



office of the
independent
adjudicator

Operating Report for 2024

www.oiahe.org.uk

Contents

Introduction.....	3
To review student complaints independently, fairly and effectively	4
To share learning from complaints with higher education providers, student representative bodies and others, to help improve policies and practices.....	8
To work effectively with others and influence policy and practice in the wider regulatory framework for higher education and in the ombuds sector.....	12
To continually develop our organisation so that we can do our work well	17

Introduction

Our charitable purpose is to advance education for public benefit through the independent review of student complaints in England and Wales and by using learning from complaints to help improve policies and practices.

[Our 2019 strategy](#) identifies four key priorities through which we fulfil our purpose and work towards our vision that students are always treated fairly.

Our Operating Report for 2024 reports progress against our Operating Plan 2024. It sets out what we did during the year to advance each of our strategic priorities. It includes both ongoing areas of work and new initiatives.

Students and the higher education sector continued to face very challenging circumstances and we had a change of government. This was a key context for our work in 2024. We continued to respond to the sustained increases in our case receipts and to prepare for possible further rises. We worked to make our service available to all who could benefit from it, in ways that were accessible to them. We continued to promote equality, diversity, and inclusion through our work and in our organisation. The influence of our good practice work and our role as an integral but independent part of the regulatory framework helped us to promote greater fairness for students. We took a flexible, innovative, and outward-looking approach to developing our work, in ongoing dialogue with our stakeholders. All of this was underpinned by continuing to develop as an organisation so we could maximise the positive difference we made to students and the sector.

To review student complaints independently, fairly and effectively

The number of complaints we receive has continued to rise year on year, representing a substantial cumulative increase in our caseload. Managing this increased caseload effectively remains a top priority and a vital part of our commitment to providing a trusted, accessible, and responsive service for reviewing student complaints.

In 2024 we received 3,613 complaints, our highest ever number. This is 15% more than in 2023 and followed increases in each of the previous seven years. We continued to take steps to manage our caseload as effectively as we can. We exceeded all our timeliness key performance indicators (KPIs) this year despite the challenges of rising case numbers. We also improved the age profile of our case-holding with 72% of complaints under 6 months old and only one over 12 months old. We also increased the number of complaints we closed to 3,645, 9% up on 2023. We took an average of 82 days to close a case, a large improvement from 125 days in 2023.

To review student complaints independently, fairly and effectively

What we plan to do	What this will look like	How we did
<p>We will provide a timely service, responding promptly to enquiries, letting students know as soon as possible whether we can look at their complaint, and resolving complaints as quickly as we can.</p>	<p>We meet our key performance indicators (KPIs) for the timeliness of our case-handling process:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Responding to 95% of enquiries within two working days ◆ Making 90% of eligibility decisions (or requesting further information) within 10 working days ◆ Closing 75% of cases within six months of receipt. 	<p>We exceeded our KPIs for the timeliness of our case-handling process:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ We responded to 99% of enquiries within two working days. ◆ We made 95% of eligibility decisions (or requested further information), within 10 working days. ◆ We closed 94% of cases within six months of receipt, far exceeding our KPI of 75%.
<p>We will use risk-based and proportionate quality assurance mechanisms to evaluate the quality of our processes and the decisions we reach, using what we learn to improve what we do.</p>	<p>We monitor the quality of our decisions and feed learning back into continuous development of our case-handling. We look again at our casework processes to identify and implement further improvements.</p>	<p>We monitored quality through various mechanisms, overseen by our Casework Quality Group. We used learning from quality assurance to inform the continuing development of our casework and to improve and update guidance for case-handlers.</p>
<p>We will take an adaptable and proportionate approach to our reviews, using our processes flexibly and trying to resolve cases at the earliest opportunity.</p>	<p>We handle cases in a way that is responsive to both the needs of the individual student and the nature of the case. We support case-handlers to take a proportionate approach to each individual case and to resolve complaints at the earliest opportunity.</p>	<p>We continued to take a flexible approach and to be responsive to the needs of students, particularly those experiencing difficulties. We looked for opportunities to resolve cases at an early stage. We built on the learning from previous and new initiatives to make further improvements to our case-handling processes.</p>

