Challenging student behaviour

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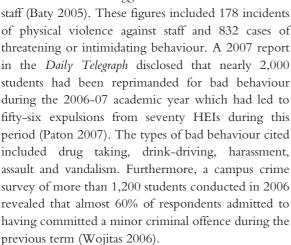First published on: 12 October 2010

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perspective

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Introduction

The issue of poor student behaviour within higher education institutions (HEIs) has been well documented in recent years. An investigation by the *Times Higher Education* in June 2005 revealed that in the preceding five years HEIs had recorded more than 1,000 incidents of student aggression towards staff (Baty 2005). These figures included 178 incidents of physical violence against staff and 832 cases of threatening or intimidating behaviour. A 2007 report in the *Daily Telegraph* disclosed that nearly 2,000 students had been reprimanded for bad behaviour during the 2006–07 academic year which had led to fifty-six expulsions from seventy HEIs during this period (Paton 2007). The types of bad behaviour cited included drug taking, drink-driving, harassment, assault and vandalism. Furthermore, a campus crime survey of more than 1,200 students conducted in 2006 revealed that almost 60% of respondents admitted to having committed a minor criminal offence during the previous term (Wojitas 2006).

Although the number of reported cases constitutes a very small percentage of the overall student population

in the UK, the impact of student misconduct on the rest of the student body and staff in HEIs can be substantial. For the student, their behaviour can impact on their studies as well as on their accommodation, particularly where breaches to a Halls of Residence licence are concerned. Students on professional courses could jeopardise their future careers where their conduct raises fitness to practise issues. For instance, the General Medical Council (GMC) sets out guidance for the behavioural expectations of medical students, who are expected to conduct themselves appropriately both on and off campus (GMC 2010).

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Whilst serious incidents will be unpleasant and distressing for those involved, it is often the lower-level disruptive behaviour (*eg* talking in class, arriving late, being rude to students and staff, not being co-operative in lectures/seminars) that impacts on students and staff, particularly in relation to their respective learning experiences. A recent survey of nursing students and teaching staff at an HEI showed the use of mobile phones (*ie* chatting and texting) and late arrivals to classes were the most common examples cited of student incivility (Attwood 2009). Such kinds of behaviour are disruptive to learning and can be seen to take a disproportionate amount of staff time to address. In a fee-paying era, students will feel short-changed if staff do not deal with situations effectively and take action to prevent future disruption.

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If such low-level disruptive behaviour is not corrected then it can often escalate into more serious forms of misconduct which can impact on student retention and indeed the reputation of a HEI at both local and national levels. For example, noise and anti-social behaviour from students in the local community can create ill-feeling towards the HEI. HEIs have student disciplinary procedures for dealing with the various levels of student misconduct. However, the application of disciplinary procedures will often denote a deterioration of a situation where a student's behaviour is considered no longer acceptable by their peers and by staff. Therefore, a key consideration for staff and students is to identify proactive and pre-emptive steps to tackle student behaviour prior to formal disciplinary procedures being invoked.

The purpose of this paper is to look at the underlying causes of student misconduct and to identify a number of strategies to deal with it in order to prevent escalation to a more formal stage. There is very little research on this subject for the higher education sector in the UK, and studies in the USA tend to focus on academic incivility in the classroom. Therefore, the paper draws on our own experiences in dealing with student misconduct in addition to case studies in the HE sector.

Why do students behave badly?

There are a number of factors contributing to student misconduct which relate to a student's previous personal and education experiences as well as to their expectations of HE. Firstly, behavioural problems can result from stress caused by transitional difficulties for students in adjusting to HE and by the social, financial and study pressures associated with this experience (Robotham and Julian 2006). Lowe and Cook (2003: 53) note how entering HE can be an unsettling period for students in terms of their feeling outside their normal comfort zone:

> The abrupt shift from the controlled environment of school or college and family to an environment in which students are expected to accept personal responsibility for both academic and social aspects of their lives will create anxiety and distress, undermining their normal coping mechanisms.

