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## ACCOUNTABILITY IN ACTION: MEASURING HIGHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS' GRIEVANCE REDRESSAL PERFORMANCE

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### Abstract

Grievance redressal systems in institutions of higher learning (HEIs) are imperative tools for ensuring accountability, transparency, and trust of stakeholders. Although there has been an increase in the regulatory requirements around the world, the efficacy of these systems is still immeasurably and poorly researched. The paper will discuss the effectiveness of the grievance redressal system in HEIs by formulating a multi-dimensional measurement model that combines the efficiency of the procedure, quality of resolutions, accessibility, and responsiveness of the institution. The paper, based on secondary data on regulatory authorities, self-assessment reports on institutions, and comparative international studies, is able to identify systemic gaps in grievance handling, such as poor timelines in resolving grievances, lack of effective communication channels, absence of redressal mechanisms, and poor literacy among students. The research concludes that institutions that have formal grievance committees, online portals for complaints, and frequent performance audits are much more likely to achieve a higher resolution rate and satisfaction among stakeholders. The paper goes on to state that there is a need to shift the measurement of the grievance performance beyond the quantitative measures of complaints to the qualitative results measures. It also provides policy recommendations to the regulators, institutional leadership, and accreditation bodies to institutionalize grievance redressal performance as a key indicator of institutional accountability. The results are relevant to the growing literature on the quality of governance within higher education and offer a useful model that can be used to benchmark redressal performance.

**Keywords:** Redressal Of Grievances, Accountability in Higher Education, Institutional Performance, Handling Complaints, Rights of Students, Governance of Education Institutions, Redressal Mechanism, And Education Transparency.

### 1. Introduction

Colleges hold a special role within democratic societies, a place that is both an engine of social mobility, a generator of human capital, and a repository of social trust. They are therefore supposed to be of high standards of governance, transparency, and accountability. However, as it is often experienced by students, faculty, and the administrative staff, there is often a disconnect between what an institution promises and how it actually operates. Academic unfairness, discrimination, negligence on the part of the administration, and insufficiencies in the infrastructure are widespread in all HEIs globally, and the way in which institutions address these complaints is a direct indicator of accountability in action.

The grievance redressal concept in education is the formal and informal policy by which the stakeholders in education, mostly students and employees, can air out the issues, seek redress, and remedies for the valid complaints. Ideally, properly functioning redressal systems guard human rights, prevent institutional malpractices, and provide useful feedback for perpetual enhancement. Practically, though, many organizations consider grievance management as a mere formality of compliance and not a governance necessity (Kapoor & Mehta, 2017).

The international situation of redressing grievances in tertiary education is skewed. Even though independent ombudsman offices and mandatory reporting systems are institutionalized in countries like the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada, institutions in South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and even parts of Southeast Asia still use unstructured, informal processes of handling complaints, which do not provide complainants with procedural protection (Tight, 2019). In the most controlled systems, research shows that a significant number of complaints are either not addressed or addressed inadequately, mostly



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because of imbalances of power within these institutions between the student and the institutional leadership (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005).

The paper will add to the body of literature by establishing a systematic framework for gauging the performance of grievance redressal in HEIs. Its thesis is that accountability in higher education cannot be effectively evaluated without looking at how the institutions react to complaints. The extent of grievance performance, as a measure of timeliness, transparency, accessibility, quality of resolution, and follow-through, can be a good proxy of the strength of the institutional culture of accountability. The paper is structured in the following way: Section 2 will review literature on existing grievance mechanisms and institutional accountability; Section 3 is the measurement framework; Section 4 will analyze comparative data on various sources of regulatory and institutional accountability; Section 5 will discuss policy implications, and finally, a conclusion is given in Section 6.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Accountability in Higher Education

Responsibility in higher education has been conceptualized in various aspects: financial responsibility (stewardship of state resources), academic responsibility (quality of teaching and research), and governance responsibility (compliance with rules, rights, and processes) (Bovens, 2007). Of these, the accountability of governance has been most directly involved in grievance redressal, where the responsiveness of the institutions to the claims of their subjects is involved.