To review student complaints independently, fairly and effectively

What we plan to do	What this will look like	How we did
We will look for opportunities to settle cases whenever it is appropriate.	We try to settle cases where this would be a reasonable and realistic potential outcome, meeting our KPI of settling 10% of our cases.	We tried to settle cases where we thought that would be the best way to resolve the complaint. We were successful in settling 15% of cases, exceeding our KPI.
We will consult on and publish updated Rules of the OIA Scheme.	We update the Rules of the Scheme to take account of changes resulting from the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act and to reflect more clearly developments in our casework practices over recent years and consult on and publish the updated Rules.	Given the pause in commencement of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act we did not make any changes to our rules.
We will continue to develop the skills of our case-handlers.	We provide support and training for case-handlers so that they are well equipped to review all cases allocated to them effectively and impartially.	We supported the continuing development of our case-handlers' skills and knowledge through an internal programme of case-handler-led sessions.
We will support students to fully participate in our review process through actively listening to what they tell us and explaining what we are doing.	We continue to offer students the opportunity to discuss their complaint with us, so we understand their concerns before we reach our decision. We communicate with students throughout our review process, so they are supported and understand what is happening with their complaint. We offer video calls where appropriate.	We communicated with students throughout our review process and offered opportunities for students to discuss their complaint with us.

To review student complaints independently, fairly and effectively

What we plan to do	What this will look like	How we did
<p>We will listen to what students and others tell us about how they experience our service and use this to further improve what we do.</p>	<p>We consider the feedback students and others give us about our service and identify and implement learning from this.</p>	<p>We considered feedback we received during our casework and through our feedback surveys. Learning from this informed ongoing work to further develop our processes and communication.</p>
<p>We will work with higher education providers to maintain a high level of compliance with our Recommendations.</p>	<p>We maintain our strong track record on compliance and meet our KPI of compliance with 85% of student-centred Recommendations by the target date.</p>	<p>We maintained a strong record of compliance with our Recommendations. 93% of student-centred Recommendations were implemented by the target date.</p>
<p>We will continue to comply with the requirements of the Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Regulations that apply to us as the designated ADR body for higher education complaints.</p> <p>We will monitor developments that may be relevant to our designation.</p>	<p>We continue to meet the standards and reporting requirements expected of us as the ADR body. We have our biennial audit by the Chartered Trading Standards Institute.</p> <p>We monitor the progress of the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill, which is intended to replace the ADR Regulations, and under this Bill the OIA as an ombuds scheme with a statutory underpinning may become exempt.</p>	<p>We continued to meet the requirements of us as an ADR body. We received a very positive report from the Chartered Trading Standards Institute following the biennial audit it undertook in February 2024.</p> <p>The provisions relating to ADR in the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act 2024 (under which as an ombuds scheme with a statutory underpinning we would be exempt from the requirements) require a statutory instrument which has not yet been laid.</p>

To share learning from complaints with higher education providers, student representative bodies and others, to help improve policies and practices

We continued to develop our good practice and outreach work, and to monitor the effectiveness of what we do and assess its impact so that we can focus our resources on what works well. We worked towards our good practice work reaching everyone who can benefit from it, in ways that are helpful to them.

We engaged with live issues affecting providers and students, listening to their experiences and developing and updating our good practice guidance based on learning from the complaints we see.

To share learning from complaints with higher education providers, student representative bodies and others, to help improve policies and practices

What we plan to do	What this will look like	How we did
<p>We will continue to share learning from our work through publishing information and guidance.</p>	<p>We publish information about our approach and learning from the complaints we see, for example in casework notes and case summaries.</p>	<p>We published casework notes and case summaries of complaints about accommodation issues in January, student placements in March, from postgraduate students in June, complaints relating to service issues and consumer rights in October and student transfer in December. We published the revised section of the Good Practice Framework about Delivering learning opportunities with others, in February.</p>
<p>We will continue to deliver our outreach programme in ways that best enable providers, student representative bodies and others to access and benefit from learning from complaints, while making effective use of our resources.</p>	<p>We continue to develop our outreach programme and the resources available on our website. We run 16 online events. We use feedback from participants and our wider engagement to inform the topics we cover and the way we deliver them. We take other opportunities to share learning from complaints, for example through contributing to sector events.</p>	<p>We ran 14 webinars and held two workshops during the year, providing opportunities for discussion around emerging casework themes. We contributed to many sector events to share both general learning from our work and learning on specific issues such as harassment and sexual misconduct, handling complaints and appeals when working in partnerships, and complaints from disabled students.</p>

To share learning from complaints with higher education providers, student representative bodies and others, to help improve policies and practices

