

Improving Accessibility and Responsiveness in a Complaints Management System

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Abstract

An effective complaint management system is an essential part of quality services. Complaints and compliments are valuable sources of information that organizations can use to improve programme delivery and service. This applies to all organizations, including Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs). When students complain (express their dissatisfaction) there should be a complaints policy for students to readily lodge complaints and staff should be responsive to the complaints. There was a recent study in Open University Malaysia (OUM) where *accessibility* and *responsiveness* were found to be significant predictors of *student satisfaction* (Latifah A.L. et. al., 2009). This paper aims to examine complaints management of OUM with regard to *accessibility* and *responsiveness*. The study is carried out using a survey method utilizing questionnaires of 12 items grouped into 2 dimensions namely *accessibility and responsiveness*, involving 100 OUM staff as respondents. The questions were based on the principles of effective Complaints Management System used by Graham & Lennard, (2007) and closely referred to the BS ISO 10002:2004. The result is analyzed using Lean Six Sigma approach using the 5-step method of Define, Measure, Analyse, Improve and Control (DMAIC). The findings suggest that there is a low level of accessibility and responsiveness in OUM's complaints management system. This implies that there is a need to have in place easily accessible and well-publicized mechanisms for resolving complaints. In addition, a responsive complaints management system should allow staff to handle complaints quickly and should include established time limits for action that reflect the complexity of the problems. It should also allow staff to keep learners informed of the progress of their complaints throughout the process. Research has shown that relatively few disgruntled learners bother to complain. As a result, every complaint received provides a window into a much larger pool of dissatisfaction. By dealing with the causes of this dissatisfaction, institutions can reduce further complaints and keep learners contented.

Key words: Lean Six Sigma, accessibility, responsiveness, higher education institution, complaints management system.

Introduction

Literature studies by the researchers indicated that complaints cause significant economic damage to an organisation; thus a good complaint management system is no longer a luxury. However, it is also noted that a holistic approach is necessary to develop a sustainable complaint management system that encompasses the whole spectrum of business activities.

The growing business scenario would proportionately grow the other areas of activity that supports the business activity. This would also increase the volume of complaints that would be received by the organisation. A well defined complaint management process would assist Open University Malaysia to manage the complaints received in the most effective manner and increase its ability to retain customers.

Relevantly, the 5-step method of Define, Measure, Analyse, Improve and Control (DMAIC) or the Lean philosophy could serve as the guiding principles to the institution in implementing business process improvement. However, the best approach to be used will be the amalgamated process that combines the benefits of both which is known as the Lean Six Sigma.

Based on the understanding that effective complaint resolution would lead to higher customer satisfaction, the researchers learned about the following Complaint Management Model that encompasses the required flow of receiving, recording, processing, responding to and reporting on complaints and using them to improve services and decision-making.