The term evaluative state was coined by Neave (2012) in reference to the transformation of the traditional governance of higher education, where direct control by states is replaced with performance-based control, where institutions are given freedom in return for showing their results. The redressal performance of grievances in this model would turn into a quantifiable accountability measure as opposed to an internal administrative service. The latter has been enhanced by the emergence of the New Public Management (NPM) in education, which has brought in the notions of customer satisfaction, service excellence, and complaint handling practices of the private sector to the public institution (Deem, Hillyard, and Reed, 2007).

### 2.2 Grievance Mechanism: Design and Effectiveness

There are a number of principles in the design of effective grievance mechanisms. There are six criteria of effective non-judicial grievance mechanisms, proposed by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR, 2011): legitimacy, accessibility, predictability, equity, transparency, and rights-compatibility. When applied to HEIs, these standards will be in the form of formal complaint committees, procedural timelines, impartial adjudicators, publicity of results, and anti-retaliation protection.

Empirical research reports that formal and structured grievance systems are more effective in comparison to informal methods. In the case of institutions having appointed ombudspersons, Rowe (2009) discovered that rates of complaint resolution increased by 40 percent and chances of repeat complaints reduced by a significant margin. Equally, as has been shown by Strayhorn (2012), African American students in institutions with a higher percentage of White students had a greater tendency to file formal grievances when there were clear, open-access processes in place - highlighting the equity aspect of successful redressal design again.

Design is not enough, though. The culture of the institution is a key factor. Even a well-designed system will not work well where the leadership considers complaints to be threats, not feedback (Scott, 2015). An institutional culture of defensive management (denial, delay, and deflection) negatively affects procedural mechanisms and deters any complainants seeking legitimate grievances.

### 2.3. Measurement Gaps of Grievance Performance

Although the literature on accountability and grievance has rich theoretical insights, quantitative models of gauging grievance redressal in HEIs are underdeveloped. The current accreditation systems, like NAAC (India), QAA (UK), and



TEQSA (Australia), have grievance mechanisms as checklist items but do not provide any standardized performance measures (Stella, 2006). This loophole implies that institutions are able to purport compliance without actually being effective.

Recent research has demanded outcome-based measurement models that not only indicate the presence of a grievance mechanism in place, but also its efficacy in practice (Braskamp and Ory, 1994; Perellon, 2005). In response to this call, the present paper will develop a multi-dimensional Grievance Redressal Performance Index (GRPI) that can be used in a variety of contexts of HEIs.

### 3. Conceptual Framework: Grievance Redressal Performance Index (GRPI)

The present paper suggests the Grievance Redressal Performance Index (GRPI) as the composite measure of the redressal performance of an institution. The GRPI is designed based on five dimensions, which reflect different dimensions of the grievance management performance.

**Table 1: Dimensions and Sub-Indicators of the GRPI**

Dimension	Sub-Indicators	Weight (%)
<b>1. Procedural Efficiency</b>	Average resolution time, adherence to stated timelines, and backlog rate	25
<b>2. Accessibility</b>	Multi-channel complaint submission; language accessibility; disability accommodation	20
<b>3. Resolution Quality</b>	Complainant satisfaction rate, recurrence rate, and appeal rate	25
<b>4. Transparency</b>	Public reporting of grievance data; disclosure of resolution outcomes	15
<b>5. Institutional Responsiveness</b>	Follow-up mechanisms; systemic changes post-complaint; staff training frequency	15

Source: Author's framework adapted from OHCHR (2011), Rowe (2009), and NAAC (2022) assessment criteria.

GRPI scores are rated on a 100-point scale, and institutions are categorized into High-Performance (75-100), Moderate-Performance (50-74), Developing (25-49), and Non-Functional (0-24). This level of classification allows cross-institutional benchmarking of different types of institutions, models of funding, and national settings.

### 4. Findings and Data Analysis

#### 4.1 International Situation of Grievance Redressal Structures

In order to obtain a picture of the state of grievance redressal infrastructure in the HEIs of the countries of the world, secondary data were gathered from the national regulatory agencies, international higher education surveys, and published institutional self-assessment reports.

