

# **Complaints Handling Model as an Instrument of Public Service in Higher Education: A Case at Jenderal Soedirman University**

Wisnu Widjanarko<sup>1</sup> and Tri Nugroho Adi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>*Departement of Communication Science, Jenderal Soedirman University, Purwokerto, Indonesia*  
*wisnuwidjanarko@unsoed.ac.id, tri.adi@unsoed.ac.id*

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**Abstract:** This study attempts to measure the extent to which the service quality in complaints handling determines the quality of a higher education institution. This study following a descriptive qualitative approach is based on a focus group discussion as the data collection technique. Informants as the subject of this study were 20 students who were administrators of the executive body of students at the university and faculty levels as well as administrators of student activity units. While the object in this study was the communication mechanism needed in the management of complaints in higher education institutions. This study identifies three important areas in successful complaints handling: variety of communication channels, responsive and having high empathy officers, and providing comprehensive information in response to the submitted complaints.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

The quality of a higher education institution is not only marked by the achievement of its mission as an educational, research and community service institution but also by the capacity to provide services. Harvey (2006) revealed that service quality in higher education institutions must meet the rules of excellence, consistency, conformity of goals, efficiency and transformaton. In other words, in providing services to college beneficiaries, higher education institutions ensure customer satisfaction by asserting that all services provided reflect these dimensions; as confirmed by Kivisto & Pekkola (2017) that the role of management governance and administration in a university will determine the quality perceived by stakeholders to be realized.

One of the meaningful stakeholders for higher education is college students. This is in accordance with education, which is one of the three main mandates of higher education institutions, where students are the main beneficiary subjects. The relationship between students and university management has started eversince they are prospective students where they need information about what and how the university provides what students expect to improve their intelectual skills as well as how the selection process is organized.

Furthermore, in the process of their study, they participate in educational activities that will be determined by the quality of lecturers, curriculum, laboratory staff, librarians, academic facilities and infrastructure and academic support including related administrative mechanisms, until they finish their study. Also, students have interest in welfare and developing their potential, where the campus also has an obligation to facilitate it in accordance with the existing rules and regulations.

There will be dissatisfaction and lead to communication bottleneck and degradation in the quality of public services when there is a discrepancy between the expectation and the perception of service quality. In the context of higher education in Indonesia as a public service, the state has regulated it through Minister of Research, Technology and Higher Education Regulation No. 59 of 2016 concerning Public Services where the public is entitled to get service fulfillment and get quality service in accordance with the principles and objectives of the service. Besides, the community has the right to notify the organizers and implementers of higher education to improve services when they do not meet standards, including the right to make complaints when they are not appropriate or deviate from servant standards and are entitled to receive responses to complaints that are submitted.

One of the public higher education institutions is Jenderal Soedirman University (Unsoed). As an A accredited higher education institution, Unsoed currently has 22,519 registered students in 2019 with 95.28% are active in 80 study programs from intermediate to doctoral levels. In its efforts to improve the quality of public services - including services to students - Unsoed is committed to referring to the principles of bureaucratic reform as stipulated in Minister of Research, Technology and Higher Education Regulation No. 39 of 2018 concerning Bureaucratic Reform Road Map in which the quality of public services is identified by facilitating the management of complaints as an inseparable part of the service itself. In this regard, it is interesting to study how the complaint management mechanism is, especially in the perspective of public relations. Cutlip, et.al (2000) revealed that public relations is a management function that aims to build, maintain and manage a mutually beneficial relationship between organizations and the public. Lee, Neely & Stewart (2012) specifically in the context of public institutions stressed that public relations is a manifestation of the responsibility of state administrators for services provided to the public. The ability to respond to the discrepancy between expectations and perceptions is essentially a sensitivity of potential risks and crises so that communication between the organization and the public can be managed as expected (Walaski, 2011).

Starting from this, it is interesting to study the expectations of students as one of the main stakeholders at Unsoed regarding the management of complaints at Unsoed. What things does Unsoed need to have so that the dynamics of communication that take place at the time of filing complaints by students take place in the context of developing organizational quality?.

## **2 THEORETICAL**

One thing raised in the complaint management mechanism is the perspective of an ombudsman. Behrens (2017) revealed that an independent perspective and becoming an institution that could be trusted and carried out professionally are needed. The importance of the role of customers or beneficiaries of service is also revealed by Knox & Oest (2014) explaining that relationships are formed when transactions are established; when someone feels they get the benefits, it will create loyalties. Especially in the context of public services,

transparency is needed which refers to the rules of informative and openness, and requires a responsive attitude, Dwiyanto (2008). Therefore, when there is a gap between service quality and what is received, then complaints become a mechanism to reduce existing discrepancies. This is in line with what was explained by Mudie & Cottam (in Tjitpono, 2008) that there is an opportunity for service providers to improve relations with customers who feel dissatisfied. Besides, negative publications can be avoided so that internal improvements will be made to the service aspects to satisfy customers. Both also explained that complaints can motivate service providers to provide better quality of service.

