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International student complaint behaviour: Understanding how East-Asian business and management students respond to dissatisfaction during their university experience

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Abstract

The higher education sector is characterised by intense global competition for international students. This is driving universities to place greater priority on the student experience and, in particular, student satisfaction and retention. However, an under-researched area is student complaint behaviour. By understanding how students react to poor experiences; the likely impact on the learning and teaching experience, satisfaction ratings and ultimately international student recruitment can be assessed, and appropriate strategies implemented.

This study developed an instrument that measured East-Asian students' preferred university complaint channels. The research focused on four categories of complaint behaviour: public, private, third party and non-behavioural, and data were collected from 135 East-Asian Business and Management students. A vignette questioning technique was used, providing respondents with hypothetical negative student experiences and recording their likely responses in terms of both how and where they would complain.

Results suggest international students are pro-active in reporting dissatisfaction direct to the university, but also share these negative experiences with fellow students. The findings offer new insights to those responsible for managing the student experience and, in particular, for those tasked with handling student complaints.

Keywords: East-Asian students; consumer complaint behaviour; vignette questioning

Introduction

Dealing with customer dissatisfaction and complaints is a core task of any service-based organisation. Effective complaint handling is critical in reducing damaging word of mouth criticism, improving customer trust and commitment (Vázquez-Casielles, Suárez Álvarez, & Díaz Martín, 2010), maximising customer retention (Tax, Brown, & Chandrashekar, 1998) and, in the context of education, improving the learning and teaching experience. This is especially important for services such as education, where students (or consumers) are tasked with evaluating intangible products over a prolonged period (Matos, Rossi, Veiga, & Vieira, 2009). Given that UK universities have increased the emphasis on recruitment of international students (Bolsmann & Miller, 2008), this may make the issue of student dissatisfaction and complaint behaviour more complex (Ruyter, Perkins, & Wetzels, 1995).

One of the most attractive global segments targeted by UK universities is the East-Asia region (including Mainland China, Malaysia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and Vietnam). It is estimated that there are over 75,000 East-Asian students currently studying in the UK, of which up to 30,000 are new recruits to the UK each academic year (UKCISA, 2011). Furthermore, "the growth in the international education market within the next two decades will be dominated by Asia" (Arambewela, Hall, & Zuhair, 2005, p. 105). In particular, Business and Management Schools are at the forefront of this recruitment trend (Hall & Sung, 2009), accounting for over 27% of all degrees awarded to international students by UK higher education institutions (UKCISA, 2011).

East-Asian students will have travelled over 5,000 miles to study in the UK, and as such will have developed a

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range of expectations about their study abroad experience based on a combination of university marketing materials, league tables and friends who have previously studied abroad. Such expectations include prompt feedback, high-quality teaching and a feeling of being taken care of by the institution (Sherry, Bhat, Beaver, & Ling, 2004). If such expectations are not realised, this can lead to an inadequate teaching and learning environment (Hall & Sung, 2009), and feelings of dissatisfaction which may be communicated to a variety of individuals. The communication of this dissatisfaction is known as consumer complaint behaviour (CCB) and is a critical issue for UK universities. Owing to increasing competition from universities worldwide, handling student complaints effectively has become a critical task in maximising student retention, generating positive word of mouth (Molinari, Abratt, & Dion, 2008) and ensuring excellence in business education (LeBlanc & Nguyen, 1997).

Studies in more generic consumer scenarios have repeatedly illustrated that Asian consumers are less prone to vent their dissatisfaction publicly (i.e., complain to the organisation), and will instead opt to either engage in negative word of mouth or do nothing (Huang, 1994; Raven & Foxman, 1994; Liu & McClure, 2001; Ngai, Heung, Wong, & Chan, 2007). Such passive responses to dissatisfaction are commonly explained by referring to values inherent in collectivist culture, such as *yuarn* (acceptance of fate: Yau, 1988), *chung-yung* (moderation of behaviour in public places) and *pao* (belief that “what goes around comes around”: Le Claire, 1993). However, recent work has identified that in the context of HE, East-Asian students are in fact willing to complain directly to tutors to resolve problems (Hart & Coates, 2010), despite concerns that such behaviour may compromise future grades (Harris, 2007). Clearly more needs to be understood about East-Asian students’ likely responses to dissatisfaction in a university environment.

