



office of the
independent
adjudicator

Operating Plan for 2025

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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.

In 2024 we developed and agreed a new [2025 strategy](#) which identifies two objectives and four priorities through which we fulfil our purpose to improve students' experience by resolving complaints fairly and independently and using the learning we gain to influence change.

Our Operating Plan for 2025 sets out what we plan to do this year to take forward each of these areas and what we intend to have achieved by the end of the year. It includes both ongoing areas of work and new initiatives. Students and the higher education sector are still facing very challenging circumstances, and this will be a key context for our work in 2025. Our Operating Plan for the year anticipates this and the further developments that we expect across all aspects of our work.

To fundamentally review our casework process to ensure it has service users at its heart, is as efficient as possible and is focused on effective resolution and remedy.

The number of complaints that students bring to us is increasing year on year. The needs and expectations of students are changing, and the sector is constantly evolving. We must ensure that we offer accessible and easy to navigate processes that are flexible and meet the needs of students and providers. Our decisions must be trusted as fair. We must ensure our focus is on achieving the best outcomes possible in the circumstances. We seek to use dispute resolution techniques to resolve issues as early as possible – using the more traditional Ombuds reviews when that will give the best outcome.

The learning we share with the sector is driven by complaints data, including student feedback. We will build on the Good Practice framework and outreach work to provide support for providers in delivering effective complaint handling. We help to identify when internal complaints processes fail and how to improve them. We promote a positive view of complaints, advocating for using complaints for learning.

To fundamentally review our casework process to ensure it has service users at its heart, is as efficient as possible and is focused on effective resolution and remedy.

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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ 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 take a risk based and proportionate approach, building on the flexibility and efficiency of our service.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ We review and develop options for using early and proportionate complaint resolution - where that will give the best opportunity for resolution and remedy. ◆ We continue to explore and promote the benefits to all parties of the use of settlements. ◆ We review and plan re-design of our core processes to ensure sustainability of our service and to improve service-user experience.
We will further develop our processes and systems to provide an accessible and inclusive service for students and providers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ We carry out research to inform best practice in further development of our systems and processes for accessibility and inclusivity. ◆ We seek the views of students, their representatives, and our provider contacts to inform our planning for systems development. ◆ We develop our understanding of the complaint landscape for Further Education (FE) in Wales to inform development of flexible and proportionate processes.
We will develop our mechanisms for listening to what students and others tell us about how they experience our service and use this to further improve what we do.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ We develop our systems for identifying learning opportunities from complaints about our service and challenges to our decisions. ◆ We review the effectiveness of our processes for obtaining feedback from the people that use our service.

To fundamentally review our casework process to ensure it has service users at its heart, is as efficient as possible and is focused on effective resolution and remedy.

What we plan to do	What this will look like
We will use risk-based and proportionate assurance to ensure the quality of our processes and decisions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ We review and re-design our quality assurance systems to support further service improvements through a focus on organisational learning and development.
We will build on our capacity to feedback on learning from complaints to the sector, to promote good practice and improvement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ We develop our strategy to focus on delivering impact for students and the wider sector.◆ We improve our systems for identifying, recording, and reporting on the drivers of complaints.

To increase the effectiveness of our influencing in support of our objectives.

We will continue to develop our good practice and outreach 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 and updating our good practice guidance based on learning from the complaints we see. We recognise the range of pressures, including financial pressures currently affecting students, providers, and student organisations.

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 play our part in the regulatory framework, balancing our independence and our interdependence with other organisations.

We will use our influence to help 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.

To increase the effectiveness of our influencing in support of our objectives.

