

Operating Plan for 2020

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 strategy](#) identifies four key priorities through which we fulfil our purpose.

Our Operating Plan for 2020 sets out what we plan to do this year to advance each of these priorities and what we intend to have achieved by the end of the year. It includes both ongoing areas of work and new initiatives such as work to cultivate kindness, to adopt a more flexible approach to our case reviews and to increase “on demand” virtual good practice guidance.

The Plan reflects the growth that we anticipate will be a key context for the year in all aspects of our work, as we continue to respond to the sustained growth in our case receipts and to further develop our wider work towards our vision that students are treated fairly. We are continuing to grow the reach of our service to try to make it available and accessible to all who could benefit from it. The growing influence of our good practice work and our role as an independent but integral part of the regulatory framework is helping us to promote greater fairness for students. All of this means that we need to grow as an organisation - in capacity, through a high-performing culture, and with a versatile and innovative approach to our work.

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To review student complaints independently, fairly and effectively.

In 2018 and 2019, the number of complaints we received went up significantly: case receipts in 2019 were 45% higher than in 2017. A top priority for 2020 is to manage our increased caseload effectively as part of our commitment to providing a trusted, accessible and responsive service for reviewing student complaints.

We will continue to look for ways to improve our case-handling. We will use learning from our quality assurance processes and insights from feedback and our good practice work to continually improve what we do.

There is increasing evidence of the value of kindness in public policy. We will aim to cultivate kindness in all that we do, especially in our case-handling. This will include a more flexible approach and a continuing focus on how we communicate with people who use our service, using more straightforward language in our writing, and exploring different means of communication.

We want to better understand the needs and concerns of students, and to help them to understand what we can and can't do. We will continue to listen to students who use our service and be responsive to what they tell us.

What we plan to do	What this will look like
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.	We meet our key performance indicators (KPIs) for the timeliness of our case-handling process: <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.
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.	We monitor the quality of our processes and decisions. We feed learning back into continuous development of our case-handling practice.

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What we plan to do	What this will look like
We will continue to encourage case-handlers to try to settle cases whenever it is appropriate.	We try to settle cases where this would be a reasonable and realistic potential outcome, working towards our KPI of settling 10% of our cases.
We will take a more adaptable approach to our reviews and empower case-handlers to use our processes flexibly.	We handle cases in a way that is more responsive to both the needs of the individual student and the circumstances of the case.
We will continue to develop how we communicate and share case information with students and providers.	We improve our communication with students during our review process so they have a clearer understanding of what is happening with their complaint. We explore other ways of sharing case information such as through our online portal MyOIA.
We will listen to students to understand their concerns.	We continue to offer students the opportunity to discuss their complaint with us so we understand their concerns before we reach our decision. We continue to collect and consider feedback from students on their experience of our service.
We will work with higher education providers to maintain a high level of compliance with our Recommendations.	We maintain our strong track record of compliance, and meet our KPI of compliance with 85% of student-centred Recommendations by the target date.
As the designated alternative dispute resolution (ADR) body for higher education complaints, we will continue to comply with the requirements of the ADR Directive.	We complete a successful Chartered Trading Standards Institute (CTSI) audit and continue to meet the standards expected of us as the ADR body.

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

We will continue to develop our successful outreach programme and our good practice work. We will monitor the effectiveness of what we do and assess its impact so that we can focus our resources on what works well. We want our good practice work to reach everyone who can benefit from it, in ways that are helpful to them.

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

What we plan to do	What this will look like
We will continue to deliver our outreach programme in ways that make effective use of our resource.	We increase the availability of “on demand” content for providers and student representative bodies on our website. We promote these resources to providers that have not engaged with our “live” resources.
We will continue to reach out to student representative bodies and offer tailored outreach and resources.	We add resources to the toolkit for student representative bodies. We continue to deliver outreach events focusing on the role of student representative bodies in complaints and appeals.
We will improve our understanding of what students know about how they can raise concerns and their awareness of our service and their right to complain to us.	We look at examples of providers’ published procedures to see whether students are clearly signposted to us. We analyse our own complaints data to understand more about who does and does not complain to us. We hold discussions groups with students to better understand their awareness of routes for complaining and their wider concerns. We use what we find out to inform our work in supporting good practice.

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What we plan to do	What this will look like
We will lead a conversation with student representative bodies, providers and other stakeholders about good practice in handling requests for special consideration. We will work with the Good Practice Framework Steering Group to draft a new section of the Framework, consult on it and publish it.	We publish the new section of the Good Practice Framework after consultation by the end of the year.
We will collect data from providers on formal complaints, appeals and other internal processes on a voluntary basis to provide meaningful context to the complaints data we hold.	We collect data with a view to sharing it anonymously with providers that give us their data.