The current study has two objectives. Primarily it sought to identify the most preferred means of expressing dissatisfaction amongst the East-Asian student body. Academics have been eager to emphasise that not all complaint behaviour manifests itself in formal complaints to organisations. Consumers, and students, may instead use a wide variety of outlets to vent their dissatisfaction, including negative word of mouth amongst friends (Singh, 1988), using third parties or industry regulators as mediators (Boote, 1998) and increasingly the Internet (Gao, 2005). Secondly, by using the vignette questioning technique (Slama & Williams, 1991), the study aimed to identify how these behaviours differ depending on the nature of the dissatisfactory experience (e.g., an academic versus an organisational issue). Knowledge of preferred complaint channels will help universities to identify problems in teaching delivery and improve these for future cohorts, in addition to minimising any negative word of mouth generated by dissatisfied students.

This paper is structured as follows. Firstly the notion of student complaint behaviour is introduced, using theory from the more general marketing literature where appropriate. From here, an instrument designed to assess student complaint behaviour is introduced in the method section, and the paper concludes with a review of the key findings and implications for those tasked with improving the student learning experience.

Student complaint behaviour

The notion of student complaints has often been incorporated into wider investigations of service quality (Owlia & Aspinwall, 1996; LeBlanc & Nguyen, 1997; Bennett & Kane, 2010). However, few studies in the existing literature have specifically addressed how students express their dissatisfaction with their university. This is particularly surprising in the UK given the recent shift of the cost of education from the Government to the individual student. In addition, the emergence of the Internet has provided students with an additional channel to share their experiences: the National Student Survey covered over 550 educational institutions in 2011 and aims to inform the choices of future applicants (HEFCE, 2011). Although a small number of studies have considered the implications of having a dissatisfied student cohort (Aldridge & Rowley, 2001; Bennett, 2003), few have gone on to investigate actual behaviours of students when they are unhappy.

Given the logical view that “efforts to minimize and to address student complaints are crucial for ensuring a university’s success” (Dolinsky, 1994, p. 28), and the increasing levels of international competition and student mobility, managing student dissatisfaction is an increasingly relevant issue. Much like in any other sector, dissatisfied students have a variety of potential responses at their disposal, some of which are undetectable (Su, 1998) and all of which can prove potentially damaging to the university.

In terms of appreciating the range of behaviours available to dissatisfied students, much can be gained from reviewing the CCB literature originally developed in more traditional product-based scenarios. The literature generally segments complaint behaviour into four distinct types (public, private, third party and non-behavioural: Singh, 1988; Boote, 1998; Crie, 2003) which will be discussed below in the context of HE.

Public complaining

A public complaint is generally taken to mean any visible action taken directly towards the institution responsible for the dissatisfaction. The most obvious and potentially damaging outcome is a student withdrawing from the university. Indeed, withdrawal has been referred to as “an extreme form of disloyal

behaviour” (Aldridge & Rowley, 2001, p. 57). This may involve transferring to another course (Dolinsky, 1994), or even leaving HE altogether. It is logical to assume that students who are dissatisfied with their university are less likely to complete their course (Elliot & Shin, 2002), although some will remain in an institution if they feel there is a lack of suitable alternatives (Shekarchizadeh, Rasli, & Hon-Tat, 2011). Unhappy students may also consider speaking directly to lecturers about their dissatisfaction. Despite this range of options, Su and Bao (2001) argued that students are naturally hesitant to share their dissatisfaction with a member of university staff, perhaps because of a fear of being victimised in the future (Harris, 2007). Students may also approach non-academic staff within a university who may be able to resolve certain operational problems (Wright, Perkins, Alston, Hertzog, Meyer-Smith, & Palmer, 1996). Cronin (1995) identified that some of the obstacles faced by international students studying in the UK include losing face and a lack of confidence in “speaking up”, factors which may inhibit public complaining. Further to this, Barnes (2007) noted that non-European students tended to be more tolerant of the university’s service provision, while European students were less accepting of problems and more likely to complain.

