



Queen Margaret University

CONSUMER DISPUTE RESOLUTION
CENTRE

Research into the Impact of CDRC Complaints Handling Courses

Report on Phase 1 Research
November 2018

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About the Centre

The Consumer Dispute Resolution Centre (CDRC) is a Centre of Excellence for continuing professional development (CPD), research and knowledge exchange in dispute resolution, complaint management and consumer policy. This Centre contributes to the evidence base for policy and practice, providing world leading multidisciplinary research. Through the provision of high quality CPD and consultancy, our research and knowledge exchange activities contribute to the professionalisation of complaint handling throughout the UK and internationally. Our activities influence policy and practice to enhance the consumer experience of dispute resolution. We contribute innovative thinking and analysis for policy makers and academic networks.

<https://www.qmu.ac.uk/cdrc>

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Introduction

The Consumer Dispute Resolution Centre at Queen Margaret University (CDRC) decided to carry out a small research project to evaluate the medium to long term benefits of attending accredited training on complaint handling delivered by CDRC.

Accredited training is usually assessed by means of a reflective statement. These statements often describe how the student has changed, or plans to change, their complaint handling practice as a result of the training. The purpose of the present research was to follow up with students the extent to which this took place and to identify any barriers to change.

The aim of the research project was to identify the extent to which accredited training on complaint handling and dispute resolution delivered by CDRC has impacted on complaint handling practice in the public and private sector.

The objectives of the research project were:

1. To identify what changes, if any, happened as a result of attending training on complaint handling practice both individually and organisationally
2. To explore the nature of any barriers to improving complaint handling practice
3. To identify any gaps in the training which would assist complaint handlers in improving complaint handling practice

The key research questions the project sought to answer were:

- What did the complaint handlers plan to change as a result of attending the training and why?
- How successful have they been in implementing those changes?
- What factors supported them in making those changes?
- What were the barrier to those changes?
- Have there been any wider impact from attending the training?
- How can the training be improved in order to assist those attending implement changes?

Methodology

The research design was a mixed method approach, and was intended to consist of the following phases:

Phase 1: A short quantitative survey using Online Surveys was sent to students who have attended CDRC short courses to complete electronically.

Depending on the outcome of Phase 1, a second phase of the research could be undertaken.

In September 2018, students who had attended CDRC short courses during the academic years of 2014/15, 2015/16 and 2016/17 were contacted by email, asking them to complete the online survey. In total, 340 former students were contacted, as shown below.

Year of course	Number of students
2014/15	68
2015/16	92
2016/17	180
TOTAL	340

The online survey remained open for 18 days, and a reminder email was sent out after one week.

The survey asked respondents about:

- them and their organisation
- the complaints handling course/s they attended
- their job role and whether this had changed
- how helpful they found the training
- what impact it had on them personally, and on their career prospects
- what changes they made to both their personal approach and their organisation's approach to complaints handling as a result of the training
- their views on the content of the training
- any suggestions for future improvement to the training

Phase 2: Those who completed the quantitative survey were asked at the end of the survey whether they would be willing to take part in follow up telephone interviews, to explore in more detail some of the issues discussed in the survey. A minimum sample size of 12 was proposed. Following the analysis of the Phase 1 survey, the decision was taken not to proceed with Phase 2 for the time being. The Phase 1 survey provided very valuable insights, and as a result, it was not considered necessary to pursue Phase 2.

Results

1. The survey respondents

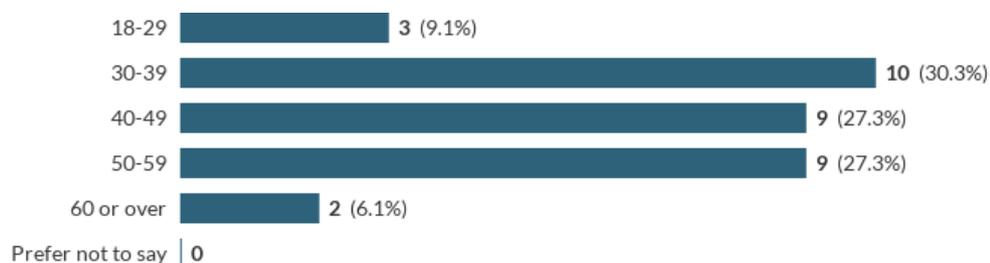
A total of 33 people responded to the survey, representing a response rate of 9.7%. Of these, one indicated that they did not wish to participate in the study; the other 32 agreed to participate in the study.