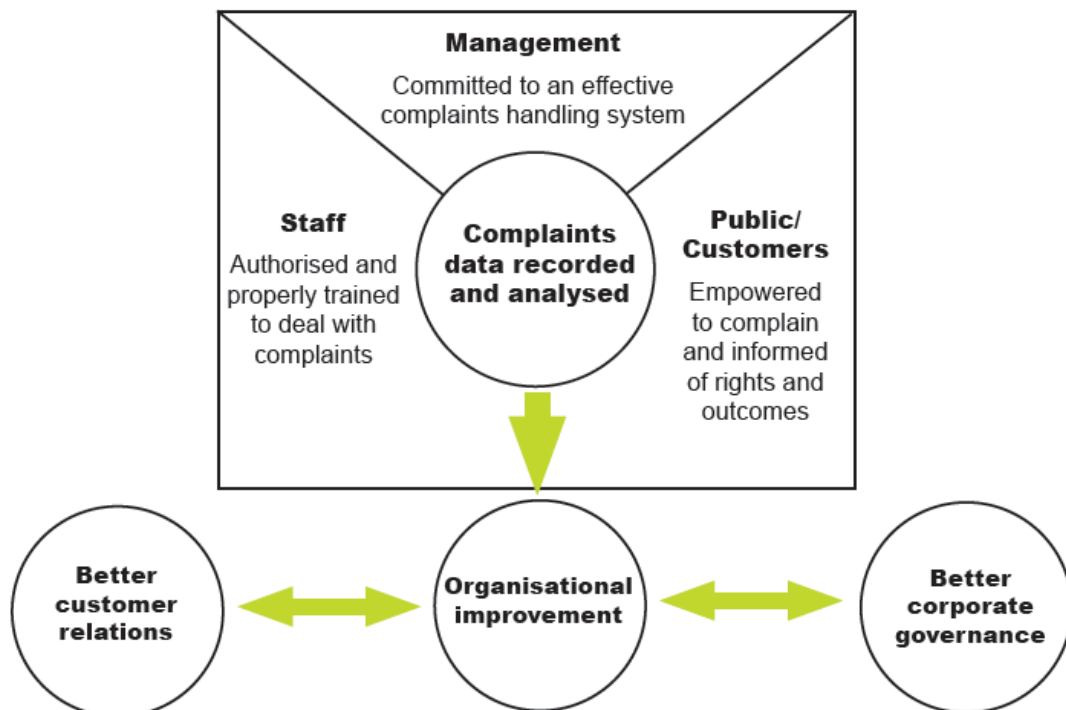


Figure 1: Complaint Management Model

Based on the study of Six Sigma, it is decided that the DMAIC methodology would be used as the tool to analyse the complaint management system at Sime Darby Property. The DMAIC methodology of Six Sigma consists of the following phases:

- Define
- Measure
- Analyse
- Improve
- Control

In the context of the study, *responsiveness* of staff as being responsive complaints management system should allow them to handle complaints quickly and should include established time limits for action that reflect the complexity of the problems, while *accessibility* is interpreted as staff making a place easily accessible and well-publicized mechanisms for resolving complaints.

Methodology

The Survey Questionnaires

The study was carried out using a survey method utilizing a set of questionnaires consisting of survey method utilizing questionnaires of 12 items grouped into 2 dimensions namely *accessibility and responsiveness* of complains management. The respondents are asked to respond with the following answer choices for each question: Yes, Partially, No, Not applicable (N/A).

The questions are arranged in nine subgroups as follows:

- i. Visibility and accessibility
 - Can the customers readily find out where to lodge a complaint against your company with you?
 - Can they readily find out how to make their complaint?
 - Is assistance available to customers who wish to complain?
 - Does your company have a complaint management policy and procedures clearly visible on its website?
 - Can complainants readily find out how their complaints will be handled?
 - Are complainants told of possible time frames for dealing with their complaints?

 - Are complainants able to obtain advice as to the progress of their complaint?

ii. Responsiveness

- Are your company's complaint management policy and procedures widely understood by staff?
- Do you prioritise according to criteria such as seriousness and urgency?
- Do you have indicative time frames for dealing with matters?
- Do your systems enable you to track time frames and bring matters up?

The Sample

100 OUM staff as respondents represent 2 key groups of staff in OUM. Approximately 40% of the respondents are staff members who have direct liaison with customers such as personnel from student Service Department. This group provides the researchers with significant experiential feedback because of their direct involvement in the interactions with customers.

The remaining 60% of the correspondents consist of various personnel from the management team and other supporting departments that might not be directly involved in customer interaction related activities but possess enough experience in observing and evaluating the existing customer relation system.

The primary data collection instrumentation used in this research is a structured questionnaire that examines the existence and implementation level of the various key elements of a complaint management system that is in accordance with the Lean Six Sigma principles.

The Analysis

As the questionnaire does not adopt Likert scale but expects categorical responses, i.e. Yes/Partially/No/Not applicable; thus the reliability analysis procedure, i.e. Cronbach's alpha is not required in this study. Instead, a content validity assessment is required. Descriptive statistical technique such as frequency distribution measured in percentage is used to analyse the data.

Results of Study

Accessibility

Table 1 below displays the analysis on whether Open University Malaysia (OUM) provides to the customers readily available information on where and how to complain and how the complaint will be managed (timeframes and information regarding progress and result), as well as reasonable assistance to make a complaint. Overall, only (48%) of the respondents gave positive responses which is less than half (i.e. 'Yes') to the assessment on the aspect of visibility and accessibility. However, 44% of the respondents reckoned there is no/partially display of complaint management policy and procedures on OUM website.