Private complaining

Much like in general consumer scenarios, it is likely that minor dissatisfactory experiences will be shared with fellow students and the wider population through negative word of mouth instead of directly confronting the institution. Private complaining has often been referred to as less serious than public complaining (e.g., Rogers, Ross, & Williams, 1992). However, in reality such behaviours can severely damage an organisation’s reputation and are often invisible, making attempts at service recovery problematic (Crie, 2003). Ndubisi and Ling (2005) noted that complaints are made to warn friends and family away from a poor service provider. Indeed, Etzel and Silverman (1981) felt that complaints about educational institutions “are often made to fellow sufferers rather than to individuals in positions of influence” (p. 133). Su and Bao (2001) clustered US students based on their likely complaint behaviour and found that 44% of respondents could be described as “private complainers”, reluctant to share complaints with those in influential positions. It has been suggested that students may resort to private complaining because of fears that official complaints may leave them open to future sanctions from the university (Su, 1998; Harris, 2007). Shekarchizadeh *et al.* (2011) noted that dissatisfied students who do not defect to other universities can still damage the institutions reputation as “they may not speak well of the institution to other potential students and may not be supporters of the institution after graduating” (p. 69).

Third party complaining

In more serious situations, students may wish to take their complaints to a third party who can act as a mediator in the conflict resolution process. This may include seeking advice from separate bodies under the university “umbrella”: student support staff, counsellors or even the Students’ Union. In 2004, the UK Government formed the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIAHE) to act as an external third party to handle serious allegations against universities. Traditionally, consumers are reluctant to complain to third-party agencies (Park, Lehto, & Park, 2008), but students are showing an increased willingness to use this option, with the OIAHE reporting a 33% increase in complaints in its 2010 report (OIAHE, 2011). Harris (2007) argued that such an increase was inevitable given the introduction of variable fees to the UK HE sector, and noted that complaints to the OIAHE may only represent the tip of the iceberg. His research noted that many universities failed to adequately record complaints at the informal level, making an overall judgment on the prevalence of student dissatisfaction far more problematic. Given the increased usage of the OIAHE by students from a variety of backgrounds, this places greater emphasis on universities to manage student expectations and develop well crafted protocols to follow in the event of formal student complaints (Hoorebeek, Gale, & Walker, 2011).

Non-behavioural complaining

Su and Bao (2001) found that 33% of US students could be described as “passive recipients” who, instead of venting dissatisfaction externally, will do nothing in response to negative experiences. Any review of student complaint behaviour needs to acknowledge those individuals who do not voice their complaints in any way regardless of dissatisfaction levels (Singh, 1988). For instance, students with a particularly positive image of their university may forgive rare or minor service failures. It is also feasible that students, despite not feeling the need or ability to share their dissatisfaction with others, may develop a slightly more negative view of an individual tutor, department or even the university as a whole.

Research conducted to understand why some consumers do not complain has uncovered a variety of explanations. Snellman and Vihtkari (2003) noted that the biggest barrier was a belief that complaining is an ineffective and hopeless activity, while Donoghue and Klerk (2006) noted the time and effort required to submit a formal complaint may act as a deterrent. The same authors also pointed out that in some cases consumers may lack knowledge of official complaint procedures. Le Claire (1993) concluded that, specifically in the case of Chinese consumers, the two most common barriers to complaining were attributing the problem to simply bad luck and social embarrassment. In the context of HE, international students may find the act of complaining emotionally difficult and culturally inappropriate (Dolinsky, 1994), and may fear that complaints would impact negatively on their future grades (Hart & Coates, 2010).

The above discussion has identified four separate strands of student complaint behaviour illustrated in Figure 1. While this provides a useful review of the range of responses available to dissatisfied students, it does not indicate which of these channels are most preferred by East-Asian students.