10 respondents said that they were willing to take part in a more in-depth telephone interview, although 1 of these did not provide their contact details.

Respondent profile

There was a range of ages among respondents, as shown below. The majority were aged between 30 and 59.

Current age of respondents



The gender of the respondents was split fairly equally, with 17 female and 16 male respondents.

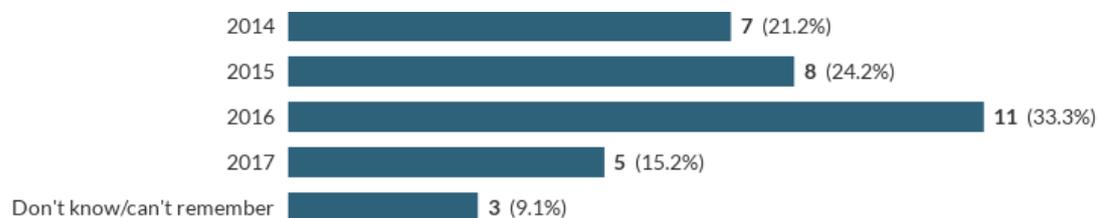
2. The courses attended by respondents

Respondents were asked to select the courses which they attended from a list of those run during the academic years 2014/15, 2015/16 and 2016/17. Some indicated that they had attended more than one course, with a total of 42 responses recorded. The highest number of respondents (9) had attended the Public Services Complaint Management Award. Eight respondents had attended two courses run specifically for the Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS): 1) effective communication and 2) context and decision making. Six had attended the Professional Certificate in Ombudsman and Complaint Handling Practice. The remaining respondents had attended a range of other courses, as shown in the table below.

Which CDRC training course did you attend?	Number of respondents
Public Services Complaint Management Award	9
Professional Certificate in Ombudsman & Complaint Handling Practice	6
Professional Award in Ombudsman & Complaint Handling Practice (General)	4
Professional Award in Ombudsman & Complaint Handling Practice (TPO and TDS)	1
Effective Communication (RBS)	8
Context & Decision Making (RBS)	8
Award in Regulatory Investigative Practice (Nursing and Midwifery Council)	3
Foundation Award in Investigation Nursing and Midwifery Council)	1
Professional Certificate in Mediation & Mediation Skills (Jersey)	3
Total	42

The highest proportion of respondents (11) said they had attended the course in 2016. Of the others, 7 said they undertook the course in 2014; 8 said they did so in 2015 and 5 said they did so in 2017. The remainder answered: ‘don’t know/can’t remember.’

During which year did you attend this training course(s)?

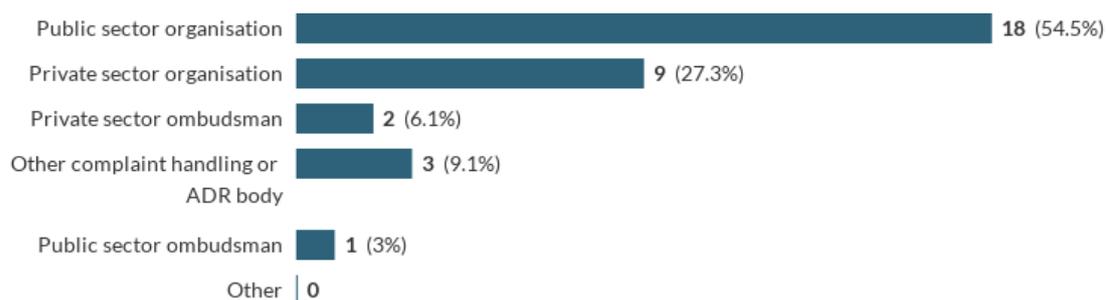


3. The organisations where respondents work/worked

Type of organisation

More than half (18) of respondents said that when they attended the course, they were working in a public-sector organisation. Of the remainder, 9 said they worked for a private sector organisation, while 3 worked in another complaint handling or ADR body. Two worked for a private sector ombudsman and one worked for a public sector ombudsman.

What type of organisation were you working for when you attended the course(s)?



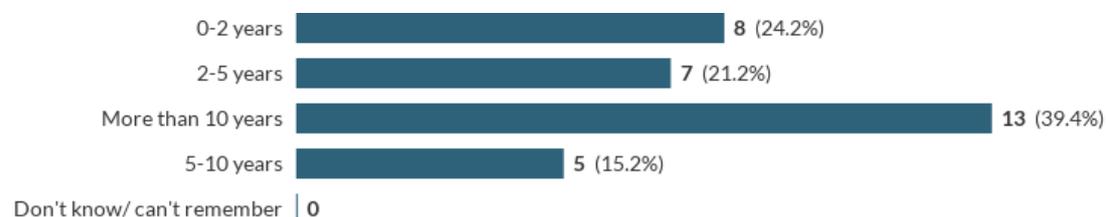
Location of organisation

Almost all (31 of 33) respondents said that the organisation they worked in was located within the UK or Channel Islands. One said the organisation was in Europe (outside the UK); the final respondent said their organisation was worldwide.