Table 1: Visibility & accessibility

	No	Partially	Yes	Not applicable
Visibility & Accessibility				
Can the customers readily find out where to lodge a complaint against your company with you?	6%	25.6%	64.1%	3.4%
Can they readily find out how to make their complaint?	4%	21.4%	70.4%	4.3%
Is assistance available to customers who wish to complain?	27.4%	16.2%	43.6%	12.0%
Does your company have a complaint management policy and procedures clearly visible on its website?	25.6%	27.4%	39.3%	6.9%
Can complainants readily find out how their complaints will be handled?	23.9%	35.9%	31.6%	8.5%
Are complainants told of possible time frames for dealing with their complaints?	25.6%	27.4%	39.3%	6.8%
Are complainants able to obtain advice as to the progress of their complaint?	13.7%	31.6%	48.7%	5.1%
Category overall	18%	26%	48%	6.7%

Responsiveness

Table 2 shows the level of staff responsiveness in understanding the system and how it works, responding to complaints in a timely manner, monitoring timeframes for resolution, and advising relevant parties of progress. The overall positive response percentage (i.e. 'Yes') is 43.28%. On the other hand, 49% of the respondents did not/partially reckon the staffs have been given system training.

Table 2: Responsiveness

		No	Partially	Yes	Not applicable
B	Responsiveness				
8	Are your company's complaints management policy and procedures widely understood by staff?	16.2%	39.3%	36.8%	7.7%
9	Do you prioritise according to criteria such as seriousness and urgency?	6.8%	17.9%	68.4%	6.8%
10	Has relevant staff been trained in how your system works?	17.1%	34.2%	38.5%	7.7%
11	Do you have indicative time frames for dealing with matters?	11.1%	38.5%	46.2%	4.3%
12	Do your systems enable you to track time frames and bring matters up?	27.4%	40.2%	26.5%	6.0%
	Category overall	15.12%	34%	43.28%	6.5%

Sig Sigma level

Six Sigma is an overall strategy to accelerate improvements in processes, products and services. The Sigma process capability is gauged by Minitab and the value ranges from less than 1 to 2 and then the failure incidents per million are calculated accordingly. The ideal Six Sigma has capability process of 2.00 with 3.4 Failures per Million. Figure 2 depicts the sigma levels.

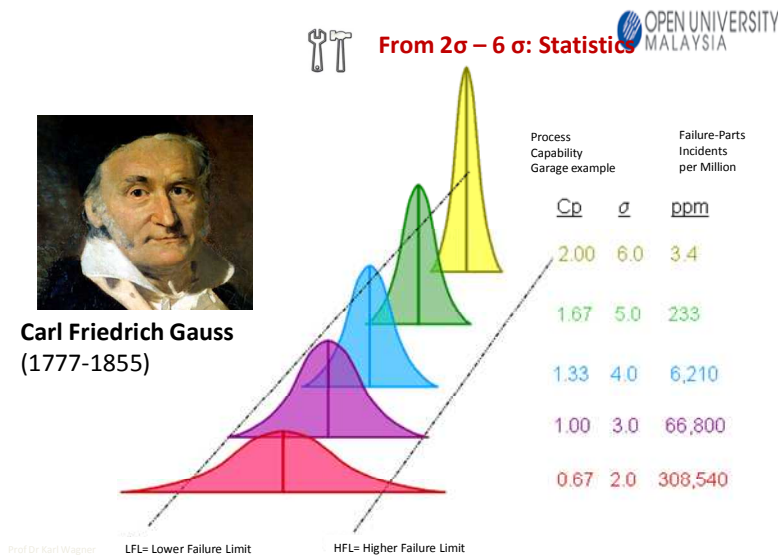


Figure 2

For the questions that sigma analysis is done by Minitab the results are provided in the following:

With regard to Accessibility as shown in Figure 3, Z.Bench (Sigma level) value is 3.33 which shows the sigma level is in the range 3 sigma.