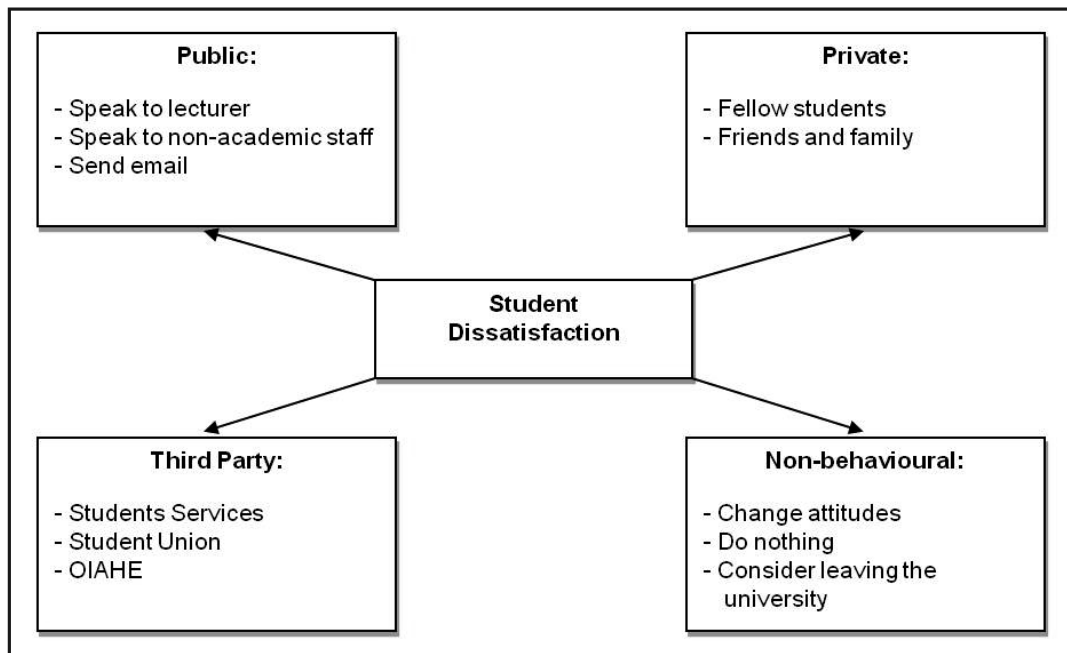


Figure 1: Typology of student complaint behaviour

Method

Respondents

The students in this study were drawn from the international student population of a Business School at a large post-1992 university that is known primarily for its teaching delivery, but has recently increased its investment in research. The institution has a diverse student population and is one of the top ten UK recruiters of international students (UKCISA, 2009). The Business School also has successful partnerships with a range of educational institutions across Asia. There are estimated to be 2,000 East-Asian students at the University, approximately 8% of the total student cohort, with approximately one third of these studying in the Business School at undergraduate or postgraduate level, providing a sizeable population to target for the study.

Instrument

An issue that has hampered previous complaint behaviour research is an over-emphasis on “public complainers” (Russo, 1979; Voorhees, Brady, & Horowitz, 2006). However, as the majority of consumers do not register their dissatisfaction with an organisation (Boote, 1998), such research can not be relied on as representative of the entire population. Consequently, it has been suggested that a scenario/vignette questioning technique be used to understand consumer responses to dissatisfactory incidents. This was first employed by Folkes (1984) and has since been used by various authors (Singh, 1988; Slama & Williams, 1991; Huang, 1994; Hernandez & Fugate, 2004). Such a method involves placing the respondent in a hypothetical dissatisfactory situation and asking them to indicate how they would be likely to respond on a Likert scale. Scenarios allow the researcher control over other variables (Folkes, 1984) and also acknowledge that consumers will typically engage in multiple complaint behaviours (Hernandez & Fugate, 2004). The provision of hypothetical scenarios also eliminates any fear of personal threat: students may be apprehensive of discussing their own experiences if they feel this may lead to them being identified.

To meet the research objectives, the authors developed the Student Complaint Behaviours Survey (SCBS): a 40-item instrument designed to understand preferred student complaint behaviours across a range of university scenarios. The instrument included four separate vignettes, each presenting a different scenario. After reading each vignette, respondents were then asked to indicate their likely responses, should they face the situation in question, on a 7-point Likert scale.

The first vignette was general in nature and did not place respondents in a specific scenario as it was designed to ascertain respondents’ general complaint behaviours. Previous literature on student complaint behaviour was used to ascertain the sorts of issues that are most likely to result in student dissatisfaction. An exploratory focus group was conducted with eight East-Asian students from the Business School to provide further examples of common dissatisfactory experiences. This process resulted in three situation-specific

vignettes covering the following three scenarios:

- Assessment and feedback: This was designed to represent an extreme situation that would potentially evoke the strongest feelings of dissatisfaction, as it affects the grade received from the university. Burke (2004) had previously highlighted that complaints are likely to follow assessment periods.
- Course organisation: The focus group highlighted poor organisation (e.g., timetabling) as a cause of student dissatisfaction, a point also highlighted by previous research (Bennett, 2003).
- Library service: This vignette was included so an additional university service that is closely linked with the academic element of university life was covered.