A sense of freedom brought about by being away from home for the first time, the pressure to make new friends and a pre-conceived idea of what it means to be a student can all contribute to difficulties in adapting to the HE environment. These transitional problems can be accentuated for those students who apply late or through clearing which can present difficulties for this group of students in integrating with

their peers (Prescott and Simpson 2004). In consequence, some incoming students may feel less of an affiliation with their HEI which can, subsequently, result in them feeling more unsettled in their new environment (Lowe and Cook 2003). The situation can be particularly problematic for students who are first generation entrants into HE and who may be less likely than their peers to understand what such an experience is likely to entail. Some students may also be unaware of how they are expected to conduct themselves in an HE environment or may not appreciate how their behaviour impacts on their peers and staff. Thus behaviour normally associated with previous educational levels may manifest itself, and this can be exacerbated by the greater independence enjoyed by students in HE.

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The payment of top-up tuition fees and a corresponding growing 'consumer' mentality have led to students becoming more assertive in articulating their demands and having higher expectations about what a HEI should provide for them (Jones 2006, 2010). A renewed rigour in asserting their rights can be viewed as symptomatic of a paradigm shift where students have growing expectations of their HE experience and what the HEI should be delivering (Jones 2010). This mismatch between students' expectations and the reality of the HE experience can be an underlying cause of student misconduct. A manifestation of this tension can be students behaving in a threatening and abusive manner when requesting assistance, information or feedback. An additional trait is students becoming more vocal when expressing dissatisfaction with aspects of their HE experience. Students will frequently air their views publicly on social networking sites such as Facebook, with opinions sometimes including derogatory and abusive comments about staff. According to a *Times Higher Education* report in January 2008 staff were increasingly experiencing abuse from students online, which was symptomatic of a more confrontational approach taken by students in airing their views (Tahir 2008).

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The response of administrative and academic staff to instances of student misconduct can often contribute to misbehaviour. Staff may lack the experience, training or confidence to challenge lower-level disruptive behaviour such as eating, drinking or taking telephone calls in lectures or quiet areas. Staff will also have different trigger points which will determine the threshold at which they decide to challenge such behaviour. In addition, staff may assume that students in HE will know how to behave and hence will be disinclined to spend any time on setting out behavioural expectations of students. The result may be that such behaviour will go unchallenged and this may result in an escalation to more disruptive behaviour which affects the learning experiences of students and staff. It should also be noted that rules and regulations can have an inverse effect on student conduct. In some cases, students may choose to 'rebel' or challenge the regulatory framework if they perceive this as being unnecessarily draconian and unfair and restricting their room for manoeuvre.

How staff behave in the HE environment can also contribute to student incivility, as research has shown (Clark 2008, Bjorklund and Rehling 2010). A survey conducted in 2000 by Indiana University into staff and student perceptions of student incivility found that 50% of academic staff respondents felt their behaviour contributed to student misconduct (Indiana University 2000). The survey also revealed that over half of the academic staff had not received any formal training in dealing with incivility in the classroom. Students will be less inclined to comply with the regulations if these are blatantly disregarded by staff; for instance, staff eating and drinking in areas where this is prohibited would not set a good example to the student body.

Addressing student misconduct

There are a variety of strategies available to staff for dealing with student misconduct, which span the various stages of the student lifecycle. On arrival at the HEI students need to be provided with an effective induction programme that enables them to familiarise themselves with their new surroundings and to be made aware of the behavioural standards expected by the HEI. Prescott and Simpson (2004) comment that a new student is more inclined to disengage from an institution if she or he feels that basic environmental factors – familiarisation with surroundings and awareness of how to access support services – are not being met. Misguidance and confused messages will exacerbate a student's frustrations and can lead to that individual forming a negative perception of their new environment. Similarly, students can have difficulties in making the transition to a more independent HE environment, so knowing how and where to access the relevant support services is crucial (Robotham and Julian 2006). The support and welcome which HEIs afford to new students in terms of information and guidance are key determining factors in this settling-in process:

> HEIs are likely, through their approach to academic, social and cultural inclusiveness, to influence the extent to which students feel they fit in or belong to the institution (Yorke and Thomas 2003: 67).