What we plan to do	What this will look like	How we did
<p>We will continue to reach out to student representative bodies including through relevant networks and forums and offer tailored outreach and resources.</p>	<p>We continue to deliver outreach events and provide good practice resources focusing on the role of student representative bodies in complaints and appeals. We hold 10 discussion groups with student advisers and engage with student officers and others in student representative bodies as part of our outreach visits.</p>	<p>We ran outreach events and provided resources tailored to student representative bodies. We delivered two workshops for student representative bodies and held 20 discussion groups with student advisers. We had discussions with student representatives as part of our visits to providers.</p> <p>We ran a workshop and participated in a keynote panel discussion at the NUS Membership Services conference. We also participated at the Academic Advisor Conference organised by The University of Sheffield Students' Union.</p>
<p>We will support students' awareness and understanding of our service and when they can complain to us.</p>	<p>We take further steps to improve our understanding of why students sometimes come to us prematurely, and to promote students' understanding of our remit and approach and when they can complain to us, including engaging with providers and student representative bodies.</p>	<p>We have undertaken work to look at why some students come to us prematurely. We will consider how we can best use this further insight as part of the wider upcoming casework review.</p> <p>We continued to advise students who contact us about when and how we can help, including offering the opportunity to discuss their case with us before deciding whether to bring their complaint to us.</p>

To share learning from complaints with higher education providers, student representative bodies and others, to help improve policies and practices

What we plan to do	What this will look like	How we did
<p>We will further develop our understanding of differences in students' experiences in relation to complaints, both within providers and in complaints to us. We will use what we learn to help improve practice.</p>	<p>We hold 10 student discussion groups to explore students' different experiences and perspectives. We look at what we can learn from the complaints we receive. We share relevant learning with the sector and use it to inform our own practice.</p>	<p>We held 10 student discussion groups including with disabled students, students from minoritised ethnic groups and apprentices. Insights from these groups and from complaints informed our outreach work and our own practice.</p>
<p>We will continue to promote effective support for disabled students.</p>	<p>We use the work we have done to look at complaints from disabled students as a basis for further engagement with the sector on issues affecting disabled students and what more can be done to improve support. We continue to contribute to relevant groups such as the Disabled Student Commitment Partner Group.</p>	<p>We continued to feed learning from complaints from disabled students into relevant work in the sector, including the Disabled Student Commitment Partner Group. We met with the EHRC about changes to their sector guidance to explore how we could work together to measure impact.</p>
<p>We will engage with the tertiary sector in Wales to understand the context of complaints and appeals from further education students, in preparation for our extended remit.</p>	<p>We engage with relevant organisations in Wales, including providers that are already members of our Scheme, to learn more about how further education complaints are currently handled, and what the different needs of further education students might be. We use this to inform our preparations for our extended remit.</p>	<p>We have maintained our engagement with the Welsh government and started to develop a relationship with Medr (the newly established regulator).</p>

To work effectively with others and influence policy and practice in the wider regulatory framework for higher education and in the ombuds sector

We are recognised for our unique role, and for our independence and expertise. We continued to work with governments and key organisations in the sector and beyond as we play our part in the regulatory framework, balancing our independence and our interdependence with other organisations.

We used our influence to help to increase focus on the student voice and experience and brought our expertise to the debate about live and emerging policy issues in the sector. We worked to extend access to our service to as many as possible of those who could benefit from it.

We were active members of the Ombudsman Association (OA) and of the European Network for Ombuds in Higher Education (ENOHE) through the year, sharing our learning and learning from other schemes.

To work effectively with others and influence policy and practice in the wider regulatory framework for higher education and in the ombuds sector

What we plan to do	What this will look like	How we did
<p>We will continue to work with the Welsh government, the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER) as it is fully established, and other key stakeholders, to make our service available to students across the post-compulsory education and training sector in Wales.</p>	<p>We work closely with the Welsh government, CTER and other key stakeholders as the implementation of the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022 progresses and we continue preparations for our expanded role under the Act.</p>	<p>We worked with the Welsh government and Medr as plans for implementation of the Act progressed, aligning our preparations with the wider implementation of the Act.</p>
<p>We will work with the UK government, Shadow Ministers and the Department for Education in the context of the approaching general election.</p>	<p>We engage with political thinking and policy development on areas relevant to our work and maintain effective working relationships with officials.</p>	<p>We maintained engagement with the DfE and recent work has focused on understanding the new government's priorities and giving our insights on the impact on students of financial sustainability issues.</p>
<p>We will respond to key proposals, reviews and developments relating to the HE sector.</p>	<p>We bring our distinct perspective, drawing on what we learn from reviewing complaints, to a wide range of policy areas including those in development which will have an impact on our Scheme such as the Lifelong Learning Entitlement.</p>	<p>We engaged with and contributed to relevant developments, including with OfS on relevant areas such as the harassment and sexual misconduct consultation outcome and the impact it may have on complaints and the Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce. We contributed to UUK's guidance on franchise governance framework.</p>

