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office of the
independent
adjudicator

Resolving student complaints

The Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education, Rob Behrens, has given a cautious welcome to figures suggesting that universities are dealing with student complaints with greater rigour than previously.

His comments come as the OIA publishes its annual report for 2013 which shows a slight drop in the number of complaints received by its offices.

“The drop in complaint numbers is very small but this, combined with an increase in the proportion of settled cases, suggests that initiatives to bring about early resolution of complaints are paying off” Rob Behrens said.

“There is a strong appetite for sharing good practice, which will be consolidated in 2014 with the introduction of a national good practice framework for handling complaints and academic appeals” he added.

The main trends in 2013 were:

- A drop in the number of new cases received, to 1,972.
- A substantial increase in the number of cases closed, to a record 2,251.
- Increases in the proportion of cases that the OIA upheld and in those that were settled between the student and the university. The OIA found six per cent of cases Justified, ten per cent Partly Justified and prompted the university to seek successful settlements in nine per cent of cases – a total of 25% of cases in favour of the student.
- An increase of two thirds in the amount of financial compensation the OIA instructed universities to pay to students, to £313,750. A further £59,359 was paid in settlements on cases that were settled before full review.
- Students from outside the European Union and postgraduate students continue to make more complaints than home and other EU students and undergraduates.
- A disproportionate number of complaints from students from outside the EU related to plagiarism and academic misconduct.
- No significant increase in Judicial Reviews and no court judgments against the OIA.

The report summarises a number of cases and details recommendations made to universities in cases that were upheld. It comments on emerging trends in student complaints.

“Clear, accessible complaints and appeals processes, which are properly resourced by the university, must be high priorities for all universities, Rob Behrens said.

“Students go to university with legitimately high hopes. While the overall drop in complaints to the OIA is welcome, the proportion that we upheld and the amount of compensation recommended both increased. This shows that there is still more work to be done.”

ENDS

Notes to Editors

1. The Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA) is the student ombudsman for England and Wales. It deals with complaints and academic appeals from current and former registered students at universities and colleges that belong to the OIA Scheme.
2. The 2013 Annual Report is enclosed. It will be published at 00:01 on Thursday 12 June.
3. For further details or to speak to the Independent Adjudicator please contact Jane Clarkson, jane.clarkson@oiahe.org.uk, 0118 9599813.