For each vignette, the same ten items were used, covering public, private, third-party and non-behavioural complaint behaviours. For example, an item used to address public complaining was “speak to a member of academic staff” and, for private complaining, “speak to other students” was used. The full SCBS, including the vignettes and response items, is given in the Appendix.

Procedure

The survey was made available to respondents via a specially designed website that was not linked to the University, to eliminate any perceptions of threat. It was promoted to students from the Business School using the University’s email system while at the same time providing assurances of anonymity. To acknowledge the differing levels of language competence evident in the East-Asian student population (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008), the instrument was offered to respondents in both English and Simplified Chinese, employing the back-translation method to ensure accuracy (Zikmund, 2000). Simplified Chinese is an adapted form of the traditional Chinese language that was implemented by Chinese government to improve literacy, and is generally understood by East-Asians from countries other than China, making it a suitable language choice for data collection. Data were also collected about the students’ demographic.

Analysis

A total of 135 East-Asian Business and Management students completed the SCBS in the four week period the survey was available. Of the respondents, there was a near perfect split in terms of language chosen to complete the survey: 68 completed in Simplified Chinese, 67 in English, justifying the decision to offer the survey in a choice of languages. 82 (61%) respondents were female, reflecting the gender balance of the University.

In terms of age, 51 respondents (38%) were aged 24 or over, with the median age group being 22 to 23. There was a spread of responses on length of residence, with 53 (39%) reporting residing in the UK for over a year, and 16 (12%) over three years, reflecting the differing year groups participating in the study. As expected given the composition of the student base, 66 respondents (49%) hailed from Mainland China, with the majority of other students coming from Malaysia (23, 17%), Taiwan (19, 14%) or Hong Kong (16, 12%).

Table 1 illustrates the average scores on a scale from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 7 (*very likely*) for each complaint style, across each of the four vignettes provided.

	Public	Private	Third Party	Non-Behavioural
Vignette 1 (General Responses)	4.09	4.92	3.81	2.83
Vignette 2 (Assessment Feedback)	4.44	4.69	3.02	2.64
Vignette 3 (Course Organisation)	4.63	4.73	3.35	2.71
Vignette 4 (Library Penalty)	4.75	4.24	3.85	2.37
Overall	4.48	4.46	3.50	2.64

Table 1: Complaint style average scores across vignettes

In line with previous research on complaint behaviour, the results show that in most situations respondents were most likely to use private complaint styles, and were least likely to engage in any of the non-behavioural responses. However, it is interesting to note that in the library scenario, respondents reported they were most likely to engage in public behaviours, which involved communicating directly with a member of staff. This suggests a more pro-active approach to seeking redress than is often assumed of people from collectivist cultures (Ngai *et al.*, 2007). In all cases, third party responses were also not seen as a likely means of response: this was particularly surprising in Vignette 2, where problems concerning assessment and feedback could possibly be discussed with other parties, such as the Students’ Union.

It was expected that, due to the academic consequences of Vignette 2, this would receive the highest scores in public complaints. However, the data shows that both the Vignettes 3 and 4 scored higher on public behaviours (4.64 and 4.73 respectively). Although these two vignettes would not have the largest impact on the students' final degree classification, there are other factors here that may have mediated their responses, such as respect for authority figures and immediate financial penalties. Respondents may also have been less likely to publicly complain in Vignette 2 because of insecurities about their academic performance, as any subsequent investigation would draw further attention to their work. Vignette 4 was designed to incorporate an immediate financial implication for respondents, and it is interesting to note that respondents were most likely to use third party complaint styles in this situation.

Building on these results, Table 2 illustrates average scores for each individual item across the vignettes to provide a clearer idea of how students were likely to react to dissatisfactory experiences.