Length of time with the organisation

Respondents were asked how long they had been working with the organisation when they undertook the course. More than half had been there for over five years, of whom 13 had been there for more than 10 years. One quarter (8) said they has been there for less than 2 years. The remaining 7 had been there between 2 and 5 years.

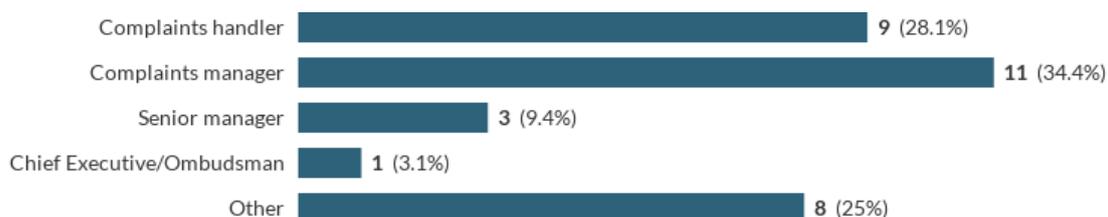
Length of time with the organisation



4. Respondents' job roles

Respondents were asked what their role was within the organisation when they attended the course. As might be expected, the majority said they were either a complaints handler (9) or a complaint manager (11). Three said they were senior managers and one was a Chief Executive/Ombudsman. A quarter of respondents (8) answered 'other'. Of these, the highest number said they were an investigations officer or case officer. Other answers included: manager; training manager; communications; and allocation officer.

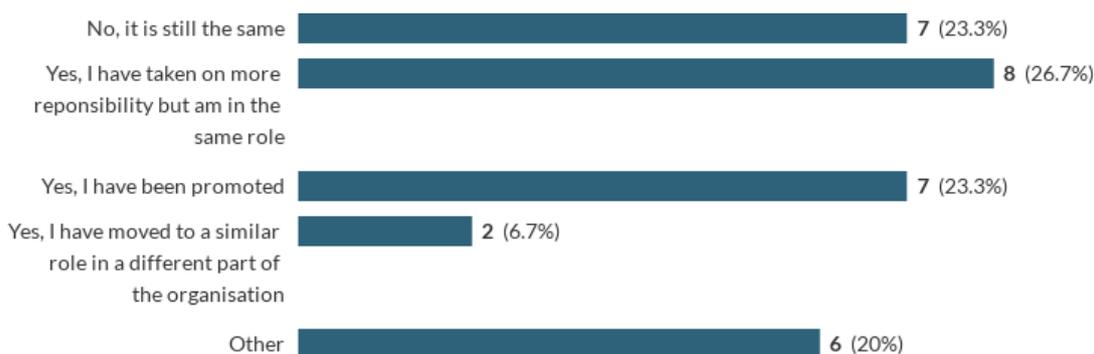
What was your role within the organisation when you undertook the training course(s)?



When asked whether they still worked within the same organisation, 91% (30) said they did, while the remaining 9% (3) did not.

Those who said they still worked at the same organisation were asked whether their role had changed since attending the course(s). Nearly one-quarter (7) said that they had been promoted, while a further quarter (8) said that they were still in the same role but had taken on more responsibility. One quarter (7) said that their role had not changed, while 2 said that they had moved to a similar role in a different part of the organisation. The remaining 6 respondents answered ‘other’. ‘Other’ included: a change of job title; a temporary promotion; and a move to a different job in another team.

Has your role changed since attending the course?

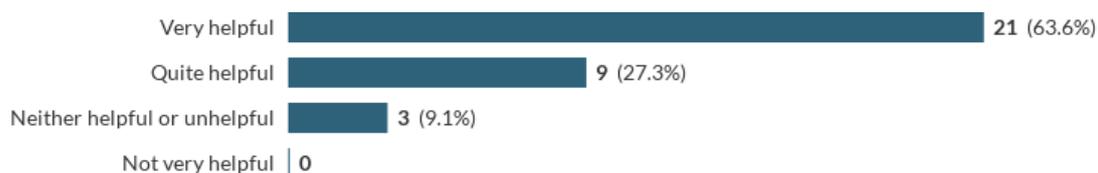


Of the three respondents who had moved organisation, one said they had a similar role in another sector; one was taking a career break; and the third said they had a less senior role within a different organisation in the same sector.