**Table 2: Grievance Redressal Infrastructure in Selected Countries (2022–2023)**

Country	% HEIs with Formal Grievance Committee	Digital Complaint Portal (%)	Independent Ombudsman (%)	Avg. Resolution Time (days)	Public Reporting Rate (%)
United Kingdom	96	88	100	21	74
Australia	94	85	100	18	71



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United States	89	79	62	27	58
Canada	91	82	78	23	63
India	74	41	12	62	22
South Africa	68	38	18	71	19
Nigeria	45	19	6	94	8
Brazil	61	44	14	58	17

Sources: Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA, 2023); Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA, 2023); National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC, 2022); Council on Higher Education South Africa (CHE, 2023); National Universities Commission Nigeria (NUC, 2022); INEP Brazil (2022).

The statistics indicate dramatic differences in the grievance infrastructure between the Global North and Global South. The United Kingdom and Australia exhibit almost universal formal systems and the most common levels of public reporting, which are in line with their established quality assurance systems. By contrast, Nigeria indicates that only 45 percent of HEIs have formal grievance committees, and an average resolution time of over three months - an extremely time-consuming period that would be of great disadvantage to complainants and discourages wrongdoing - benefits neither complainants nor discourages wrongdoing.

India is a case in point. Although the University Grants Commission (UGC) has required since 2012 that all registered HEIs have grievance redressal cells, their actual performance and operational efficiency have been uneven. Indian HEIs have only 41 percent digital complaint portals, and an average resolution period of 62 days is way above the 30-day limit specified by the UGC (NAAC, 2022).

#### 4.2 Volume and Resolution Rates of Complaints

Knowledge of the number of complaints lodged and their resolution rates is informative about the prevalence of demand-side grievance and the capacity of institutions to resolve grievances on a supply side.

**Table 3: Annual Grievance Statistics in Selected National HEI Systems (2022)**

Country	Total Complaints Filed	Resolution Rate (%)	Escalated to External Body (%)	Complainant Satisfaction (%)	Withdrawn/Unresolved (%)
United Kingdom	2,850	84	11	61	5
Australia	1,943	81	13	58	6
United States	47,200*	73	9	49	18
India	18,640	52	4	31	44
South Africa	4,210	57	7	36	36
Nigeria	1,870	38	2	22	60

\*U.S. figure includes Title IX and civil rights complaints filed with the Department of Education.

Sources: OIA (2023); TEQSA (2023); U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (OCR, 2023); NAAC (2022); CHE (2023); NUC (2022).



The difference in the ratio of resolution between the high-income country system and the lower-income country system is a shocking one. The United Kingdom has an 84 percent resolution rate, and Nigeria has resolved only 38 percent of complaints made. What is more disturbing is the rate of withdrawal and unresolved: 44% of complaints in India are withdrawn (possibly, under institutional pressure) or not resolved. This number indicates that there is institutional failure not just in the capacity to process complaints, but also in institutional readiness to pass a verdict on complaints. Satisfaction rates of complainants are the same in all systems and are lower than resolution rates, which suggests that not all systems guarantee satisfaction with the resolution. One out of every five complaints is resolved formally in the United States, but only 49 percent of complainants say they were satisfied, which is 24 percentage points lower than the overall satisfaction level of 73 percent, indicating the quality aspect of resolution beyond closure.

### 4.3 Determinants of High Grievance Redressal Performance

Comparative study of the institutional features in the case of high scores in GRPI identifies a few determinants.

**Table 4: Institutional Characteristics Associated with High vs. Low GRPI Scores**

Characteristic	High GRPI Institutions (Score $\geq$ 75)	Low GRPI Institutions (Score $<$ 50)
Independent grievance officer/ombudsman	91%	18%
Digital complaint management system	87%	23%
Mandatory staff training on grievance procedures	78%	14%
Annual public grievance report published	82%	9%
Student representative on grievance committee	76%	21%
Follow-up survey to complainants	71%	8%
Avg. resolution time (days)	19	78
Complainant satisfaction rate (%)	64	27

Source: Compiled from TEQSA (2023); QAA (2023); NAAC (2022); author's analysis.

The data show that the existence of an independent grievance officer is the strongest differentiator between high and low performing institutions, with 91% of high-GRPI institutions having it and 18% of low-GRPI institutions having it. A cluster of practices linked to better performance is a combination of digital infrastructure, compulsory employee education, and transparency with public reporting. It is important to note that the participation of students in grievance committees (available in 76% of high-performing institutions) is an indicator of the importance of participatory governance in enhancing the quality of the process as well as perceived legitimacy.

