass their course of study or to go on to be successful in a particular academic field, do not feel comfortable using a complaint mechanism that would identify them. Instead these students remain silent, potentially being subjected to inappropriate behaviour until they have finished their course of study; the cycle is then repeated for future students.

Sometimes postgraduate students seek confidential advice from Colleges, Departments, the Students' Unions' Advice Service and OSCCA regarding their experience. However, these students only tend to seek advice after a substantial period of time and often take no further action as they do not wish to be identified to the member of staff who is the source of their complaint. Concerns that have been raised by postgraduate students include bullying or harassing behaviour from staff, a lack of contact with the supervisor or challenges with accessing resources, and the general culture within a department or lab environment.

Rationale for requiring complainants to be identifiable

The key reasons for requiring complainants to be identifiable are:

- to enable the person accused to provide a full response to the accusation;
- to limit the likelihood of malicious complaints;
- to increase transparency for everyone involved, as the accused person is likely to attempt to guess the source of the complaint;
- to enable the University to be able to put protection in place for the complainant and the accused person – removing the accused person from any positions of responsibility for that complainant and limiting contact between them.

However, for postgraduate students, and particularly PhD students, any protection the University can put in place may be of limited use: there may be no other staff member who is able to supervise them, which may have a negative impact on their research; and although the University retains some control over what happens within the University setting, it cannot guarantee to complainants that an accused person will not discuss the complainant outside of the University, bad-mouthing them to external colleagues. In a close-knit academic community where reputation is important many postgraduate students do not take this risk.

Challenges

If the University chooses to continue only with the formal mechanisms in place then the disadvantages could be significant:

- students are potentially being subjected to a poor student experience;

- poor staff behaviour is enabled to continue without being challenged;
- students are unable to reach their potential, thrive in the University community and instead are left with feelings of guilt;
- the myth that student concerns about staff are not taken seriously is reinforced.

Possible solution

It is not possible to re-create a formal complaints procedure that permits complainants to remain anonymous for the reasons listed above. However, it would be possible to create a mechanism that would allow some informal action to take place whilst preserving the student's anonymity.

Currently, Graduate Tutors may informally intervene in departmental matters, when given permission to do so by their students. However, by doing so they are forced to share the student's College, which can lead to identification of the student. This system is also reliant on postgraduate students having a trusting relationship with their Graduate Tutor and the Graduate Tutor feeling comfortable to raise issues with the Department.

One possible solution is that Graduate Tutors and postgraduate students raise concerns with OSCCA. Depending on the nature of the concern and the wishes of the student/Tutor, OSCCA may take action immediately, as set out in the flow chart below or wait until other similar concerns are raised before raising the matter further.

Sharing information with the Department could not result in formal or disciplinary action being taken or an outcome being provided to the student. It would be almost impossible to undertake an investigation unless there was publically available evidence indicating staff misconduct. However, on the basis of a concern being raised, it would be possible for HR or a senior member of the Department to discuss with the relevant staff member the fact that an anonymous concern(s) had been raised and to offer support to the member of staff, invite them to undertake training and/or reflect on their own behaviour. A record of this conversation would ensure that if a formal complaint was received in the future then the staff member would have already undertaken training and reflection and this may make any future misconduct more serious. It would also enable the Department to be alerted to unusual practices, such as staff supervising significant numbers of PhD students at the same time or supervisors going away for long periods of research leave without putting appropriate cover in place.