5. Personal impact of the training on respondents

The vast majority of respondents (30) said that they had found the training either very helpful or quite helpful in their complaints handling role. Most (21 or 64%) said they had found it very helpful. The other 3 respondents said they found it neither helpful nor unhelpful in their role.

How helpful did you find the training was for you personally in your complaints handling role?



Respondents were asked to give further reasons for their answer. While a small number said that the course had no impact on their role, or was not entirely relevant to their role, most made positive comments.

Several respondents referred to the importance of the course in terms of ‘professionalising’ their complaint handling role:

“Professionalised the role I was doing and put me on a par with colleagues in other areas of complaint handling.”

“Made me aware that we need to consider complaint handling as a ‘profession’; need to train people better; and recognise that complaints are not just another piece of correspondence!”

“A chance to obtain a professional qualification that validated my role within the organization.”

Some thought the course had been useful in general, while others found it useful in gaining a perspective on how complaints were dealt with both in their own organisations and more widely:

“It gave me confidence to know that I had been on the course, and the general approach and research was helpful.”

“Provided useful principles and tools for us to benchmark against and consider. It also served to remind of the need to consider each complaint on its own merits.”

“Great to understand your role within the larger sphere of ombuds.”

“Gave good perspective on what I was doing when compared with others.”

“Provided perspective on how [the organisation] handle and review complaints.”

Some mentioned specific aspects of the course which they had found useful. Several respondents said that they had found the section of the course on how to undertake investigations helpful:

“really useful guidance on how to approach an investigation in a systematic and methodical way, thinking up-front about what evidence we would need to collect to confirm/not an allegation.”

“It helped me gain knowledge on reflecting on how I handle things and on some investigation technique re interviewing.”

Others mentioned the inclusion of material on potential bias:

“My understanding of bias in particular and how it can affect perception was very helpful in my role.”

“The course opened my mind to potential cognitive biases.”

Some said they found the focus on understanding the complainant’s perspective, and on the importance of communication helpful:

“It helped me to understand the thought processes behind how different customers want to receive information and how to best position my communications.”

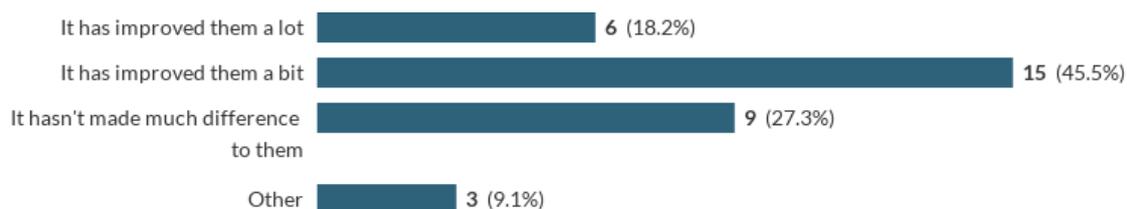
“I also gave more thought to my approach of investigating complaints and communicating with customers following my attendance of the course.”

“The course was extremely helpful and I still refer to some of the effective communication learnings in my current role.”

Impact on future career prospects

Respondents were then asked what impact undertaking the training course(s) had on their future career prospects. Nearly two-thirds (21) said that it had improved their prospects a lot (6) or a bit (15). Nine said that the course hadn’t made much difference to their career prospects. Of the three who answered ‘other’, two mentioned that the course had sparked their interest in further academic study in the dispute resolution area.

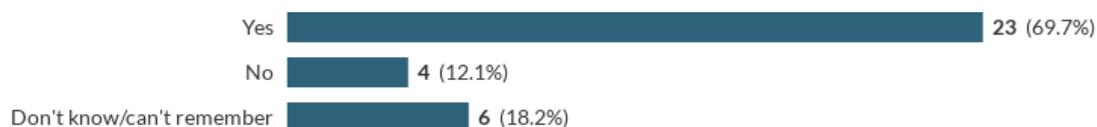
What impact do you think undertaking the training course(s) had on your future career prospects?



6. Personal changes made as a result of the training

Respondents were asked about changes which they had made to their own personal approach to dealing with complaints as a result of the training. 70% (23) said that after attending the course, they had planned to make such changes. Four respondents said they had not planned to make such changes, while the remaining 6 answered ‘don’t know/can’t remember.’

