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office of the
independent
adjudicator

New guidance on dealing with student complaints

The Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) has today opened a consultation on draft new guidelines to improve the way that universities deal with student complaints and academic appeals.

The guidance has been drawn up by a working group, chaired by the OIA and bringing together the National Union of Students with university bodies, the Academic Registrars' Council, the Association of Heads of University Administration and the Quality Assurance Agency.

The draft framework sets out a three stage process with clear timeframes and advice on recording and learning from complaints. The creation of a framework follows recommendations from the NUS, proposals in the 2011 White Paper and the OIA's Pathway 3 consultation on early resolution in complaints handling, published in 2012.

Rob Behrens, Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education, said:

“When the OIA asked universities if they wanted a framework for dealing with complaints and appeals, the overwhelming majority that responded said yes. As a steering group our job has been to look at the detail of the framework and come up with proposals that balance the need for timely, fair resolution with the need for proper consideration. Early resolution is key. For most students higher education is a critical stage at which what they do and what they accomplish in a few short years can affect the rest of their lives. Over the next three months we want students unions and universities to tell us if the proposals are workable and, more importantly, if they will help support students through what can be a stressful experience.”

The key characteristics of the draft framework include:

- The framework provides broad operational guidance for universities to consider in drawing up their complaints and academic appeals processes.
- It defines a three stage process covering informal resolution, a formal investigation stage where informal resolution is unsuccessful, and a review stage. This approach is already taken by many universities.
- It sets out clear timescales for each stage, recommending two weeks for informal resolution, one month for formal resolution and three weeks for the review stage.
- It outlines the responsibilities of different staff roles in the university in dealing with or keeping oversight of complaints and appeals.

The consultation on the proposals runs until 5 July.

Rachel Wenstone, Vice President (Higher Education) of the National Union of Students, said:

“This consultation is a chance to improve the way students' unions and universities work together to resolve student complaints and academic appeals. While institutions in the UK rightly develop their own unique systems and processes this framework will give us a shared language to help us develop our understanding of what great practice looks like. It will

enable both institutions and students' unions to reflect and make intervention to improve how we support students through the system."

Universities and Science Minister David Willetts said:

"While most students have a good experience at university there are a small minority that don't. Students need to know who can help when they have problems and, if necessary, how they can raise a complaint.

"This guidance supports the Government's ambition to ensure that universities provide better information to students and are more accountable and responsive to students' needs."

Ends

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Notes to Editors

1. The draft framework has been prepared by a national steering group comprising the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, the National Union of Students, the Association of Heads of University Administration, the Quality Assurance Agency, and the Academic Registrars' Council.
2. The framework will apply to England and Wales.
3. The framework is not statutory and has no basis in legislation. Universities will be free to write their own procedures. From 2015 the OIA will look at whether procedures are consistent with the framework in making its decisions.
4. The consultation closes on 5 July 2014