



office of the
independent
adjudicator

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Student ombudsman calls for earlier resolution of student complaints

In 2012 the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA) received and closed more complaints than ever before.

Details are contained in the annual report of the Independent Adjudicator, published today, 13 June. The complaints statistics are included below. The highlights are:

- The number of complaints increased for the seventh year in a row, with a year on year increase of 25 per cent.
- The year on year increase in complaint closures was 24 per cent.
- 18 per cent of complaints were found Justified or Partly Justified, or were settled by agreement between the student and the university before completion of a full review.
- 59 per cent of complaints were found Not Justified. A further 17 per cent were ineligible for review by the OIA.

The Report looks at developments in complaints handling and reports on work to improve and speed up processes. It names London South Bank University for non-compliance with OIA Recommendations. This is only the third time that this sanction has been applied in the history of the OIA.

The Independent Adjudicator, Rob Behrens, commented:

“The OIA has been busier and more productive than ever this year. Most complaints are about issues that a student believes have affected his or her academic progress or final results. These are important matters that can have a significant bearing on a student’s future.

While most cases were found Not Justified there were still more than 300 cases in 2012 where there was evidence of inconsistency, error or behaviour that was not reasonable on the part of the university. Despite the excellent work of many people there is still more to be done. My annual report includes examples of misrepresentation of courses, lack of discussion with students before moving a course from a college in one town to a different venue, many miles away, and universities failing to follow their own regulations for dealing with appeals.”

Rob Behrens is confident that earlier and more effective resolution of complaints can be achieved by universities supporting and resourcing complaints handling:

“We are at a crossroads in our partnership with universities and students unions on complaints and appeals handling” he said. “In light of the continuing rise in complaints and appeals, emphasis is squarely on universities resolving cases before they reach the OIA, and on the OIA resolving those cases that complainants bring to us.

“Early resolution is better for everyone involved. The OIA is coordinating a series of campus pilots exploring different approaches. From 2014 the subscription a university pays will depend in part on how many cases the OIA received from its students in the previous year. ”

The OIA is now working with the National Union of Students, the Academic Registrars’ Council and others to develop a Good Practice Framework for handling complaints and appeals.

The Report also looks at the expansion of higher education providers and how this affects complaints handling.

“Students should be able to fall back on an independent ombudsman service, irrespective of where they are studying. I am delighted that two new members, Kaplan and Holborn Law School, have now joined the OIA Scheme and look forward to others following in the near future.”

ENDS

Notes to editors

The annual report will be published on 13 June 2013.

To receive an advance copy or arrange an interview with the Independent Adjudicator, or for further information, please contact Jane Clarkson, jane.clarkson@oiahe.org.uk or Steven du Cr s steven.ducros@oiahe.org.uk, 0118 9599813.

The Annual Open Meeting of the OIA takes place from 9.30 am – 12.30 pm on 13 June at the Honourable Society of Gray’s Inn, London, WC1R 5ET

1. Annual report statistics

Complaints received

The OIA received 2,012 complaints in 2012. This is an increase of 25 per cent from 2011, when 1,605 complaints were received.

1,858 complaints were from students at English universities and 154 from students at Welsh universities.

Complaints closed

The OIA closed 1,795 complaints in 2012. This is an increase of 24 per cent from 2011, when 1,443 complaints were closed.

Issues complained about

The issues most often complained about in 2012 were:

- Academic status (69%)
- Service issues (9%)
- Academic misconduct, plagiarism and cheating (6%)
- Financial (3%)
- Discrimination and human rights (3%)

Subject or disciplines raising most complaints

Students from the following subjects were the most likely to complain:

Business and administrative studies (331 complaints)

Subjects allied to medicine (268 complaints)

Law (202 complaints)

Medicine and dentistry (127 complaints)

Creative arts and design (122 complaints).

Status of student complainants

Postgraduate students account for 30% of student complaints – 25% Masters students and 5% PhD students.

23% of complaints come from students from outside the EU. 69% of complaints were from UK students and 7% from students from other EU countries.

Men are more likely to complain than women (55% of complaints were from men)

2. Early Resolution pilots

Institutions taking part in early resolution pilots include: the Academic Registrars Council; Aston University and Aston Students' Union; Canterbury Christchurch University; Edge Hill Students' Union; University of Huddersfield; Kingston University; University of Sheffield and University of South Wales.

3. Good Practice Framework

The OIA is working with the National Union of Students, the Academic Registrars' Council, the Association of Heads of University Administration and the Quality Assurance Agency to develop a good practice framework for handling complaints and appeals. This follows the results of consultation in the Pathway 3 report, published in October 2012

<http://www.oiahe.org.uk/decisions-and-publications/pathway-3.aspx>

4. About the OIA

The OIA is the designated operator of the Scheme for reviewing student complaints in England and Wales, established under the Higher Education Act 2004. All publicly funded universities in England and Wales belong to the Scheme. Private and alternative providers may join by application to the OIA Board.

The OIA Scheme is free to students, and has been designed to be accessible to all students, without the need for legal representation.

The OIA has a wide remit to review student complaints about an 'act or omission' by HEIs in England and Wales. It does not review academic judgment or admissions issues. The Scheme Rules and all details related to OIA operations can be found at www.oiahe.org.uk.