What we plan to do	What this will look like
<p>We will establish new relationships, build on emerging relationships, maintain, deepen, and strengthen existing relationships – to maintain and enhance our ability to influence.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ We engage with political thinking and policy development on areas relevant to our work and maintain effective working relationships with officials.◆ We work with the Office for Students (OfS), Medr, other regulators and Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs) so information is shared as appropriate, and we are involved in relevant discussions around their workstreams.◆ We attend relevant meetings and participate in discussions relevant to our work, including with the Department for Education (DfE), the Welsh government, National Union of Students, the UK Quality Council, the Quality Assurance Agency, and the Competition and Markets Authority.◆ We continue to develop our outreach programme and the resources available on our website for providers, student representative bodies and others. We use feedback from participants and our wider engagement together with insight from our casework 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.◆ We work with the governments and others to ensure any legislation and implementation considers the impact on individual students and closes any gaps in students accessing the Scheme. This includes work on any Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 implementation and any other White Paper or legislation brought forward.◆ We engage with providers with higher volumes of OIA complaints to explore more effective ways to identify and share learning from complaints.◆ We engage with providers with low direct engagement with us to ensure that our good practice work is benefitting these members and their students.◆ We seek out opportunities to identify good practice in providers that can inform our casework.

To increase the effectiveness of our influencing in support of our objectives.

What we plan to do	What this will look like
<p>We will draw on developing casework themes, trends, and examples to illuminate issues that can improve students' experiences. We will focus on priority areas in which we identify greatest need for change/greatest possibility of impact.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ We publish information about our approach and learning from the complaints we see, for example in casework notes and case summaries. We share information from our casework with other organisations working on priority areas. ◆ We consult students, student representative bodies, providers, and other relevant stakeholders about a new section of the Good Practice Framework: Handling complaints about harassment and sexual misconduct.
<p>We will continue to respond to gaps in student protection, pursuing opportunities to widen membership where this is in the student interest.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ We continue to work with the Welsh government and Medr to support the move to an integrated tertiary system by preparing the OIA and providers for the move towards our independently reviewing complaints from FE students. We work with Medr as it establishes its requirements around complaints handling, and following communication from the Welsh government, we work with providers to ensure necessary processes are in place and enhance our understanding of the tertiary sector in Wales. ◆ As plans for the Lifelong Learning Entitlement and other initiatives develop, we continue to try to ensure all students have access to independent redress. This will also require close working with the OfS. We continue to highlight inconsistencies in protection for students studying at members where the awarding organisation is not a member and students studying for other courses, including below level 4, which do not have access to independent redress.

To increase the effectiveness of our influencing in support of our objectives.

What we plan to do	What this will look like
<p>We will ensure that we can offer independent and evidence-based perspectives on issues of interest to the sector, as necessary according to changing priorities as emerging issues impact upon students.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ 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.◆ We continue our focused work on the impact of provider closure, whether course, campus, or market exit, on individual students. This will help consideration of better outcomes for individual students where possible and will mitigate the risk of the OIA receiving complaints where there is little option of a remedy. This will encompass:<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Working with SUMs Consulting to identify and share effective practices that will support providers in England and Wales in navigating challenging financial circumstances with a particular focus on mitigating the impact on students.▶ Inputting our expertise and working with the governments and others considering potential solutions for students who might have no remedy following a market exit. This includes developing thinking around our proposed options of a fund for affected students, some form of insurance scheme or a change in legislation for providers entering insolvency prioritising students.▶ Working with individual providers who may be considering closures to ensure they have taken on board learning and good practice and attending multi agency meetings where requested.

To improve the quality of our evidence, both data and insight, to improve our organisational performance and effectiveness of influencing.

Carrying out high quality and efficient casework and influencing others in support of our objectives are dependent on access to accurate and timely data and information. We need to ensure that we capture information that is useful, in a consistent and coherent way. We are mindful of the burden of data capture on our organisation and within the sector, and we will aim to collect data once and use it often. We will continue to develop our reporting and analytical capacity, including improving systems integration and investigating emerging technology.

Access to accurate and timely information about the sector we operate within is necessary to the successful operation of the Scheme. Information about the size and scope of higher and tertiary provision informs a range of our activities, from practical membership administration to policy engagement. Information about the student body helps us set our work in context and better understand and reflect upon emerging issues.

To improve the quality of our evidence, both data and insight, to improve our organisational performance and effectiveness of influencing.