Item	Vignette 1 (General responses)	Vignette 2 (Assessment feedback)	Vignette 3 (Course organisation)	Vignette 4 (Library penalty)	Overall
Speak to a member of academic staff (lecturers or tutors)	4.16	5.12	5.03	4.00	4.58
Speak to a member of non-academic staff (office or support staff)	3.75	3.47	3.89	5.04	4.04
Speak to a member of student services	4.14	3.41	3.66	4.42	3.91
Speak to fellow students	4.88	4.56	4.95	4.55	4.74
Speak to family/other close friends	4.94	4.80	4.47	3.90	4.53
Consider leaving the university	2.18	2.19	2.22	1.82	2.10
Speak to a third party (e.g., Students' Union)	3.51	2.62	3.04	3.25	3.11
Send email to relevant staff member (academic or non-academic)	4.44	4.76	4.90	5.25	4.84
Hold more negative attitude towards the university	3.55	3.66	3.69	3.64	3.64
Do nothing	2.80	2.05	2.24	1.59	2.17

Table 2: Individual response items across vignettes

Overall, the item “send email to relevant staff member (academic or non-academic)” was the most likely response reported by students (4.84), closely followed by “speak to fellow students” (4.74). The results vindicate the decision to incorporate a separate item into the SCBS concerning email, as recent research has shown that this is an increasingly relevant channel for dissatisfied customers (Park, 2005). The decision to separate word of mouth style responses into two categories was also vindicated: respondents appeared slightly more likely to discuss issues with fellow students than other friends and family, who perhaps could not fully empathise with the situation.

The least likely responses across all vignettes were “consider leaving the university” (2.10) and “do nothing” (2.17). These results have positive implications for university managers: even in the case of particularly dissatisfying experiences, students see withdrawing from the university as a last resort. In addition, the low score for “do nothing” implies a pro-active approach to complaining that could help rectify problems and ensure the same mistakes are not replicated with future students.

It is also interesting to note that the third party responses “speak to a member of student services” and “speak to a third party (e.g., Students' Union)”, scored highest in Vignette 4 concerning the library. From this, it appears that students were prepared to make a greater effort to gain redress when there was a threat of financial penalty, or when they were at a lower risk of being victimised in the future (Harris, 2007).

Independent sample *t*-tests were undertaken to ascertain if respondent complaint styles were associated with the language chosen to complete the survey. It was assumed that a respondent's choice of English or Simplified Chinese acted as a proxy for their preferred language whilst studying in the UK. The analysis suggests that no significant differences exist across the different complaint styles depending on choice of language, although those who completed in Simplified Chinese were more likely to engage in non-behavioural responses (2.78) than those who chose English (2.49, $p = .06$). Conversely, public complaining was preferred by those completing the survey in English (4.53, compared to the Simplified Chinese cohort score of 4.42, $p = .46$). It was surprising not to find more significant differences between the two groups: communication is an important element of complaining and it may have transpired that those using English showed a higher propensity to publicly complain. However, it may instead be that although no differences were evident, those with a higher level of English language ability may be more successful when they do submit a complaint.

Discussion

Findings from the research suggest that, in general, private and public complaining are by far the most preferred options among East-Asian Business and Management students, while third party responses are far less common, possibly owing to a lack of awareness of sources of guidance. This public complaining contrasts with the more general consumer research of Hernandez and Fugate (2004), who believed that the vast majority of dissatisfied consumers would not complain. Thorelli (1982) had earlier suggested that typically Chinese consumers would lack a knowledge of how and where to complain, although this may not be applicable to younger more-travelled East-Asians. These results do however align more with the work of Su and Bao (2001), who found that around a third of their sample could be classed as active complainers who would not hesitate to share their dissatisfaction. In this case, it may be that high fees paid to study at university inspire a more involved and demanding student than may have been observed previously.

It has been suggested that the use of email effectively blurred the lines between public and private complaining (Liu & McClure, 2001). Given the IT facilities typically provided for students, it is perhaps unsurprising that electronic communication was the most preferred form of response in the SCBS. This may be particularly appropriate for East-Asian students, who feel uncomfortable approaching an academic member of staff directly (Yau, 1988). Therefore, it would appear that any comprehensive model of student complaint behaviour would need to include email communication as a specific feedback channel. However, it has been suggested that consumers use non real-time channels such as email when wishing to simply vent frustration rather than seeking compensation (Mattila & Wirtz, 2004), an idea that warrants further investigation in a HE context.

