

Firstly, I would like to extend my thanks for taking the time to read my petition and respond to it. I have always looked to the Scottish education system as being one of the finest in the world and this is why I decided to study in Scotland. I believe, however, that I, and many other students, are being extremely let down by the way higher education is set up and delivered. As a former teacher and validator of degree courses for universities, I am keenly aware of what good education looks like to receive and deliver and validate. I am very concerned that, at present, students can be disadvantaged without any really recourse, despite having paid a lot of money and having put a lot of time and effort into a subject they want to study and potentially use in the workplace to make great advancements.

Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR)

According to the Quality Assurance Agency Scotland, the Quality Enhancement Framework provides public confidence in academic standards and the quality of the student experience. ELIR is a key element underpinning this framework as *“ELIR results in a judgement and a set of commendations and recommendations relating to the way the institution is securing academic standards and improving the student experience.”* However, in the [2014 ELIR Technical Report of the University of Glasgow](#) issues raised included a lack of postgraduate research student representation; the need to have better oversight of the postgraduate research student experience; inconsistency in information communicated to staff and students regarding management of assessments; and a lack of clarity of purpose of the student portal. The [2019 Technical report](#) shows that issues still persist. From my understanding, the SPSO has repeatedly ruled that the complaints process at Glasgow is inadequate but no improvements have been made. The ELIR did not pick this up within the assessment. If a university is not obliged, or forced to act on the recommendations of a public ombudsman, or an ELIR report, then what are they required to act on?

Industrial action

The QAAS said *“It is imperative that institutions prioritise students' interests when putting in place measures to mitigate the impact of industrial action.”* However, this is not always happening. From my own experience, many lecturers refused to provide lessons during strikes and stated this to the university's management. Despite this, students continued to be told that lessons would be re-scheduled and assessments adjusted, however, my lessons were not rescheduled, nor were alternative assessment methods provided. It was the view of the head of the relevant department that the strikes had impaired our education, however, the Senate refused to consider this view.

The QAA said that they are able to address *“concerns about academic standards and quality, where QAA Scotland think these raise broader issues about the management of quality, standards and/or the information HEIs make available about their provision”*. I believe that a loss of lessons, to the extent students have experienced in recent years, means the economy of Scotland will suffer as will the education of the students. Missing modules that are critical to a job, without replacement teaching, is a serious disadvantage to students. Yet students are struggling to enforce their rights to the education that they have paid for.

The Scottish Funding Council said that *“SFC's funding enables Scotland's colleges and universities to provide life-changing opportunities for over half a million people, Leading, Inspiring, Investing: Making Scotland the best place in the world to learn, educate, research and innovate”*. It also said: *“To invest in education that is accessible to learners from all backgrounds, gives them a high-quality learning experience, supports them to succeed in their studies, and equips them to flourish in employment, further study & fulfilling lives.”*

The Scottish Funding Council has an obligation to ensure that provision is made to ensure the quality of higher education. Students have paid for a service, however, if the service is not of a high enough standard, what options do students have? Students can't withhold their fees, even if their lessons have been cancelled. In my own experience I was served with bailiff orders *during* the complaints process and then the university refused to discuss their actions or attend mediation at a law clinic. I also received communications threatening that if I didn't cease withholding funds and pay the rest of my fees, I wouldn't be able to graduate with my classmates. I believe that taxpayers' money should be used to the best available outcome but with the 'no refunds' policy at the University there is no way to hold the University to account.

Tuition fee refunds

The QAA states that *"It should be noted that a students' tuition fees are not provided based on the numbers of specific classes provided, as is implied by the petition, but are provided to cover the totality of the learning and teaching and student experience for the programme being studied"*.

I accept that a course is the totality of the learning and teaching provided, however if a student finds their course has changed substantially, they are not entitled to a refund. If lessons are missing or a holistic journey not provided, there is no refund.

I would suggest that allowing refunds under the Consumer Rights Act would be a fair mechanism to put in place and would help with accountability in higher education. As universities take money in return for a service, in many cases that of taxpayers, I feel this aspect of a complaint must be addressed.

The limited remit of the SPSO ultimately forces such challenges out of the system into court. Many complaints will never be addressed as some students do not have the money, the time or the feeling of safety to take their complaint to court. Institutions will therefore not be held to account. It is also not appropriate to have a degree programme validated and then SPSO decide independently that many lessons are not necessary, and that feedback can be cut.

Student representation

The QAA states that student representatives should be consulted on any mitigating measures. *"If students had serious concerns about their teaching provision, or the quality of a course, this should be identified within an institutions existing processes as a result of the student participation."*

In my case, I had no correspondence from student representatives and when approached, the Student Council and Student Union refused to get involved regarding the issue of educational provision during strikes. The Student Council also refused to engage with the university's management, except to say that anyone could submit a complaint but that the outcome would be pre-determined. I would suggest that this is not reflective of a fair or open complaints process. If this is the case, how is a student meant to escalate complaints and what support do they have?

'No surprises'

The QAA says that it has *"facilitated discussion and the sharing of best practice amongst universities in the Scottish sector on how to best maintain quality and standards during and following periods of industrial action"*. It also says that individual institutions can seek advice under the 'no surprises' protocol if they *"thought they might have specific or severe issues in maintaining provision during strike action"*, something, it says, that institutions have regularly done.

I do not recognise this from my own case, in which students were informed that all lessons would be rescheduled then subsequently advised, several weeks later, that their lectures would be cancelled, not rescheduled, and that feedback would not be available.

If universities bypass, or refuse to communicate, with the bodies set up to help it run itself effectively, then how accountable is it and how does it operate in this vacuum? Not in a fair way towards students I would suggest.

Indeed, the information relating to strikes was available well before the academic year start date and could have easily been disseminated as a potential problem for future students.

Communications with Students

The QAA states that an institution should “ensure the continuing high-quality student experience in Scotland and caters to situations where there are unforeseen circumstances.” The QAA specifically raises the following point “It is imperative that institutions prioritise students' interests when putting in place measures to mitigate the impact of industrial action” and “clarity around a students' rights (via published information in students' handbooks for example, and with measures such as Student Charters, Student Partnership Agreements)”.

The QAA references that student handbooks etc should be made available to students. In my own department, copies of student contracts and the student handbook were placed in locked areas of the learning portal, despite multiple access requests from students. The handbook for my course was also not updated despite calls for widespread updates to happen from previous inspections along with student portal updates (ELIR 2014/2019). How is a student to understand their responsibilities or those of the Institution when they can't access the relevant paperwork?

On the issue of academic judgement. I believe that every institution should be held to account and there are clear academic frameworks to reference on this. Academic judgement therefore is not a reason to blanket or partially reject a complaint. Indeed, in my work as a course validator and a teacher I would want to be held to account for my actions to ensure that every student received the education they are entitled to. Currently the workings of an institution can be far too opaque. Therefore, I believe that the powers and remit of the SPSO should be reviewed and that the way that cases are currently approached improved.

Currently students have little power to hold their universities to account or even complain. Therefore, I believe that mechanisms to challenge, without the threat of financial or academic detriment to the student, need to be established. I believe that the current balance of power and the lack of effective checks and balances means that some cases are unfairly rejected by the Student Union and Representative Council. I believe that poor complaints processes at universities do not allow fair consideration of complaints or a fair outcome. Neither does it allow a timely response.

I also note that refunds are now being sought for COVID impacts on higher education so this further emphasises the need for transparency in financial interactions within higher education and the requirement for accountability and a refund mechanism where educational provision is not met.