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 will continue to work with governments and key organisations in the sector and beyond as we further develop our role in the regulatory framework, balancing our independence and our interdependence with other organisations.

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

We will continue to be active members of the Ombudsman Association (OA) and of the European Network for Ombuds in Higher Education (ENOHE), sharing our learning and learning from other schemes.

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We will continue to work with the Welsh government and key stakeholders towards the development of legislation to make our service available to students across the post-compulsory education and training sector in Wales.	We work closely with the Welsh government in the drafting of relevant parts of the legislation so that the legislation will enable us to fulfil our role effectively.
We will continue to work as an independent but interdependent part of the regulatory framework, working constructively with the OfS and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW).	We work with the OfS and HEFCW so that we have the information we need to administer our Scheme and we are involved in relevant discussions around their workstreams.
We will continue to work with a range of organisations and groups across the sector and beyond.	We attend relevant meetings and participate in discussions relevant to our work, including the DfE, National Union of Students, the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment, the Quality Assurance Agency, the Education and Skills Funding Agency and the Competition and Markets Authority and Consumer Benefit Forum.
We will continue to use our unique knowledge and experience as the sector ombuds service to influence relevant policy areas.	We respond to relevant sector consultations and developments and bring our knowledge to relevant policy areas.
We will continue to work with other sector organisations to influence thinking and policy around market exit, building on our experience of market exit and the impact it has on students.	We contribute to any relevant task forces and lessons learned exercises, and continue to promote the importance of making remedies available for individual students in these circumstances.
We will continue to engage with new models of higher education delivery and qualifications and monitor implications for membership of our Scheme to try to make sure students in changing areas of provision can access our service.	We work closely with the DfE and others to assess the potential impact of changes to higher education delivery and qualifications, such as proposed changes to higher technical education, in relation to membership of our Scheme.

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We will continue to work with others to encourage providers and awarding bodies that are not members of our Scheme as a “qualifying institution” to join our Scheme.	We have discussions with relevant providers and awarding bodies and encourage them to become members of the Scheme.
We will complete the review of our governance structure and identify future arrangements that will enable effective governance, reflect our expanded membership and have the confidence of stakeholders.	We identify and start to implement new governance arrangements.
We will learn from, contribute to, and reflect good practice in the ombuds sector.	As active members of the OA, we compare our practice with other organisations in the ombuds sector, identifying any improvements we can make to our own approach. We contribute our learning about complaints handling to the wider ombuds sector through OA and ENOHE events.

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

We reflect our values in our work and encourage an engaging, supportive and high-performing organisational culture that is inclusive, diverse and promotes wellbeing. We support colleagues’ understanding of our organisational context and direction and the part they play in it. We will keep capacity requirements across the organisation under review so that we are in a position to fulfil the different aspects of our remit effectively. We will continue to develop our organisational infrastructure so that it supports our core functions effectively.

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We will continue to promote a positive, high-performing organisational culture.	We support people to achieve their potential and have high expectations of performance. We recognise and promote awareness of the importance of

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What we plan to do	What this will look like
	wellbeing. We run our fourth employee engagement survey to understand more about people's experience of working for our organisation.
We will cultivate kindness in our communications with students, in our good practice work, and in our workplace.	We value and celebrate kindness. A kinder approach helps students to feel that we have listened to and understood their concerns and supports the effectiveness of our casework.
We will maintain a focus on diversity and inclusion.	We continue to reach out to underrepresented groups in our recruitment. We analyse our casework data to better understand patterns in complaints to us and use this to inform our good practice work and our own practice.
We will continue to support our people's development and provide tailored learning opportunities.	We value learning and support our people to develop themselves. This includes a programme of internally led knowledge-sharing sessions, tailored workshops, management development, external training and study opportunities, and participating in the ombuds mentoring scheme.
We will further develop our knowledge management.	Our practices support consistency and enable colleagues to find the information they need quickly through well-structured and comprehensive case-related resources. We continue to work towards automation of the process of extracting, redacting and storing useful casework-related data.
We will continue to provide a cost-effective and efficient alternative to the courts, benefiting both providers and students who use our Scheme.	We manage our finances to enable us to advance and balance our organisational priorities and keep the unit cost of our cases stable.
We will continue to refine and improve our subscriptions system.	We continue to monitor developments in higher education sector data that are relevant to our subscriptions and to keep the structure and level of our subscriptions under review.
We will continue to develop our IT systems so that they are stable, secure and function well.	We maintain a good level of stability and security through the year. We explore potential future improvements to our IT to work towards more integrated systems that support greater efficiency.