Did you plan to make any changes to your own personal approach to dealing with complaints as a result of the training?



Those who said that they did plan to make such changes were asked to give details of the changes they had planned to make. Those who did so gave a range of responses, which related to both 'hard' and 'softer' complaints handling skills. While some of the answers given were about planned changes, most related to changes which respondents had in fact actually made. Common responses included taking a case by case approach to complaints, and making efforts to avoid being influenced by bias:

"Generally to consider each complaint and complainant individually and try to avoid information and other bias."

"To take a more individual case by case approach to complaints, wherever possible."

"Always take a step back and try not to allow personal biases affect the outcome."

"I took steps to ensure that I was more focused on ensuring a completely unbiased approach and to ensure that I spoke to more customers personally prior to issuing a complaint resolution letter."

A number of respondents said that they had changed their interviewing /investigation techniques and/or how they communicated with complainants as a result of undertaking the training:

"I changed my interview technique and became more reflective following difficult communications."

"Changed my questioning technique."

"I think a lot more about my style and approach to communication."

"Speaking with customers more as it is easier to explain. When I do write to customers I ensured my language was friendly (not bank speak) and in laymen's terms so it is more accessible."

"listening more, using blameless apology more, taking time to show someone you have heard what they are saying, making sure to repeat back to them what you have understood, using a table to separate out each element of a complaint and our response to it, the investigation needed, and what evidence needed to be collected to respond to each allegation."

Others talked about focusing on resolution, and the use of apology as a means of resolution:

"more focussed on resolution and asking complainants what they wanted to happen."

“When appropriate try to resolve matters with the appropriate use of apology.”

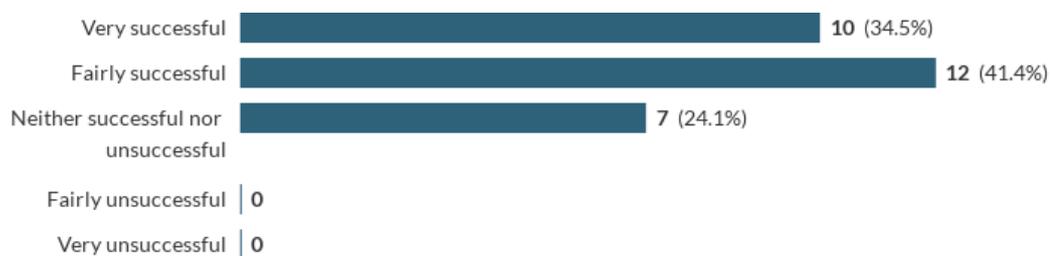
Two respondents who had undertaken the Professional Certificate in Mediation and Mediation Skills commented on their increased use of mediation techniques:

“Improvement in active listening and empathising. De-escalating situations involving combative adversaries.”

“I became more mediative in my general demeanour.”

Respondents were asked how successful they had been in implementing their planned changes. The majority of those who responded (22 of 29) said that they had been very or fairly successful in doing so. The remaining 7 respondents said that they had been neither successful or unsuccessful. No-one said that they had been unsuccessful in implementing the changes.

How successful were you in implementing these changes?



Many of the responses given related primarily to plans to make organisational changes, rather than personal changes, and these are reflected in the discussion on this issue later in the report. In terms of personal changes, a number of respondents reported that they had successfully made positive changes to how they dealt with complaints:

“In conjunction with support from a [name of organisation] Complaint manager I changed my whole approach to writing letters so they are more specific and friendly.”

“I seem to remember that I had fewer reactivations after ensuring that I spoke to more customers prior to issuing the final response letters.”

“I was able to take on a number of investigations and identify what the case theory was and how to plan and carry out the pathway of the investigations. I think I would have gone beyond the scope had I not had this training.”

“Skills have been utilised at work and in live mediation situations.”

“While I wasn't able to informally resolve complaints, I have been able to influence the decision maker to use apology within his decision letters.”

Some respondents who said they had been fairly successful in making changes observed that they had found it hard to change their existing behaviour:

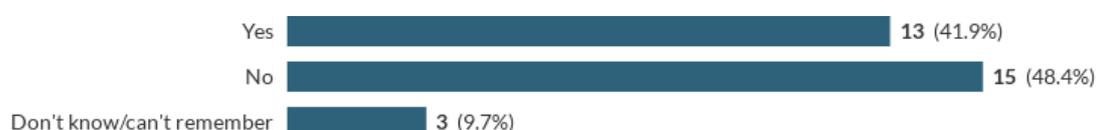
“Changing behaviour is hard.”

