

Approaches to Complaint Management at German Universities

Wolf Hertlein

Hello and welcome to my presentation “Approaches to Complaint Management at German Universities”. I am very honoured to be speaking to you today at University of Oxford, one of the most prestigious universities in the world, and to open the first session together with Lies Poesiat and parallel to Jenna Brown and her colleagues. I am also honoured that you decided to listen to my presentation. And I want to thank our organizers for the excellent preparation of this meeting, especially Charlotte Wootton.

My name is Wolf Hertlein; I am complaint manager at Technische Universität Darmstadt. Darmstadt is in Southern Germany, between Frankfurt and Heidelberg. Technische Universität Darmstadt is one the best-known universities of technology in Germany. We offer our 25.000 students excellent chances for a professional career. I studied mathematics, and 2 years ago I passed a further education as a mediator.

As our time is very limited and I want to have enough time for discussion, I will start with the end: with a summary. 9 days ago, after my holidays, I found an E-Mail from Charlotte Wootton, asking me for „a very brief summary of each presentation to enable delegates to choose sessions“. I was alarmed, as to that moment, I had nothing but the title, mixed notes and ideas; just fragments of a presentation.

But after a short while, I calmed down and I sent her this: „German universities are in transition, also with regard to complaint management. Rather different approaches have been installed, but universities with student ombudsmen are still rather limited.“

So let’s have a closer look.

The structure: In Germany, we have two types of ombudsmen: On the one hand, we have ombudsmen for good scientific practice at nearly every research university. Additionally, there is a central “Ombudsman für die Wissenschaft (ombudsman for science) at the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG). On the other hand, there are ombudsmen for students at least at some universities. These two functions are completely separated. The following will be exclusively about the ombudsmen for students.

Additionally, some universities have ombudsmen especially for foreign students. “Ombudsman for students” and “complaint manager for students” are terms usually used as synonyms in Germany. There are no further agencies or ministries involved, no actual legislation forces universities to install complaint management.

So my my first central observation is: “Complaint management for students is set up only on the level of the universities”. The universities decide themselves.

My second observation: „Complaint management is a new topic for German universities“. This observation is a consensus between colleagues, and is also true for students. We often hear: „I didn’t know there is a complaint management at our university, a fellow student just told me about you.“

Goethe Universität Frankfurt was the exceptional pioneer and the first university who installed an ombudsman for students 12 years ago, far earlier than other universities. The initiative came from a student member of the senate. Prof. Dr. Christian Winter, a professor and former vice-president was denominated as ombudsman. The actual ombudsman is Prof. Dr. Jürgen Bereiter-Hahn, also a former vice-president.

The consequence of the observation that complaint management is set up only on the university level, is that there are a lot of different approaches, depending on the culture of the specific university.

Frankfurt was my first example. I want to present three further examples, all of them in Northern-Germany: Göttingen, Hamburg and Braunschweig. I want to show you the most common approach with the example of the University of Göttingen: My colleague Meike Gottschlich is an administrative employee; she started with complaint management in 2007, which was quite early. Her approach, which is quite similar to mine, is to act as a neutral facilitator. The proceeding in any case is completely informal and depends on the circumstances. Most of our colleagues work quite similar, but often less established than her.

The next example is the Hamburg University of Applied Sciences. This university follows a very different and innovative approach: They don't have one ombudsman, but two: A team built of a "Vertrauensstudent" and a "Vertrauensdozent", a student - Julia Bebensee - and a lecturer - Prof. Dr. Carmen Gransee - as a tandem of ombudsmen. The idea is to have a low-threshold offer with the student on one hand and on the other hand a professor who knows the university very well and may use his higher status within the university.

My last example is Technische Universität Braunschweig and their blog „Sag's uns!“ – „Tell us!": Students may submit complaints online, and as soon as there is an answer, both, complaint and answer, are published on the internet. The blog was established by Yvonne Gaedke and is now run by Julian Karwath. My feeling is that it is quite brave for a university to handle criticism in such an open way.

But: In spite of these professionalized examples, complaint management is established only at a few universities yet and complaint management is in most other cases not highly professionalized yet. I expressed this in a diagram. This may look scientific, but it is just presumptions based on exchange with the colleagues I know. We have about 400 institutions of higher education in Germany. Most of them don't have a defined central responsibility for student complaints. On the other hand, there are some universities which have professionalized complaint management systems.

The best proof available for this presumption is our national network: For three years now, we have annual meetings, 2012 at FH Dortmund, a university of applied sciences and arts, organized by my colleague Jutta Neuburger and her team. Since 2010, about 25 colleagues met every year at different universities. Additionally, we have a mailing list with 80 names on it. But there is no further structure yet, no homepage or anything else. This network is of great value to us.

What I've learned first from this network is that despite of the diversity of our organizational approaches, the basic principles of our work are quite similar: Independence, informal proceeding, confidentiality, neutrality/multipartiality, no executive power.

You see: We are beginners, but we are developing! Thank you for your attention!

One further remark: I promised to end with the summary I sent to Charlotte Wootton, but I would like to give you a slightly updated version as a take-home-message: In Germany, universities are on the way to install student ombudsmen / complaint management step by step. Rather different approaches have been installed, but universities with professionalized student ombudsmen are still rather limited.

Presentation:

prezi.com/mtjxerbfjve8/approaches-to-complaint-management-at-german-universities-oxford-2013/