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**Embargoed until: 00:01 Thursday 26 April 2018**  
**OIA publishes 2017 Annual Report**

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We publish our Annual Report for 2017 on 26 April 2018. The Report sets out:

- The number and outcomes of complaints we received and closed
- Examples of the complaints students make to us, and the Recommendations we make when we find complaints Justified or Partly Justified
- Common issues arising in the complaints we deal with
- Our evolving role in the higher education sector
- Information about our work sharing good practice in handling complaints and academic appeals.

Felicity Mitchell, Independent Adjudicator said:

“The Report reflects our ongoing strong performance in reviewing student complaints. It matters to students that their concerns are resolved in a timely way, and in 2017 we delivered this, exceeding all of our key performance indicators that relate to the timeliness of our processes. When things go wrong we can recommend practical remedies to put things right for students, and our Report gives some examples of this. It is of course even better to prevent issues arising in the first place. In 2017 we significantly developed our work to share learning from complaints, promoting good practice across the sector.”

Ben Elger, Chief Executive, said:

“Our vision is that higher education students are always treated fairly. Access for students to independent redress for their unresolved complaints is an important part of this, and the Higher Education and Research Act (HERA) extends our membership, giving more higher education students access to our Scheme. Our wider role in the regulatory framework, independent from other sector organisations but interdependent with them, enables us to play our full part in the sector, working with others to the benefit of students and higher education providers.”

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## **Our Report in detail**

### **Complaint numbers and outcomes**

- The number of complaints we received rose slightly in 2017. We received 1,635 new complaints in 2017, compared to 1,517 in 2016.
- We closed 1,640 complaints. 2017 was the fifth consecutive year in which we closed more complaints than we received.
- We consistently closed more than 75 per cent of cases within six months of receipt during the year, sustaining the significant improvement we have made in recent years in the time we take to review complaints.

- In total, 24 per cent of cases were Justified, Partly Justified, or settled in favour of the student. This is slightly higher than in 2016 (22 per cent). Of these, four per cent were Justified, 11 per cent Partly Justified and nine per cent settled.
- In addition to the many practical remedies we recommended, financial remedies were offered by providers to almost 200 students as a result of our reviews, with payments in 15 cases exceeding £5,000. The total amount we recommended was £583,321.29. The highest single amount included future stipend payments and totalled around £47,000. In addition, providers paid just under £70,000 to students through settlement agreements reached after students complained to us.

## The nature of complaints

The overall pattern of complaints in 2017 was broadly similar to the previous year.

We again dealt with significantly more complaints about issues affecting a student's academic status than any other category of complaint. This category includes issues such as the mark given for an assessment or in an examination, progression between years, or final degree results. In 2017, 50 per cent of the complaints we closed related to academic status (54 per cent in 2016).

Other categories of complaint were:

- Service issues including complaints relating to facilities, course content compared to the prospectus, processing of visa applications, teaching hours or research supervision – 25 per cent (23 per cent in 2016).
- Financial issues – six per cent (seven per cent in 2016)
- Academic misconduct and plagiarism – five per cent (four per cent in 2016)
- Discrimination and Human Rights – five per cent (five per cent in 2016)
- Welfare and accommodation – four per cent (three per cent in 2016)
- Disciplinary matters – two per cent (two per cent in 2016).

## Sharing learning from complaints

In 2017 we published two new sections of our Good Practice Framework. [Delivering learning opportunities with others](#) gives guidance on handling complaints and academic appeals from students who are studying on courses provided through a collaborative arrangement involving more than one provider or awarding organisation. [Supporting disabled students](#) includes guidance on how providers can remove obstacles to learning, and on supporting students before and during their studies, as well as on what to do when things go wrong.

We also significantly developed our outreach work. We ran an extensive programme of webinars, workshops and visits. Our webinars alone attracted over 1,000 student advisers/representatives and staff from higher education providers from across the full range of our membership.

## Common issues in complaints

Our Report gives a number of case studies on complaints involving fitness to practise; complaints from students who have mental health difficulties; issues affecting international students; and complaints relating to the student experience. These include:

- A medical student who was found not fit to practise after admitting dishonesty about why she was absent from her placement – we found her complaint Not Justified (case study 1, page 16);
- A student who was prevented from continuing with her course because she ran out of time following absence for mental ill health - we recommended that the higher education provider should change its regulations to allow her to enrol on another course (case study 5, page 19);
- A student who was allowed to continue with his PhD studies for 18 months after he should have been withdrawn for lack of progress - we recommended compensation totalling over £17,000 (case study 7, page 20).
- A student who was affected by changes to the structure of the course he was studying – we recommended an apology, a payment for the distress caused and a refund of a year's tuition fees (case study 9, page 21).

The Report highlights the value of alternative dispute resolution for higher education students in relation to complaints involving consumer rights. In those complaints we review whether the student has been treated fairly as well as considering their rights as consumers.

## ENDS

### Notes to Editors

For further information please contact Sarah Liddell, Head of Leadership Office, [mediarelations@oiahe.org.uk](mailto:mediarelations@oiahe.org.uk), 0118 959 9813.

1. An embargoed copy of our Annual Report is attached. The Report will be published on our website, [www.oiahe.org.uk](http://www.oiahe.org.uk), on Thursday 26 April.
2. The Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA) is the independent student complaints ombudsman for higher education in England and Wales. It is the designated operator of the student complaints' scheme under the Higher Education Act 2004.
3. Our Scheme is free to students, and has been designed to be accessible to all students, without the need for legal representation.
4. We have a wide remit to review student complaints about higher education providers in England and Wales, as set out in our [Scheme Rules](#).
5. You can find further information about the Scheme and our work at [www.oiahe.org.uk](http://www.oiahe.org.uk).