“It’s something I need to be conscious of at all times, and it is easy to slip into cognitive biases.”

7. Changes to organisational complaints handling

Respondents were then asked whether they planned to make any changes to how their *organisation* handles complaints, after attending the training course. Of the 31 who responded, 13 said they did plan to make changes. A slightly higher number (15) said they did not plan to do so.

After attending the training course, did you plan to make any changes to how your organisation handles complaints?



Those who answered ‘yes’ were asked to explain what changes they planned to make. Again, most respondents gave details of the changes which had actually been made. Responses from those who did discuss changes which they planned to make included:

“we planned to reflect on the course and implement any changes that the complaints team saw as beneficial.”

“Taking control of every complaint channel possible to implement a more centralized approach to complaint handling.”

“Becoming the ‘go to’ department for complaint assistance.”

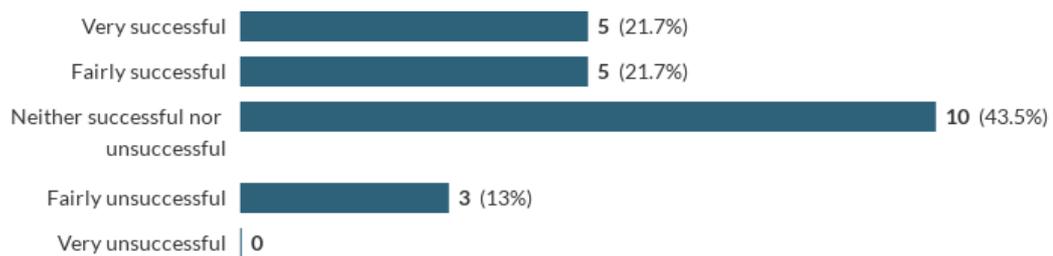
“Early intervention of ADR in disputes.”

“Plan investigations better.”

Respondents who had answered ‘yes’ were asked how successful they had been in implementing the changes. Of those who responded, ¹10 said they had been very or fairly successful. A further 10 said they had been neither successful or unsuccessful, while 3 said they had been fairly unsuccessful.

¹ There were 23 responses even though only 13 said ‘yes’ to whether they planned to make changes

How successful were you in implementing these changes?



Respondents were asked to explain their answer. Many gave details of positive changes which they had been able to implement within their organisation:

“I was in a position of influence, being part of the core complaints handling team that leads on policy and on our approach. This meant I could refine our approach easily and tweak it where necessary. I also advised others on how to respond to complaints, which meant I was well placed to share the learning from the course.”

“I shared best practices with my immediate team wherever possible.”

“Our quarterly reports for management teams are richer now in detail and causes. Our Complaint Handlers group is well attended and starting to participate in a work plan so we deal with complaints better across the whole [organisation].”

“There was a lot of work undertaking with implementing these changes involving a large team of people. I was making many of the decisions and allocating the complaints appropriately.”

“Recommendation accepted and extra tier of escalation has been removed”....” All complaint handlers are mentored and a buddy system of peer reviews is in place”.....” Changes have been implemented helping with consistency of response, and shorter complaint resolution time.”²

“I have supported colleagues in my previous role by reviewing letters and giving feedback. In my new role I support new case handlers by supporting them with different ways to improve their writing quality.”

“Re-established a complaint handlers group; brought in [name of organisation] training on social care; started to categorise complaints better to help with problem solving and learning.”

“I became Chair of the Employee Forum about two years later. The course helped me to canvass people's complaints and suggestions and take them forward for resolution purposes and to make improvements to areas within the organisation.”

“Prior to course there was no individual with responsibility for RCA [root cause analysis].”

² All answers by same respondent, in response to 3 different questions

Those who had been less successful in implementing changes gave various reasons for this. These included their own lack of authority and influence in ensuring that changes were made:

“I cannot implement [planning investigations better] due to authority, though I do influence investigating officers where possible with advice and guidance on how to best conduct the investigation.”

“I do not work within the area that controls the complaints policy and my organisation has rigid rules and regulations that I could not change.”

Others mentioned difficulties arising due to limited resources:

“As mentioned resource and support for the program is a constant issue.”

“Time constraints means I am not able to give as much time to these tasks in my new role as I would like.”

Others indicated that there was a need for cultural change within their organisations in relation to complaints handling:

“Part of a large organisation (6,000 employees) so driving change is a slow process.”