It was also interesting to note that respondents were more willing to share negative experiences with fellow students, rather than friends and family back home. It may be that fellow students are in a stronger position to empathise and offer practical guidance. In addition, East-Asian students may wish to protect their family, and their investment in education, by reassuring them that they are not experiencing any problems.

The key methodological issue concerning the use of vignette questioning is impression management: respondents may opt to provide answers they feel will project an artificially positive, confident image to the researcher. In this case the results indicated a surprisingly high level of student pro-activity in reporting dissatisfaction. This may reflect a genuine desire to address negative experiences, but it should also be noted that “any time behavioural intentions are used as a proxy for behaviour, there is an opportunity for misrepresentation of actual market phenomenon” (Hernandez & Fugate, 2004, p. 161).

Conclusions and recommendations

Universities which fail to handle student dissatisfaction are likely to lose students to those which are more student focused, and show a desire to uncover and resolve problems (Bennett, 2003). However, despite the clear importance of handling complaints in order to maximise student retention, very few studies have specifically addressed CCB in a HE setting. For example, Su and Bao (2001) attempted to understand the most common responses to student dissatisfaction, but this was carried out in the US and did not focus specifically on international students. Therefore, this study has added significantly to an understanding of how East-Asian students voice their dissatisfaction when studying in English-speaking HE institutions.

The SCBS offers an easily adaptable and administered instrument to assess the preferred complaint channels of students across a range of subject areas and cultures. The current study has provided evidence that the vignette questioning technique can be used in service-based industries to gather data that can then be explored further with more qualitative techniques. This can hopefully contribute to future studies into student complaint behaviour, and ideally include additional scenarios to tap the multi-faceted nature of the university experience.

While the current study has added to existing knowledge on East-Asian student complaint behaviour, the sample size means that caution is recommended when extrapolating the findings across the wider East-Asian student population. Ideally, future research would seek to address this issue by accessing students from a number of universities. However, the university used in this research is one of the largest recruiters of international students in the UK (Garner, 2008), suggesting that it was a suitable site for this study.

Future research could adopt a more qualitative approach, which may result in a deeper understanding of the student complaint behaviour concept. In particular, one-to-one interviewing may provide further insights as to why students are hesitant to publicly complain (e.g., fear of a link to future grades) and also why specific channels are preferred when giving negative feedback (e.g., student committees or post-completion satisfaction surveys). Given the delicate nature of complaining to East-Asians (Dolinsky, 1994), such research would need to be conducted sensitively, in a language of the respondents' choosing and if possible by a researcher not affiliated with the student's faculty. The increasingly competitive nature of higher education, both in the UK and globally, demands that universities pay closer attention to student retention and

complaint handling strategies. Research such as the current study will help inform education managers how students choose to vent their dissatisfaction and what can be done to recover from negative student experiences.

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Appendix

Student Complaint Behaviours Survey (SCBS)

Each of the following vignettes uses the same items.

Scoring: 1 = very unlikely, 7 = very likely, 4 = don't know

Vignette 1

In general, please indicate how likely you are to take each of the below actions should you be dissatisfied with any aspect of the university experience.

Vignette 2

You go to collect a mark and feedback for a recently completed assignment, and your feedback form shows a far lower mark than you expected. Also, the feedback lacks detail and is poorly presented, giving no indication of why you received such a low mark. You are faced with having to resit the module, but you are convinced your assignment was of a higher standard.

Vignette 3

You have recently started a module that is due to include ten lectures and five seminars. However, due to organisational problems and absence from the module tutor, only seven lectures and three seminars take place before the examination. As a result you have not covered key parts of the teaching and learning plan and lost the opportunity to ask questions.

Vignette 4

You recently returned some books to the library. However, you receive a letter informing you that the books are now overdue and you will be fined every day until they have been returned. You check once again and you have not got the books at home, although you do not have any proof that you have returned them.

Speak to a member of academic staff	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Speak to a member of non-academic staff	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Speak to a member of student services	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Speak to fellow students	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Speak to family/other close friends	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Do nothing	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Consider leaving the university	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Speak to a third party (e.g., Students' Union)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Send an email to the relevant member of staff	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Change attitude towards the university	1	2	3	4	5	6	7