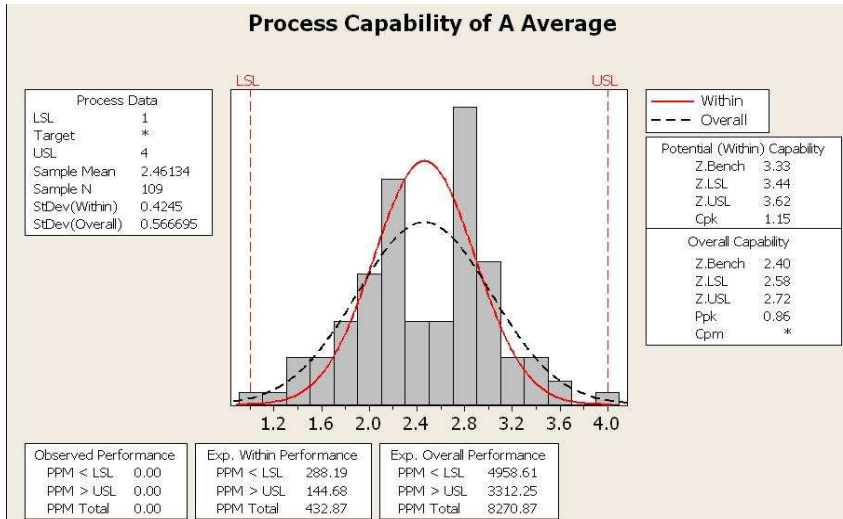


Figure 3

With regard to Responsiveness as shown in Figure 4, Z.Bench (Sigma level) value is 2.90 which shows the sigma level is almost in the range 3 sigma.

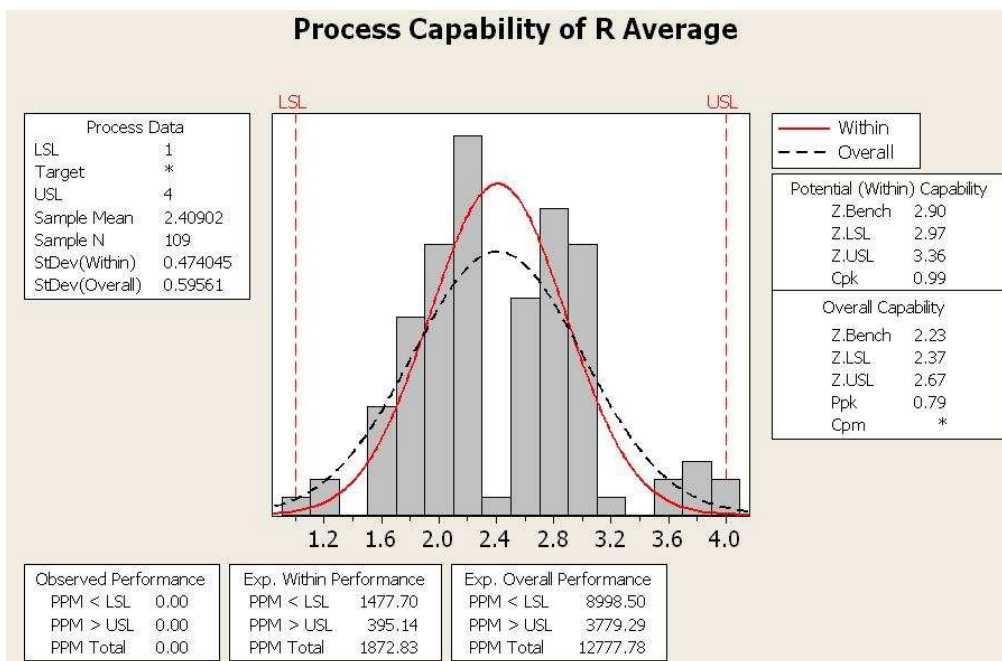


Figure 4

Discussion of Results

Based on the findings, it is apparent that OUM's processes and system was not set-up to deliver a superior customer experience. It is noted through various literature studies that:

- Complaints are expensive, both in direct and indirect costs.
- Good complaint management system can be an economical and efficient way of improving public image and increasing customer satisfaction.
- Constructive responses to complaints can help retain customers.