“It’s hard - we get a lot of similar complaints about our decisions that our process is not able to resolve (this requires legal challenge). Whilst I’ve tried to get the business to be more clear about the fact that we can’t resolve complaints (as opposed to reflecting that the complaints are unjustified, this requires more difficult cultural change.”

“It is a challenge for the Board to understand the importance of the impact of complaints on the business and allocate sufficient resources to accommodate and accomplish a world class service.”

One respondent from a public sector organisation indicated that those attending the course had concluded that changes were not required within their organisation:

“Most of our attendees reflected, but ultimately could not identify changes that we could make.”

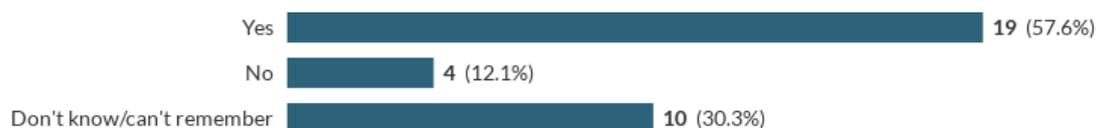
8. Views on the content of the training course(s) and its relevance

Specific aspects of the training course(s) that were helpful

Respondents were asked whether there were any specific aspects of the training course(s) that they found helpful.

More than half (19) said yes. Only 4 said no, although 10 answered ‘Don’t know/can’t remember’.

Were there any specific aspects of the training course(s) that you found to be helpful?



A number of respondents commented that they found the whole course helpful. Particular aspects which were highlighted included the following:

“effective approaches to complaint handling - not agreeing too quickly, taking time to listen, allowing the complainee the time and space to get matters off their chest, using a blameless apology, how to structure investigations and using forms and templates to try to ensure consistent approaches to investigations.”

“Structure of complaint responses and remedy.”

“All of it was useful but especially the unconscious bias and customer journey for acceptance of news.”

“I found all aspects of the course in general to be helpful and interesting. The area that helped me most was the work around cognitive bias.”

“Case studies; use of chronologies; dispute resolution techniques; managing persistent or unclear complainants.”

“Videos - examples that figure out real situations.”

Some respondents commented on the value of reflecting on their own practice as part of the course:

“The reflective essay did make me think a lot about what I had done and improvements\choices that could be made.”

“Reflecting on own work.”

Others mentioned the value of learning from their fellow students:

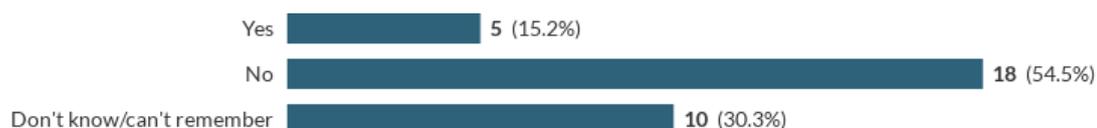
“Not particularly the training, but how others talked complaints.”

“the away days were good for shared learning discussion with colleagues.”

Coverage of the course content

When asked whether there was anything they would have liked to see as part of the training course(s) that wasn't covered, most of those who responded (18) said there was not. A further 10 answered 'don't know/can't remember'.

Was there anything you would have liked to see as part of the training course that wasn't covered?



Five respondents offered suggestions for new items that might be included in the course content:

“The importance of and how to build relationships and working with other outside agencies, networking.”

“more practical tips..., it did not give the practical guidance that would have been helpful. e.g. writing decisions.”

“organisation specific input from [my organisation].”

“More on categorising complaints.”

“Tackling the report at the end, however, I did receive help from the tutor who was very pleasant and helpful. It was sometime ago now but I seem remember thinking that the structure of how the report was supposed to be presented wasn't entirely clear. The analytical aspect of this course was fantastic but the practical element was slightly lacking (from what I remember).”

9. General views on the course(s)

Respondents were asked whether they had any other suggestions for future improvement to the training. All but one respondent said they did not; one of these said: *“I really enjoyed the course and wouldn't make any changes.”*

The respondent who did suggest a change thought that ‘QMU should insist time is afforded to attendees to complete reading/assignments’ so that they were given more support by their organisation.

Would respondents recommend the course(s) to others?

When asked whether they would recommend our complaints handling courses to their colleagues or others who work in complaint handling roles, 91% (30 respondents) said they would.

Would you recommend our complaints handling courses to your colleagues or others who work in complaint handling roles?



Twenty-two respondents went on to offer reasons for their answer to this question. All of the comments were positive, and a selection of these are set out below:

“I recommended the course yesterday to a colleague and have also done so on previous occasions. It was probably the best training that I have undertaken through my organisation.”