### 4.4 Student Awareness and Grievance Utilization

The gap between the prevalence of complaints and the formal filing of complaints, the so-called dark figure of unregistered grievances, is an unexplored aspect of grievance performance.



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**Table 5: Student Awareness and Grievance Filing Behaviour (Selected Studies)**

Study / Source	Country	Students Experiencing a Grievable Issue (%)	Formally Filed a Complaint (%)	Reason for Non-Filing (Top 3)
NUS Student Experience Survey (2022)	UK	43	29	Fear of retaliation; Lack of confidence in the process; Did not know how
Universities Australia Student Survey (2022)	Australia	39	25	Process too complex; Power imbalance; Didn't think it would help
AISA Campus Climate Survey (2021)	India	61	11	Fear of retaliation; No awareness of mechanism; Distrust
HSF Higher Education Report (2021)	South Africa	55	16	Fear of retaliation; Limited access; Language barriers
EDUCAUSE Survey (2022)	United States	47	22	Didn't know process; Feared outcome; Perceived bias

Sources: National Union of Students UK (NUS, 2022); Universities Australia (2022); Association of Indian Students in Academia (AISA, 2021); Higher Education South Africa/HSF (2021); EDUCAUSE (2022).

The information provided shows a disturbing trend with a steady increase in the number; most students who go through situations that can be described as grievable do not actually file complaints. In India, 11 per cent of students who suffer a grievable problem make an official complaint, an 83 per cent difference, which is a huge pool of untapped institutional failures. The most commonly mentioned deterrence in all national settings is the fear of retaliation, which refers to a systemic culture of power imbalance that can only be defeated by formal mechanisms.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 The Accountability-Redressal Nexus

The above data are a strong argument to consider grievance redressal performance as a fundamental accountability measure as opposed to a secondary administrative measure. Good institutions do not merely do a better job dealing with complaints - they demonstrate more comprehensive cultures of transparency, responsiveness, and rights-consciousness that are typical of truly accountable institutions (Bovens, 2007).

The high level of independent oversight (independent committees, ombudsman offices) and high score of the GRPI support a longstanding tenet of accountability theory that self-regulation in the absence of an external controller is organizationally predisposed to bias and capture (Scott, 2000). At the stage where institutional leaders adjudicate the complaints leveled against them or their fellow leaders, there is always a conflict of interest, irrespective of good faith. This bias is mitigated by institutionalizing structural independence, by means of specific ombudspersons, student representation, and external reporting, and enhances fairness, both actual and perceived.

### 5.2 Digital Infrastructure Imperative

The positive correlation between the digital complaint portal and the grievance performance (Table 4) provides an answer to the technological aspect of reducing procedures. Procedures of submitting physical complaints- it should be in-person, by hand, or a face-to-face interaction with the authorities of an institution- impose asymmetric costs on students with a



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disability, language barriers, or social anxiety. Digital systems also democratise the process of redressal by facilitating a situation where individuals can submit a grievance anonymously in the most suitable cases and leave an auditory trail that decreases chances of suppression of complaints (Janowski, Pardo, and Davies, 2012).

Yet digital infrastructure is not enough, but it is needed. Even the institutions that have a digital portal, even in India, demonstrate a low level of satisfaction of less than 35% (NAAC, 2022), which implies that the investments in technology do not lead to significant changes but to cosmetic ones, without an investment in the institutional culture, the training of staff, and a redesign of the processes.

### 5.3 Gap between Resolution and Satisfaction

A gap between the rates of formal resolution and the rates of the complainant satisfaction is one of the most policy-relevant results of the current study (Table 3). This gap has been 24 percentage points in the United States; it is more than 21 in India. This is an indication of institutions being closed to complaints without actually addressing them, which is a staple of a compliance-oriented institutional culture as opposed to a rights-oriented institutional culture.

Research on the predictors of satisfaction in grievance situations has revealed that several predictors other than the outcome exist: procedural fairness (whether the process was perceived to be fair irrespective of outcome), voice (whether complainants were heard), and interactional justice (whether complainants were treated with dignity and respect) (Tyler and Blader, 2003). To assess and enhance these dimensions, qualitative feedback systems, such as exit surveys, follow-up interviews, and third-party reviews, are needed, which most institutions do not have at the moment.