What we plan to do	What this will look like
<p>We will undertake an audit of the data we generate about student complaints to identify gaps, duplication, and potential for greater functionality.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ It has been two years since the implementation of Microsoft Dynamics as our case handling system, so it is a timely opportunity to review how it will continue to support us in delivering our objectives. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ We examine the operation of our system and processes through an outputs lens considering the consistency, accuracy and reliability of the data captured. We identify gaps and any aspects of our data which are unnecessary. We identify areas for improvement and develop actions to address these. ▶ We also examine our systems and processes through a user experience lens. We identify opportunities to streamline our data capture processes to support efficient and effective case handling.
<p>We will continue to grow our capacity and capabilities in data analysis.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ We build on work to embed quality data as a shared responsibility and a shared asset across the organisation. This includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Integrating accurate data recording into casework quality standards. ▶ Developing training and resources to support all staff in entering data and in making use of reporting tools. ▶ Maintaining up-to-date knowledge of tools and best practice within data-focused roles, including engaging with emerging AI technology.
<p>We will undertake an audit of the data and information from external sources that we make use of to inform our work.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ We evaluate the external information sources we use and consider whether they continue to meet our data needs. We explore whether any recent changes in the remits and methodologies of the organisations compiling the data have an ongoing impact on our use of this data. ◆ We identify any areas where our information needs are not met by the data currently available to us and explore alternatives where appropriate. We consider whether there are new ways to use existing external data to contextualise the information we generate and to help with our organisational planning.

To improve the quality of our evidence, both data and insight, to improve our organisational performance and effectiveness of influencing.

What we plan to do	What this will look like
We will ensure continued compliance with information regulatory requirements.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ We complete work to address any issues identified in the Data Protection compliance gap analysis.◆ We engage with any changes to practice emerging from new Data Protection legislation.◆ We keep under review the implementation of the Digital Markets Competition and Consumers Act 2024 and its impact on our role as an approved ADR body.

To increase the effectiveness of the organisation, to build on and strengthen our one organisation approach, ensuring we can respond to the demands of the other priorities, and create an environment in which all our people can thrive.

Our new strategy envisages a period of systematic development of our leadership, culture, people, and systems. We need to ensure that we have the necessary capability and capacity to support delivery of our strategic priorities.

We need to develop the appropriate mechanisms to balance resources and prioritise activities to deliver this organisational change in the context of high levels of casework demand. This will involve identifying and addressing practices that cause inefficiency in our internal effectiveness.

We will work to enhance an organisational culture and working environment that is focused on learning and development.

To increase the effectiveness of the organisation, to build on and strengthen our one organisation approach, ensuring we can respond to the demands of the other priorities, and create an environment in which all our people can thrive.

What we plan to do	What this will look like
We will take the next step in developing our leadership and management to position ourselves well to deliver our strategic priorities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ We review our approach to leadership and management.
In the first year of our new strategic plan, we will establish several benchmark measures and indicators to support the continuing development of the organisation and our focus on a whole organisational approach to maximise our impact.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ We review the way we report on our performance and efficiency and refresh our key performance indicators. ◆ We further develop and enhance our approach to risk management. ◆ We engage with a range of stakeholders to help our understanding of how our work is experienced.
We will work with our people to promote their on-going engagement in the organisation and ensure appropriate channels for employee voice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ We build on the insight from our recent employee engagement survey and our new recognition agreement with the GMB Union: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ We strengthen employee voice to ensure meaningful two-way communication and engagement. ▶ We work on developing our systems and framework for learning and development.
We will fully implement 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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ We recruit Trustees/Directors to the vacant positions on our Board, managing this carefully to support continuing governance effectiveness and ensuring involvement of our Company members and other stakeholders.

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What we plan to do	What this will look like
We will undertake a successful office move.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ We finalise arrangements with our new landlords and prepare for a move in May 2025. The new space will support our modern working methods, provide a high-quality environment for our people and be an efficient use of our resources.
We will continue to review our subscriptions to promote a fair balance between growth and efficiency in responding to the increasing volume of complaints.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ We will maintain our unit cost at about £1,700. ◆ We review the balance between the core and case element of subscriptions in the light of the changes to band thresholds.
We will strengthen our approach to diversity and inclusion.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ We develop and implement plans to improve our approach.