Further studies lead the researchers to the principles of Effective Complaint Management established by British Standards Institution which constitutes of the following and only two major factors of *Accessibility* and *Responsiveness* are studied in this paper (bolded):

1. Highly visible procedures
2. **Easy and free access**
3. Effective company protocols
4. Fairness and consistency
5. **Responsiveness**
6. Organizational ownership and commitment

Conclusion

Poorly handled complaints can be an expensive exercise that reflects badly on the the institution and reinforces defective business processes. If complainants feel they are being ignored or not taken seriously, they may publicly expose their experience, which could directly impact on an agency's reputation. There is much to lose by ignoring complaints and much to be gained by having an effective complaint management system.

A good complaint management system can be an economical and efficient way of improving corporate image and increasing client satisfaction, and can also enable OUM to review own performance and identify and address systemic and service related problems.

Based on the response on the survey conducted, it is quite visible that OUM would need to spend significant resources in developing and disseminating the essence of the Complaint Management Policy and Procedure to staff and students. The slack on the area is clearly shown from the low scoring in the display of the policy and procedure on the website and also a lower score on the level of understanding and training among staff.

Another key message from the respondents is the lack of a systematic guide and methodical process to analyse the received complaints. The absence of this element was further amplified with lower scoring on the training provided for the staff. It is also apparent that respondents strongly feel that the complaint handling staff lacks the necessary authority to make decision. All these factors lead to poor

analysis of complaints received. This prevents a thorough root cause analysis which is important in improving key processes in order to reduce future complaints. It is also apparent that the flow of analysed complaints is not channelled effectively to senior management. This could have caused the respondents to also react that the support from senior management could be better and the need for a thorough understanding of the senior management's direction in managing complaints.

The human element is paramount in order to succeed in any systemic implementation. Based on the survey feedback, it is noted that the lack of IT tools does hamper the spirit of the workforce. Lack of proper IT system and availability of hands-free equipment reduces the effectiveness of the resources utilised in handling complaints.

Comparatively, respondents also indicated that more effort is necessary to increase the trainings provided for the complaint handling staff.

Recommendations

Devising, resourcing and implementing a Lean Six Sigma based complaint management system need not be a difficult or complicated process. In fact, complex systems and processes can cause delays, confusion and frustration. On the other hand, a system that is too simple will not achieve any worthwhile purpose. Essentially, it is important to develop a process that enables OUM to efficiently, effectively and economically:

- receive, assess, deal with and fairly resolve complaints
- analyse and report on those complaints with a view to business improvement.

The researchers propose a set of high level implementation guidelines as follows:

1. The organisation culture must be conducive to effective complaint management. There must be:

Acceptance

The management and employees should recognise and accept that:

- Complaints are an important part of accountability;
- The way complaints are managed directly impacts on corporate image;
- There are potential benefits to be gained by managing complaints well.

Commitment

It is required to have a commitment from the top down to ensure that the complaint management system is widely known, strongly supported, and does not fall into disrepair or disrepute.

Communication

The organisation should be complaints friendly and ensure open communication with complainants whereby they are given reasonable information about their complaints and responses to requests for information.

2. OUM management should draft a student Service Charter that reflects institution's position with respect to complaint management (i.e. 'what' and 'why'), whereas the procedures, work instructions, technical specifications and the like should reflect the steps to be taken to give effect to the policy (i.e. 'how'). The Customer Service Charter would need to be communicated through trainings to the entire workforce at OUM and it should be prominently displayed at OUM facilities and website.
3. In the aspect of resources, the management should provide sufficient number of adequately trained staff; modern information and communication technology and equipment are essential elements for an effective CMS.
4. Resources are allocated to training and supporting relevant staff so that they:
 - are receptive to complaints and active listeners
 - welcome feedback on the company's product and service delivery
 - have solid interpersonal skills
 - are problem solvers and adept at conflict resolution
5. Complaints procedures are required to be redefined and revised in accordance with Lean Six Sigma principles to support the company's complaints policy in practice:

Accessibility

- Information on where and how to lodge a complaint readily available to customers
- Information on how the company will handle a complaint readily available to complainants
- Assistance to complainants (i.e. dedicated service counter, complaint hotline, support for language interpretation)

Responsiveness

- Appropriate time frames for responses, turnaround times, etc are set and monitored
- Track progress and advise complainants upon reasonable request

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