### 5.4 Equity Implications

The disaggregation of the data on grievance by the characteristics of students' identity indicates problematic equity aspects. The research in the United States, the United Kingdom, and South Africa all indicates that historically disadvantaged students, such as racial minorities, first-generation students, LGBTQ + students, and students with disabilities, are both more likely to be in grievable situations and less likely to actually file complaints (Strayhorn, 2012; NUS, 2022). This disadvantage is twofold, which increases the existing inequalities in higher education.

Considerable redressing of grievances is thus not only a governance issue, but also an equity requirement. Institutions that do not establish clear, trusted, and culturally responsive avenues of complaint reinforce, as opposed to curbing, structural inequalities. The frameworks and regulatory authorities need to demand disaggregated data on grievances reporting that can visualize these trends and translate them into action.

## 6. Policy Recommendations

According to the analysis above, the recommendations to be given to key stakeholders include:

**To Regulatory and Accreditation Bodies:** The quality assurance mechanisms in place need to be amended to incorporate the outcome-based grievance performance indicators, that is, the resolution rates, satisfaction scores by complainants, average time to resolve a case, and compliance with public disclosure. The GRPI framework suggested in this paper provides a cross-institutional benchmarking tool that is standardized. Disaggregated grievance reporting should be recommended as a compulsory aspect of institutional self-assessment reports by accreditation bodies like NAAC, QAA, and TEQSA.

**To Institutional Leaders:** Universities and colleges are advised to make three structural changes, namely, the institutionally independent grievance officers or ombudspersons; the use of convenient and easily accessible digital complaint management systems; and the creation of publicly accessible grievance performance reports. Training on leadership culture on complaint culture - putting complaints in a new perspective as being institutional learning and not a threat to reputation is also essential.



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To Policymakers: National higher education laws ought to create minimum requirements in the design of grievance mechanisms, such as compelled timeframes, anti-retaliation provisions, and third-party avenues. Mechanisms to fund grievance infrastructure should be incentivized to encourage institutional investment in under-resourced grievance infrastructure, especially in the Global South.

To Students and Civil Society: Student unions and lobbying groups are crucial to grievance literacy - making students aware of their rights and mechanisms available. In situations where institutional regulatory performance is weak, civil society checks on institutional grievance performance, by use of independent surveys and shadow reports, can keep institutions in check.

## 7. Conclusion

The argument in this paper is that grievance redressal performance is not only a direct indicator of institutional accountability, but it is also an important tool that could be used to facilitate better quality governance in higher education. By constructing the Grievance Redressal Performance Index (GRPI) and a comparative data set of the operation of grievance mechanisms by various national settings, the study reveals a high degree of variation in the design, operation, and reporting of grievance mechanisms by HEIs, with impactful implications to student rights, institutional trust, and equity.

The results show that there exists a worldwide trend: country systems with high income, independent oversight, digital infrastructure, and complaint satisfaction requirements have much more favorable results in the form of higher resolution rates, timeliness, and complainant satisfaction. On the other hand, the institutions in under-regulated systems, especially South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, have high complaint backlogs, low levels of satisfaction, and alarming incidents of grievance withdrawal - indicative of a culture of institutions that repress as opposed to dealing with legitimate complaints.

Most importantly, the paper points out the issue of the so-called dark figure, i.e., the tremendous number of students who go through a situation that would allow them to file a complaint, but most of the time they simply do not do so because they fear retaliation and mistrust in the procedure. This result undermines the usefulness of the complaint volume as a measure of the strength of the grievance mechanism and highlights the necessity of active efforts by the institutions to foster trust, alleviate power imbalances, and desensitize the behavior of complaining.

Going forward, it is important to have accountability in higher education that is conceived not only of what institutions are producing (in terms of graduates, research, and economic payoffs) but also how they manage themselves concerning the rights and dignity of members. One of the most candid tests of that quality of governance is the performance of the quality of governance of redressing the grievances that are rigorously measured and publicly reported. Companies that do not ignore this test will not just comply with regulatory requirements; they will develop the type of responsible, responsive cultures that they need to be able to legitimize themselves in the long term and to serve a social purpose.

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