Dear

Freedom of Information Response (Our Ref: K/21/361)

Thank you for your Freedom of Information (FOI) request dated 21 July 2021, reference K/21/361.

Your request read:

“1) In relation to the 19/20 and 20/21 academic years how many times did you agree to waive a student’s (postgraduate or undergraduate) tuition fees following a complaint about the quality of teaching or offer them a refund or compensation following a complaint about the quality of the teaching or more generally about the quality of their degree?

Please note this question relates to the waiver or refund of fees in the 19/20 and 20/21 academic years irrespective of when the complaint was lodged and irrespective of which year’s teaching the complaint was made about.

2) For each payment please give the amount, the subject and the year of teaching to which it relates

3) In addition, for each payment please provide a one or two sentence summary of the complaint made, e.g. ‘over half of the classes were cancelled due to a lecturer’s sickness and the claimant blamed this for their poor performance in the assessments’.”

The University of Leeds holds some information relevant to your request. However, we consider that to respond to your request would exceed the cost limit as set out in Section 12(1) of the FOI Act. Section 12(1) states that a public authority can refuse a request if complying with it would exceed the appropriate limit of £450. For the purposes of FOI, time spent on the permitted activities is calculated at the flat rate of £25 per person, per hour. The appropriate limit therefore represents the estimated cost of one person spending 18 hours to determine whether the information is held, and to locate, retrieve and extract the information.

We have outlined the reasons for invoking Section 12(1) below.

We do not record complaints based on when the final decision was carried out. Complaints are recorded based on the date they were received. A significant amount of time can sometimes pass between a complaint being received, and the final outcome being carried out. This can be for a range of reasons, for instance if the student becomes unwell and investigations need to pause, or if a complaint is particularly complex. As such, waivers and payments made in the 2019/20 or
2020/21 academic years may have resulted from complaints received several years earlier.

To locate the information you have requested, we would therefore be required to review all complaints received since at least 2017/18. A complaint received in (for instance) June 2018 could feasibly have concluded in September 2019, thus beginning in the 2017/18 academic year, but not being concluded until the 2019/20 academic year. A timeframe of four academic years therefore seems reasonable.

We would first need to isolate those which relate to the quality of teaching or their degree more generally. Complaints made by students are categorised by subject. The categories we report on are as follows:

- Academic provision
- Quality of supervision and teaching
- Failure to meet obligations
- Deficiencies in standards of service
- Discrimination, harassment, bullying and victimisation

We therefore consider that complaints which concern “the quality of the teaching or more generally about the quality of their degree” are most likely to fall within the first four categories. We have set out below the number of complaints received in each category between 2017/18 and 2019/20. We have not yet collated the figures for the 2020/21 academic year (and doing so would in itself be time consuming).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>2017/18</th>
<th>2018/19</th>
<th>2019/20</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deficiencies in Standard of Service</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>33.5</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure to meet Obligations</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>118.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Supervision and Teaching</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Provision</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>62.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>61</strong></td>
<td><strong>73.5</strong></td>
<td><strong>225.5</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please note that partial complaints denote complaints which are split across multiple categories. For example, a complaint which is about a failure to meet obligations which also relates to the quality of supervision and teaching would be recorded as 0.5 complaints in the ‘failure to meet obligations’ category and 0.5 complaints in the ‘quality of supervision and teaching’ category.

Next, we would need to identify which of these complaints resulted in fee waivers or compensatory payments. This is not always separately recorded. If the primary outcome of a complaint is a fee waiver, the outcome will be recorded as such. If, however, the primary outcome is something else, and a compensatory payment or fee waiver is a secondary or incidental outcome, it is likely that the outcome will be recorded under the primary reason, and the fact of the waiver/compensatory payment will only be recorded within the detailed case work. It is therefore necessary for us to review all of the complaints referred to in the table above. We estimate that it would take a minimum of three minutes per case to review and establish whether a fee waiver or compensatory payment was made. It would therefore take a minimum of 18 hours to review. Additional time would be required to review the complaints received in 2020/21.
Once we had established which cases resulted in waivers or compensatory payments, we would then need to review financial records in order to establish when the payment or waiver was made. Some payments are made centrally, while others are made by the School to which the student belongs. This varies depending on the nature and severity of the complaint. We estimate that it would take a further two hours as a minimum to establish the payment dates for cases which fall within the scope of your request.

We are therefore satisfied that it would take far in excess of the 18 hour appropriate limit to respond to parts one and two of your request. We do not record information in a way which enables us to answer part three of your request. The creation of new information in this way is not required by the FOI Act.

In the hope that it is helpful, we can provide the following information, which has been released in response to previous FOI requests which seek similar information.

“…in the 2019/20 academic year, 115 complaints were received which related to either industrial action or the coronavirus pandemic. All complaints either directly or indirectly asked for a compensation, a refund (full or partial) or other financial redress.

Of these, 19 complaints included a request for a specific amount of compensation or other financial redress. The total amount of money requested, where included in the complaint, was £44,427. A total of £1966.90 was granted to industrial action/coronavirus complainants. Of this, £1000 was paid as goodwill gestures. Goodwill gestures are typically made in cases where fault cannot be established or the complaint has not been upheld, but where there has been inconvenience, distress etc. caused.

Across all years [2015/16 – 2019/20] (excluding industrial action/coronavirus complaints), the total value of ‘compensation’ (as defined in your clarification email) awarded was £104,138.88. Of this, £31,789.88 was paid as gestures of goodwill.

Please note that this figure is based on records we hold of monies which were either paid or refunded to a student, or where a credit was (or has been) applied to their account. In some more recent cases, payment may not yet have been applied. Where no money has ‘changed hands’ (so to speak), for instance in cases where a charge has simply not been levied, no record of the monetary value is created. For instance, if a student was ordered to pay a late fee, but ultimately the fee was waived, the student has neither paid any money to the University, nor had any money credited to them. While the waiver is recorded as part of their complaint record, the value of the charge is not. No recorded information about the value of the ‘compensation’ in cases of this nature is, therefore, held.”

If you would like to revise your request in order to reduce the amount of time required, we suggest that you consider the following:
• Requesting information based on the year the complaint was made, rather than the year compensatory payments or fee waivers were made.
  o Limiting the request to a year or years with fewer complaints (see table provided above) will reduce the amount of time required to analyse the complaint records.
• Limiting the request to one of the categories of complaints set out above (again, favouring one with fewer complaints will further reduce the time)

We hope this information is helpful. If you have any questions about this email, however, please do not hesitate to contact us on foi@leeds.ac.uk

If you are unhappy with the service you have received in relation to your request and wish to make a complaint or request a review of our decision, you can request an Internal Review. Requests for Internal Review should be made in writing using the following contact information:

Post: Mr D Wardle
      Deputy Secretary
      The University of Leeds
      Leeds
      LS2 9JT

Email: foi@leeds.ac.uk

Requests for Internal Review should be submitted within 40 working days of receiving the University’s response to your request. Further information about how the University manages Freedom of Information requests and about our complaints procedure is also available on our website (www.leeds.ac.uk).

If you are not content with the outcome of the internal review, you have the right to apply directly to the Information Commissioner for a decision. Generally, the ICO cannot make a decision unless you have exhausted the review/complaints procedure provided by the University. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at: Information Commissioner’s Office, Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire, SK9 5AF.

Yours sincerely

Chloe Wilkins
Freedom of Information Officer

Secretariat
University of Leeds