“This was an excellent opportunity to challenge my current approach and to improve how I deliver complaints management within my organisation.”

“I learned a lot of practical, useful, new techniques that I could actually use everyday and networked with other similar professionals which was also really helpful.”

“It was the most focused bank training course I have attended. Doing the essays really made me think about my learning. It was taught in a professional manner with a lot of information and best practices shared.”

“The learning is great for all as can be applied not only to complaint resolution but also in all aspects of the bank.”

Two respondents made reference to the course in the context of ‘professionalising’ complaints handling:

“I think that it would professionalize the sector if we had more CPD.”

“it helped firm up the role and feeling that the qualification was a credit to one’s ability to investigate.”

General comments

Finally, respondents were invited to give any further comments they would like to make regarding the training course (s). Seven respondents provided comments. Most of these were positive comments about their experience of the course(s):

“Thank you so much, the experience during the training and the self-reflection after it, gave me - first - a hint on my professional strengths and limits.”

“the trainers were friendly and particularly the trainer who lead investigations for PHSO was really useful to learn from, when he used examples to bring the techniques to life.”

“I found the tutors/lecturers to be very knowledgeable and helpful. I usually tend to switch off while attending training courses to be honest, but I was kept thoroughly engaged throughout on the QMU course!”

“I would love the opportunity to complete more modules from this training.”

“Great to meet people in other ombuds.”

One respondent suggested that ‘a ceremony to present the certificates by the QMU or organisation would make it more memorable.’

The final respondent commented that they “probably could have used and should have used more guidance on the final paper.”

Conclusions

While the level of responses to the online survey was not as high as might have been desirable, it is fairly typical for a survey of this type. There could be a number of reasons for the response rate. These might include: the length of the survey; the time involved in responding; and how relevant and important respondents felt the survey was to them. The length of time which had elapsed since some students attended the course, which may have led to difficulties with recollection: a sizeable number of those who did respond answered 'don't know/can't remember' to some of the questions. It is also possible that some former students have moved outwith the complaints sector; they may therefore have been less motivated to reflect on their experience of the course(s).

Those who did respond to the survey represented a range of job roles, organisations (both private and public sector), length of job experience and courses attended. Their responses provide us with some very useful qualitative feedback on both the courses themselves and the impact of undertaking the course(s) both on students personally and on their organisations.

Overall, the findings are very positive. It must be acknowledged that those former students who took the time to respond to the survey may have been pre-disposed to make positive comments. Nevertheless, while there was some constructive feedback for CDRC staff to consider, most respondents made very positive comments about the content and delivery of the various courses. The vast majority (30 of 33) of respondents said they would recommend the course(s) they had taken to others. The same number said that they had found the training either very helpful or quite helpful in their complaints handling role, and nearly two-thirds said that undertaking the course(s) had improved their career prospects.

The majority of respondents planned to make changes to their own personal approach to dealing with complaints as a result of the training, and were mostly successful in doing so. Respondents reported that they had successfully taken steps to consider complaints on a case by case basis; to avoid being influenced by personal bias; to change their interviewing /investigation techniques and/ their approach to communicating with complainants; and to focus on resolution of complaints.

Fewer than half of respondents said that they planned to make changes to how their *organisation* handles complaints, after attending the training course. While it is not clear why more did not make such plans, this may in some cases have been because they were not personally in a position to make such changes. A number of respondents said that they had been successful in implementing positive changes within their organisation. The changes mentioned included: sharing best practice with colleagues; more detailed reporting on complaints; more consistent responses; shorter complaint resolution times; more streamlined complaints processes; mentoring of complaint handlers; and improved categorisation of complaints.

Those who had been less successful in implementing changes mentioned factors such as their own lack of authority and influence in ensuring that changes were made; time and resource constraints; and cultural issues within their organisation in relation to complaints handling.

In terms of the courses themselves, respondents commented positively on various aspects of the course content, and a few made suggestions for additional items for future conclusion. Two respondents commented on difficulties which they had encountered with the final assignment, suggesting that there was a lack of clarity as to what was expected of them, and that they would have welcomed more guidance on this. Two respondents also commented that they would have welcomed more practical guidance on matters such as writing decisions.

Respondents also made positive comments about the helpfulness and expertise of the trainers themselves; the opportunity which the courses offered both for self-reflection on the student's own practice and for meeting and learning from others working in complaints handling; and the importance of the course in terms of 'professionalising' their complaint handling role.