In the context of higher education services, Qureshi, et al (2010) revealed that student satisfaction is very important, because one of the outcomes of the campus is the quality of graduates who can only be shaped when the campus provides a comfortable environment to develop with as little as possible dissatisfaction that can have an impact on institutional reputation. What is also interesting is that the awareness of consumers in college to get the best service from campus management is similar to the one when they deal with business interests (Robert & Erick, 2008). Thus, Wahab (2016) asserted that service must be part of the representation of the excellence of a university especially when they have to compete with other universities. Therefore, proactive attitudes and actions become an inseparable part of providing satisfaction to the subject of service.

Another engrossing thing is that there is a need for operational procedures in handling complaints. The Commonwealth Ombudsman (2016) has established a policy and complaints procedures on Australian universities, including ensuring protection and follow-up when there are issues related to the process. Watson, et.al (2016) in his research in England emphasized that the existence of a resolute communication-based complaints service mechanism would reduce the discomfort for students in making complaints, including building confidence in students that they have the capacity and seriousness in immediately following up and resolving problems submitted..

## **3 METHOD**

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach, with focus group discussions as data collection technique. Informants as the subject of this study were 20 students who were administrators of the executive body of students at the university

and faculty levels as well as administrators of student activity units. While the object in this study was the communication mechanism needed in the management of complaints in higher education institutions. Interactive analysis technique was used to analyze the data which includes the reduction, presentation, and withdrawal of conclusions on an ongoing basis.

#### **4 RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

Through guided discussion process, the bottlenecks in information which lead to complaints are technical matters in academics and student services as well as questioning the policies of university leaders, such as the issue of education funding. In this regard, three things that are found in this study; the first, a variety of communication channels that are easily accessible are needed to submit complaints, ranging from the availability of a clear and representative place, the presence of face-to-face services, telephone, electronic mail, interactive information pages and the use of social media; the second, responsive and having high empathy officers are required in the complaints handling; and the third, no less important is providing comprehensive information in response to submitted aspirations, and complaints.

Diversity of channels is needed, considering that each student has their own habits and comfort in communicating. Therefore, it is an obligation for universities to prepare a variety of channels so that no one feels difficulties or constraints when submitting complaints or opinions. The clarity and comfort of the place are also inseparable factors besides the availability of many access options for communication. This is important because not only does it facilitates the service process itself but also as a symbol of seriousness and intentness of the institution in managing such matter. The responsiveness of the officers is equally important. Misperceptions often occur due to inaccuracies in verbal and non-verbal choices articulated by the party receiving complaints. It should be realized that complaints appear because students consider that the services promised are not fulfilled; resulting in dissatisfaction. Therefore, an understanding of the psychology of students as stakeholders is needed as well as risk and crisis communication skills in the complaints service officer, in addition to the technical mastery of communication in facilitating complaints to the parties concerned in order to give the immediate respons. The ability to provide the

information needed regarding complaints is also very important. In managing complaints, the campus should have standard operating procedures on how the information needed can be conveyed comprehensively, both orally and in written. This will make students who submit complaints get a comprehensive picture related to the problems raised.

The capacity to manage complaints will build trust and a good and sustainable relationship between students and campus management. This is in line with Field & Barnes (2003) who revealed that the effectiveness of complaints management in higher education institutions poses a challenge for campus institutions to improve the quality of their services. In addition, an understanding of the attitudes, behavior, and character of students who are filing complaints needs to be well understood, because it is not only based on mere personal aspects, but as revealed by Mousavi & Esdiani (2013), there are other service quality, situation, and macro factors which also affects a person's condition in filing a complaint. The concept is not different from Vuori (2013) which emphasizes that each student's preferences and perceptions of higher education services will determine how they place themselves as subjects who receive services provided by the campus..

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

It is a necessity for Unsoed as a public higher education institution to adhere to the principles of public service and public information disclosure. Through integrated service capacity, it will be able to reduce the level of public dissatisfaction - including students in it - when making complaints or expressing their opinions. For this reason, the availability of various communication channels, communicative capacity of officers in serving as well as the assurance of information content as a communicative response are things that need attention so that all service mechanisms can be standardized as well as oriented towards the satisfaction of complainants. All of them will be better when they are in one system - organization, procedure, and authority - which accelerates the acceleration of handling by always keeping the accuracy of services.

Unsoed should have a complaints handling unit which prioritize the complainer's consolation, the ease in submitting complaints, and the staff responsiveness including their performance in

handling the complaints to form a responsive public satisfaction oriented institution within the public mind. This will give a wide-ranging impact on public trust in Unsoed's institutional capacity as a higher education institution, both in terms of the Tridharma as well as its services and management.

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