

University: Aberystwyth University

General

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the current system for handling student complaints about HEIs?

The current arrangements seem to have coincided with an upsurge in trivial complaints from students. It's not clear whether the existence of the OIA has encouraged this or whether it's due to the changing nature of student funding and their expectations.

2. Is the current Scheme an improvement on previous arrangements?

We had a miniscule number of complaints proceeding to the University Visitor in the past, after going through our internal procedures. Significantly more now go to the OIA, even if numbers represent a tiny proportion of our students.

3. Has the existence of the OIA improved the way in which HEIs engage with students in the areas of student complaints and appeals?

Not really. We always tried to operate transparently and openly with appellants and complainants and continue to do so. The existence of the OIA has not improved things for the University in that respect.

However, referring dissatisfied 'customers' on to the OIA does provide them with an opportunity for reflection

Funding of the Scheme

4. Is the current funding model appropriate? If not, are there alternative funding arrangements you would suggest?

Basing subscriptions on University size alone doesn't seem to be a sufficient incentive to work constructively with students. I can see a strong case for basing the subs on a rolling average of the number of complaints handled by the OIA for the institution, to reflect more realistically your actual costs.

Remit

5. Is there a public interest in the OIA developing its remit, for example by:

a) including students studying for foundation degrees at Further Education Colleges?

not relevant to us

b) reviewing individual complaints about pre-registration admissions?

I don't support this development

c) including in the Scheme non qualifying institutions such as private degree awarding bodies?

I imagine that here are legal and logistical reasons why they are not already included. Including them would considerably extend the OIA's remit and change its nature

Accessibility

6. Do you think that the current mechanisms for making students aware of OIA processes are adequate? What improvements, if any, would you suggest? Are there specific areas where students are not aware that they can bring a complaint?

If anything I think we already publicise the scheme too much, as far as academic matters are concerned. I am not convinced that it is effectively promoted for non-academic issues, e.g. finance and accommodation

7. Do the existing arrangements ensure that the OIA is sufficiently accessible for students to make a complaint? How might the OIA improve its website and communications?

I have no suggestions for improvement but would expect students to have some!

Efficiency and Effectiveness

8. How might the OIA increase its operational efficiency and improve the timeliness of decision making?

Set realistic deadlines and stick to them (see 10 below).
Identify more rapidly where students raise issues connected with the original appeal/complaint but which have not been given to the University beforehand.

9. Do you have any comments about the way in which the OIA reviews complaints or about the quality and consistency of its decisions?

Thus far I have had no complaints about the reasonableness about OIA judgements as far as this University is concerned. I have seen instances in your annual reports where compensation has been recommended in circumstances which, in my view, did not merit it.

I expect those universities will comment on those!

10. Are existing OIA processes sufficiently user friendly and transparent?

Sometimes the deadlines for response are unrealistically short, bearing in mind the need to consult with other staff within the University to get the full background on a specific case.

11. Do you have any suggestions for amending the OIA Rules to increase effectiveness?

Emphasise the point raised in 8 above that evidence not already considered by the University cannot now be raised in support of a complaint.

Impact

12. Does the OIA offer effective and appropriate remedies for students whose complaints are upheld?

Mostly, but see my point about inappropriate compensation above.

13. Should OIA adjudications be published?

In summary form only

14. How might the OIA share better its knowledge and experience of complaints handling and promote good practice?

Regular feedback to the sector on trends in student complaints and its experience in handling them.

Governance

15. Is the independence and impartiality of the Scheme safeguarded sufficiently?

I don't see any problem in the current arrangement.

16. Is the present composition of the Board appropriate? Should there be additional student representation?

I would support representation from the NUS if that is not already the case.

17. Have you anything further to add?

Just a comment that keeping the rise in subscription to less than 10% is not a cause for celebration, as the recent letter implied. We all have rises in our costs and have to improve efficiency accordingly, simply to survive.