

Video Transcription

Introduction to the Annual Report 2025

Duration: 06:07

Speakers: Helen Megarry, Independent Adjudicator – OIA (Helen)
Ben Elger, Chief Executive – OIA (Ben)

START VIDEO

Helen: Welcome to our Annual Report for 2025. This year's report tells a story of a service that's been responding to rising demand and preparing for change. As the independent complaints service for Higher Education in England and Wales, our role is to review student complaints fairly, carefully and independently when internal processes come to an end. That means that we sit at an important point between the student experience, the work providers, and the wider values that underpin ombuds services, which are independence, fairness, accessibility and sharing the learning through our unique position.

Ben: 2025 was actually our busiest year ever. We had over 4,000 complaints for the first time, and it was a 17% increase in complaints from the previous year. We also had a record number of enquiries into the office as well. But really pleased to

say that at the same time, we closed more complaints than ever before, 3,950 was a new record. But it does show there's still increasing demand for our service and lots of underlying issues that students need resolved.

Helen: What matters is not only that demand has increased, but that we continue to improve how we responded to it. More than 90% of the complaints were closed within six months, and our average case handling time has been reduced to 81 days. That matters because fairness isn't only about the outcome. For an ombuds service, it's also about whether the process is timely, whether people understand it, and whether or not it's proportionate. For students, we know that delay can be really stressful, it can be disruptive, and sometimes it can affect the options that are available to put things right.

Ben: The data this year tells us a lot about student experience and concerns. Once again, academic appeals are the highest number of our complaints, but we also have an increasing number of service complaints, which is our category looking at things like teaching and facilities. Once again, postgraduate students are over-represented in our numbers, as are disabled students, and we've got a lot to say about that in the report, and international students with a background context of high fees and visas. A smaller but really important part of our casework is around harassment and sexual misconduct. And

this year we've put together the Good Practice Framework chapter with lots of help from people throughout the sector, and we're really glad that that's so strong.

Helen: Taken together, the complaints that we look at point to something much bigger than individual cases. They show the importance of systems that work clearly and consistently in practice, especially for students who may already be dealing with pressure, uncertainty or disadvantage. As an ombuds service, we bring an independent review and a wider perspective. We see patterns across many complaints, and that gives us insight into where the processes are working well and where they're falling short.

Ben: The accessibility of our scheme is really important to us. Making things fair, open, and user-friendly is a real priority. It can be really stressful, even overwhelming, for students to complain. So we're really trying to make things as straightforward as we possibly can. It's also really important that we can use our unique role to drive change in the sector. A lot of the work we do is working with government, stakeholders, regulatory bodies to try and have a joined-up approach here. And one of the things that's been really key in the last couple of years is to take account of the difficult financial situation for students and providers. So we've been thinking a lot about earlier intervention and how we can get involved to help students in

situations where otherwise there might be no remedy for them. And to this end, we've done lots of work this year and particularly launched our report with SUMS Consulting. We're both making practical suggestions for providers and student organisations and suggestions for real legislative change.

Helen: Part of our preparatory work has included an accessibility and inclusion review. That gave us independent insight into how students experience our communications, our digital channels, and our casework processes. And it's helped us to identify where we need to keep improving, where we need to make our website and external content clearer, where we need to be more accessible and more student-focused through a refreshed communication strategy.

Ben: It's been a really important year for continuing our work in Wales, and in particular preparing for our role in further education in the new tertiary sector. We've been working with the Welsh Government, with Medr, with NUS Wales and with Colegau Cymru to really move this forward. We'll have a soft launch in September 2026, focusing on our good practice work and full membership from September 2027.

Helen: The rise in complaints and what we're hearing through our casework make it clear that this is the right moment to review how our scheme operates in practice. So in 2026, we're going

to undertake a significant program of work to review our casework processes and start a comprehensive review of the scheme itself. Our aim is to make sure that the scheme remains fair, efficient and easy to use while preserving the independence, care and quality that are central to our role as an ombuds service. We want to make sure that the service that we provide reflects the needs of students today and is equipped for the future.

Ben: Complementing this, we will continue to build on our outreach and insight work so that our unique perspectives are taken into account in driving up standards in complaints handling and making the sector better for students. Our Annual Report is basically about both delivery and direction. It shows the scale of the work that we've carried out in 2025 and explains what our next phase of development is, and that it's both timely and essential. We're proud of what colleagues across the OIA have achieved in a very demanding year, and we're equally clear about the work that we must do now.

END VIDEO