As part of any induction process it is imperative that staff establish ground rules for behaviour so that students are aware of how they are expected to conduct themselves in various areas of the HEI. Wherever possible, the students should be involved in the process for establishing ground rules as this will encourage a sense of ownership and can lead to students reminding and even enforcing the rules vis-à-vis their peer group. Research into students' perceptions of uncivil behaviour in the classroom has shown that these correspond closely to those of staff in terms of what constitutes appropriate conduct (Clark 2007, Bjorklund and Rehling 2010). These findings led the authors to conclude that ground rules should be informed by what students view as inappropriate behaviour, and this necessitates their input into the process.

Anecdotal feedback from lecturers who set clear ground rules at the beginning of each year and involve the students in making these decisions reports better behaviour in their classes. In order to get the students' support and involvement in this process, it is important that they are aware of the benefits to their learning experience of having such rules in place. For instance, lecturers can refer to respect for each other's contributions and timely arrival to lectures/seminars in order to minimise disruption as prerequisites for a productive and stimulating learning environment. Ground rules can also serve to determine the parameters for academic debate in terms of how the students can contribute to a lecture or seminar in a constructive and non-confrontational way. It is also important that students are reminded of ground rules at various points

of the academic year, otherwise these will soon be forgotten.

Some staff say that they do not always feel confident in setting ground rules; this may be because their department or faculty has not set out or agreed behavioural expectations to apply to their area of work. This can result in staff feeling that they are acting in isolation in establishing their own rules which might invite complaints from students on the grounds of unfair treatment in comparison with other lecturers in a particular faculty (eg no entry for latecomers to classes). Where the department or faculty outlines behavioural expectations, both staff and students report that it sets a culture for that particular area to which both parties readily adhere.

In order to empower staff and to provide them with confidence to set ground rules and to enforce these, lecturers – particularly those new to the profession – need to be given training in strategies for dealing with student misconduct and to be made aware of the HEI's disciplinary codes and how these can be applied in lectures. For many new staff, such training is an integral part of their induction and features prominently on in-house teaching courses that they are required to undertake. In this way, staff can be equipped with the relevant skills and procedural awareness to deal with disruptive and anti-social behaviour at the point at which it occurs. It is only through early intervention that students are made aware of what is acceptable behaviour and the possible consequences should they not take on board such advice.

Training and support also need to be provided to staff who have responsibility for investigating student misconduct and for applying any penalties, particularly at a minor misconduct level. From this perspective, it is important that staff responsible for instigating the disciplinary procedures do not work in isolation and that they have an opportunity to draw on collective institutional experience and expertise. An approach our institution has adopted is to establish 'disciplinary contacts' in faculties and departments who act as the point of liaison for disciplinary issues. Periodic meetings are held with the disciplinary contacts to provide a forum for staff to share experiences (eg discussing case histories) and best practice in handling disciplinary cases, in addition to being made aware of developments on a national level (eg recent rulings from the Office of the Independent Adjudicator). In this way, collective institutional expertise can be developed which will serve to enhance the investigation and addressing of student misconduct across the HEI.

The cumulative effect of such training and support to staff responsible for enforcing ground rules and invoking the disciplinary procedures will be to encourage staff to view the maintenance of behavioural standards as the responsibility of all members of the university community. Without the relevant training and procedural awareness, staff can perceive student misconduct as the responsibility of the department tasked with holding disciplinary hearings and issuing penalties, which can make them less inclined to address student misconduct at an early stage. It is also important that promoting positive behaviour amongst the student body is not the exclusive domain of staff; Student Unions also have a key role to play. A Union's input will lend greater credibility to any campaigns to improve student behaviour through making these relevant to and informed by the student body. The National Union of Students (NUS) has recently been promoting a 'Love your neighbourhood' campaign to encourage students to be good neighbours in order to enhance their standing in the local community (NUS 2010). Through such initiatives and drawing on activities such as volunteering, Student Unions can promote students as role models to their peers in celebrating their work and achievements and inspiring and encouraging positive behaviour.