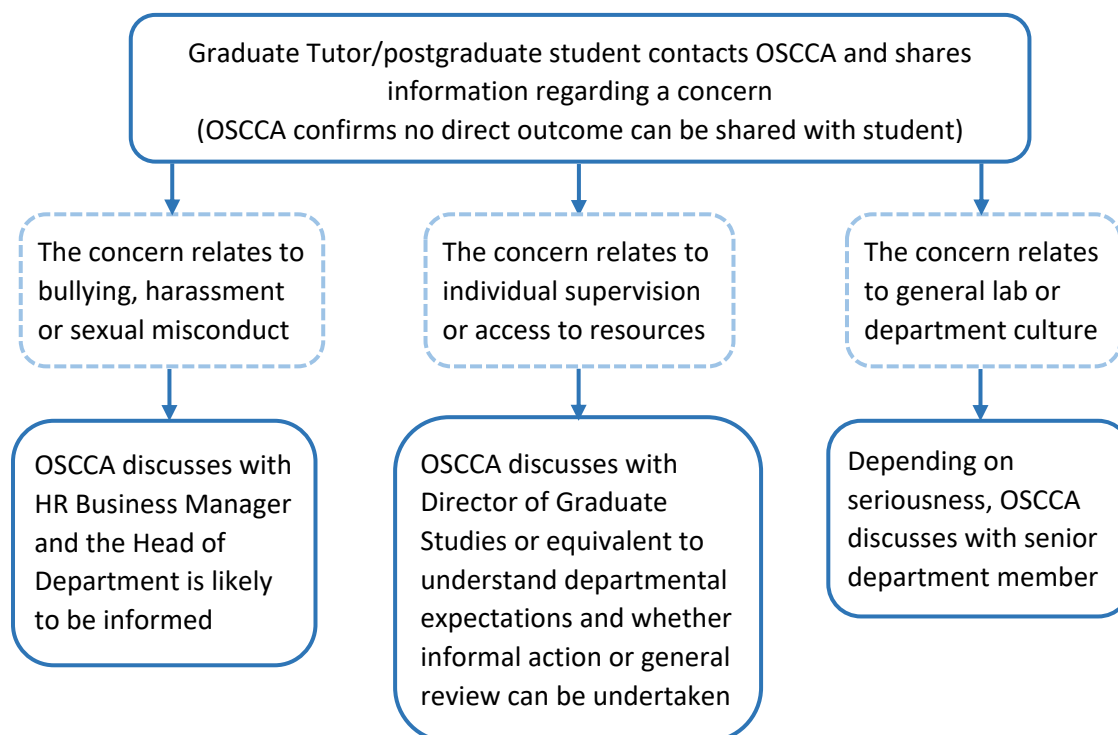
This mechanism is already used informally between OSCCA and HR: where any student is raising potential staff misconduct issues but does not wish to make a formal complaint, OSCCA (with the permission of the student) shares the details with HR who in turn discuss the matter with the Head of Department to decide what action to take. This mechanism results in some satisfaction for the student, as they feel as though they have taken action to safeguard future students, and for the Department as further action can be taken.

How would it work in practice?

It is proposed that a six month pilot would enable the University to test the benefits of an informal anonymous mechanism. This informal route could be restricted to Graduate Tutors who received concerns from their students, and students who met with OSCCA in person to understand the process of complaining but felt unable to proceed because of their wish to remain anonymous.

In this way, there would be verification of the student's identity, though this would not be shared with the Department (or with OSCCA where Graduate Tutors had received complaints from their students) minimising the risk of malicious complaints.

The mechanism would work in the following way:



The action that may be taken and the individuals involved will be case specific and where matters are low-level or at the student/tutor's request, information may not be shared with the Department until several anonymous concerns have been received relating to the same matter.

Data records and monitoring

Information held by OSCCA (as with the rest of the University) is disclosable following a Subject Access Request. As a result, following receiving the anonymous concern and the verification of any details, information regarding the source of the concern would be permanently deleted. This would protect the student from being identified but removes the possibility of sharing outcomes or further information with the student. Graduate Tutors and students would be explicitly informed of this at the beginning of the process to give them confidence in the system and realistic expectations about the information that they could expect to receive.

It is proposed that following the pilot, an anonymised list of numbers and types of concerns and the action taken would be shared with the Graduate Tutors Committee for further discussion.

Trends would be monitored on an ongoing basis and an anonymised report would be shared with the General Board's Education Committee.

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