To work effectively with others and influence policy and practice in the wider regulatory framework for higher education and in the ombuds sector

What we plan to do	What this will look like	How we did
<p>We will continue to fulfil our role as an integral but independent part of the regulatory framework, working with the Office for Students (OfS), the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), Medr as it becomes fully established, and other relevant regulators and Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs).</p>	<p>We work with the OfS, HEFCW/CTER and other regulators and PSRBs so information is shared as appropriate, and we are involved in relevant discussions around their workstreams.</p>	<p>We engaged with OfS, HEFCW and Medr to discuss relevant issues and share information as appropriate. We liaised with other relevant regulators including the Nursing and Midwifery Council, the Health and Care Professions Council, the General Medical Council, the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, and the Architects Registration Board.</p>
<p>We will continue to work with a range of organisations and groups across the sector and beyond to increase our understanding of and contribute our perspective on key issues.</p>	<p>We attend relevant meetings and participate in discussions relevant to our work, including with the Department for Education (DfE), National Union of Students, the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment, the Quality Assurance Agency, and the Competition and Markets Authority and Consumer Benefit Forum.</p>	<p>We maintained a very high level of engagement with a broad range of stakeholders and contributed to discussions around relevant issues. We regularly participated in meetings of the Quality Council and the Consumer Benefits Forum and had bilateral meetings with a range of organisations.</p>
<p>We will work with the OfS and others as it implements its complaints scheme under the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act, to promote clarity for students.</p>	<p>We continue to work with the OfS and others to try to make sure that information for students is clear and enables them to understand their options for complaints involving free speech, including what each scheme can do, so that they can make an informed choice about how to pursue their complaint.</p>	<p>This was paused by the incoming government. We continued to engage with sector groups and officials to influence further developments ensuring clarity for students where possible.</p>

To work effectively with others and influence policy and practice in the wider regulatory framework for higher education and in the ombuds sector

What we plan to do	What this will look like	How we did
<p>We will contribute to policy consideration around the issue of students being left without meaningful remedy if their provider closes, for example due to insolvency, and raise awareness of this important student protection issue.</p>	<p>We continue to promote the importance of making remedies available for individual students in these circumstances and engage with government and organisations in the sector around possible solutions. More widely we draw on our experiences of course and provider closure to share learning on mitigating the impact on students in these circumstances.</p>	<p>We have continued to make good progress with raising the profile of this and promoting policy consideration.</p>
<p>We will encourage all higher education awarding organisations not currently covered by legislation to join our Scheme to make access to independent redress as wide as possible.</p>	<p>We continue to work with DfE, OfS, Ofqual, Qualifications Wales and others to understand gaps in coverage and work to reduce them. We engage directly with awarding organisations to encourage membership of our Scheme.</p>	<p>We continued to take opportunities such as meetings with relevant regulatory and other bodies to identify potential members and worked towards encouraging them to join our Scheme. This included Ofqual writing to all Awarding Organisations confirming it is compatible with the Conditions of Registration to join the OIA Scheme.</p>
<p>We will formally adopt our new governance structure, introducing arrangements that will reflect our expanded membership and maintain the confidence of stakeholders in our governance, as well as strengthening its effectiveness.</p>	<p>We formally adopt our new governance structure and start to implement the new arrangements, managing this carefully to support continuing governance effectiveness through the transition.</p>	<p>Following approval of relevant changes from the Charity Commission and our Company Members our new Articles of Association were adopted on 29 October 2024 and we have commenced recruitment process for Board vacancies under these new arrangements.</p>

To work effectively with others and influence policy and practice in the wider regulatory framework for higher education and in the ombuds sector

What we plan to do	What this will look like	How we did
We will learn from, contribute to, and reflect good practice in the ombuds sector.	As active members of the OA, we share learning with and learn from other organisations in the ombuds sector. We identify any improvements we can make to our own approach and contribute to the development of ombuds practice more widely through our involvement in OA and ENOHE.	We continued to engage with the OA and ENOHE and contributed to several networks.

To continually develop our organisation so that we can do our work well

We reflected our values in our work and encouraged a forward-thinking, responsive, and high-performing organisational culture that is inclusive, diverse and promotes wellbeing. We supported colleagues' understanding of our organisational context and direction and the part they play in it.

We kept capacity requirements across the organisation under review so that we were able to fulfil the different aspects of our remit effectively. We continued to develop our organisational infrastructure so that it supports our core functions effectively.