If student behaviour does not improve or if various strategies for trying to address misconduct are not working then the ultimate sanction a HEI has at its disposal is to invoke its disciplinary procedures. Depending on the seriousness and nature of the misconduct, a key underlying principle of any disciplinary procedure should be to provide the student with an opportunity to reflect and to learn from the experience in order to avoid future reoccurrences. This would be particularly appropriate for lower-level misconduct. Such an approach takes into account the transitional difficulties that students may be experiencing in adjusting to the HE environment at the same time as moving into adulthood where they are expected to take greater responsibility for their actions. Accordingly, any disciplinary investigation should explore any contributory factors to a student's misconduct such as personal (eg home sickness, missing family or friends) or academic difficulties which may be affecting their physical or mental health. In this way, it is important that staff across the institution are aware of relevant learner support systems so that students can be appropriately referred (West 2004).

An institution's disciplinary procedures need to empower staff to deal with misconduct in a timely and prompt manner so as to ensure that a clear message is sent to students. The focus should ideally be on educational and corrective sanctions in order for the student concerned to learn from the experience and to demonstrate an improvement in behaviour. An integral part of the discussions should, therefore, be to make the student aware of the consequences of a repeat occurrence of such misconduct (eg escalation to the next disciplinary stage or payment of a fine). Accordingly, penalties such as good behaviour bonds or suspended fines or even a formal warning act as a deterrent, and indeed our experience has shown that for those students where such sanctions are in place further instances of misconduct are rare. However, this is an

area that may benefit from further research as no impact evaluation has been conducted, though individual institutions would be able to comment on the extent to which their disciplinary penalties discourage further student misconduct. At the conclusion of the disciplinary process, it is important that both parties are able to draw a line under the issues and that the student is provided with an opportunity to demonstrate an improvement. If students feel they are repeatedly being unfairly singled out any prospect of a positive learning experience from such situations will be undermined.

It should be noted that regulations setting out how the institution expects its students to behave are often enshrined in general regulations or behavioural codes which students will normally be asked to sign up to when they join the institution at enrolment. However, unless the relevant regulations are brought to students' attention on a continual basis then these codes or Student Charters will soon be forgotten and will only be 'dusted off' when the student's conduct is deemed to be in breach of this regulatory framework. Increasingly, institutions are ensuring that Student Charters have a more balanced approach through setting out not only behavioural expectations but also what a student can reasonably expect from the institution in terms of service delivery and provision of facilities. It remains to be seen whether such a 'dual undertaking' detailed in the Charters will make students more aware of behavioural expectations or whether they will focus on their 'rights' rather than their 'responsibilities'.

Conclusions

Challenging student behaviour is the responsibility of all staff in the HEI and the relevant disciplinary procedures should have an educational and reflective dimension rather than being solely punitive. Staff need to be appropriately trained and made aware of relevant procedures so that they are empowered and feel confident in tackling student misbehaviour. It is equally important that HEIs are proactive in dealing with misconduct rather than solely relying on activating disciplinary procedures when behavioural issues arise. Investment in establishing ground rules and in setting out the HEI's behavioural expectations of students not only at the beginning of a new academic year but also at various stages throughout serves to make students aware of how they are expected to conduct themselves. Ideally, behavioural expectations need to be set out and explained to students when they first apply to the university and when they are inducted at the beginning of the academic year. HEIs also need to be attuned to student experiences at the previous educational stages in order to understand and to assist new students in making the transition into HE:

Given that the 'output' of schools is the 'input' of universities in many of these cases, there is a need to keep pace with the service provided in schools, and the type of experience which students are used to as the norm (Yorke and Thomas 2003: 67).

It is also important that the disciplinary process affords the student(s) an opportunity to learn from misconduct incidents which fits into the educational remit of the HEI. As Lowe and Cook (2003: 75) observe, 'Institutions of higher education need to provide appropriate academic, attitudinal and social preparation for their new students.' This constitutes the ideal holistic approach for 'challenging' student behaviour.

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