To continually develop our organisation so that we can do our work well

What we plan to do	What this will look like	How we did
We will undertake a strategic review process.	We undertake a strategic review process to look again at how we can maximise our positive impact across the strategic areas of our work, to the benefit of students and the sector.	We undertook a Strategic Review Process; this has resulted in a revised 2025 strategy .
We will continue to promote a positive, high-performing, and adaptable organisational culture.	We support people to achieve their potential and have high expectations of performance. We engage colleagues in our organisational context and direction to help everyone to fully play their part. We proactively support wellbeing.	We continued to support colleagues to fulfil their roles. Staff were involved in the office wide strategic review sessions. We also listened to staff experiences through our externally led employee engagement survey with follow up focus groups. Insights from our people will inform our ongoing people & culture work for 2025 which we will closely align to the priority workstreams arising from the Strategic Review.
We will further strengthen diversity and inclusion in our organisation.	We value diversity in our organisation and continue to work to promote an inclusive culture. We continue to reach out to underrepresented groups in our recruitment, drawing on specialist expertise where appropriate and taking a strongly skills-based approach.	We completed a diversity data collection with a response rate over 90%. We review the diversity information available from our recruitment platform to gain data insight to decide where we may need to position our approach differently. The findings are informing our development work for 2025.

To continually develop our organisation so that we can do our work well

What we plan to do	What this will look like	How we did
<p>We will continue to support professional development and provide tailored learning opportunities.</p>	<p>We value learning and support professional development. We provide learning and development opportunities including internally led knowledge-sharing sessions, tailored externally led training, external events relevant to our work, and access to an extensive range of online courses.</p>	<p>We ran internally led knowledge-sharing casework sessions. All staff had access to LinkedIn Learning courses to support continuing professional development. Staff completed ACAS e-learning modules to support our work on equality, diversity, and inclusion.</p> <p>A number of staff members also attended external events and workshops to improve their professional skills and bring learning back into our organisation.</p>
<p>We will continue to place importance on kindness in all aspects of our work.</p>	<p>We recognise the value of kindness and continue to cultivate it, particularly in our casework processes and the ways we communicate. Our kinder approach helps students to feel that we have listened to and understood their concerns and supports the effectiveness of our casework.</p>	<p>We continued to put value on kindness in our approach. This supported the effectiveness of our casework and helped students to feel heard in our processes.</p>
<p>We will continue to develop our information management practices.</p>	<p>Our practices support consistency and enable case-handling colleagues to find the information they need quickly through well-structured and comprehensive case-related resources. More widely, we further develop our data management practices so that all colleagues have easy access to the information they need, when they need it.</p>	<p>We continued to review and develop our case-handling resources. We embedded additional reporting tools to support greater data accuracy and to improve the timeliness of our data.</p>

To continually develop our organisation so that we can do our work well

What we plan to do	What this will look like	How we did
<p>We will continue to provide a cost-effective and efficient alternative to the courts, benefiting both providers and students who use our Scheme.</p>	<p>We manage our finances to enable us to advance and balance our organisational priorities and keep the unit cost of our cases stable through carefully planned organisational growth and a continuing focus on efficiency.</p>	<p>We continued to manage our finances effectively, enabling us to resource our organisational priorities appropriately. The unit cost of cases has reduced to around £1,700.</p>
<p>We will continue to refine and improve our subscriptions system.</p>	<p>We continue to monitor the structure and level of our subscriptions, taking account of both our rising caseload and financial pressures in the sector. We monitor developments in higher education sector data that are relevant to our subscriptions.</p>	<p>We considered subscription levels for 2025 very carefully, taking account of the significant and sustained increase in complaints to us, our underlying financial position, and financial pressures in the sector. Our Board agreed to freeze core subscription rates for 2025 and raise the per point fee for the case-related element by £5 to £255. We implemented the agreed changes to the case-related element of subscriptions and increased the points threshold for each subscription band by 10% to take account of the increased volume of complaints in providers.</p>
<p>We will continue to develop our IT infrastructure and systems so that they are stable, secure and meet organisational needs.</p>	<p>We maintain a good level of stability and security through the year. We continue to develop our new IT system and make more use of its greater integration and enhanced functionality to support efficiency. We upgrade our website infrastructure to further improve functionality and accessibility.</p>	<p>Our IT systems continued to function well through the year. We successfully completed our website infrastructure upgrade.</p>

To continually develop our organisation so that we can do our work well

What we plan to do	What this will look like	How we did
We will undertake early preparations for our office move.	We review our premises needs in the context of maximising the effectiveness and efficiency of our working practices, and we begin preparations for a planned move in 2025.	We have signed an agreement to lease for our new premises.