

Video Transcription

Introduction to the Annual Report

Duration: 05:37

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

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Helen: Today we are publishing our Annual Report for 2024. This covers, another challenging year for the sector. There's been growing financial pressure on our providers and also the ongoing impact of cost of living on students. We're particularly concerned, too, about increasing number of students reporting issues with their wellbeing and mental health.

It's been a busy year for the OIA. We've had the most complaints in the year that we have ever had before. We had a 15% increase in the number of complaints that we received in 2024 from 2023. And this is following a trajectory that's been established over recent years of increasing numbers of complaints. Fortunately, we've managed to match our increase in demand with increased productivity. Our teams have been very busy and have managed to ensure that we are actually resolving complaints in a timely way. 94% of the complaints that we handled were resolved within six months of us receiving them. We've managed to achieve more

timely resolutions, which gives us a lot more opportunity for, flexibility and achieving positive outcomes for students.

Ben: It's a time of unprecedented financial uncertainty for universities, for providers and for students. And, the OIA have got involved earlier in the process to try and help where providers might be in difficulties and it might be difficult for students to get remedies, so we've been doing a lot of work on situations throughout the year. But what this has really demonstrate to us is that there does needs to be change and that probably needs to be legislative change.

So we're asking government and others to consider whether this could be a pot of money to help students in situations where there would otherwise be no remedy, or whether we should have an insurance scheme, or whether we should be able to make students a different type of creditor, give them a different status if providers have failed.

Helen: In 2024, we had an increased number of students coming to us who were reporting issues with disability or mental health. External and financial pressures exacerbate the impact that these conditions have on them.

One of the ways in which we can help to alleviate this pressure is in our day to day casework, where we have to ensure that we can support students who come to us, who are particularly vulnerable, and make sure that we can have a compassionate and kind approach to everyone. One of the other ways in which we can

address this issue is by supporting some of the work that's going on in the sector, and we've been really pleased to contribute to both the Disability and Disabled Students Charter, and also working with the Mental Health Task Force on developing the Compassionate Communications Commitment.

Ben: We've worked hard throughout 2024 to try and get clarity for students, for providers and for everyone about the new free speech legislation. We're really pleased that the government has now decided that the OIA should remain the route for students to make complaints going forward.

We know there's still a lot of work to be done, and we'll be talking to OfS and others about exactly how this will work in the long term. We're proud that the OIA is going to be a big part of the new tertiary sector in Wales. has been a really important year for Welsh tertiary sector as things have moved forward, particularly with Medr, the regulator, and behind the scenes, we've been working really hard to get ready for our new role when we can take complaints from further education students as well as higher education students. We're going to be doing that from September 2026, but look out in 2025 for a period of dialog and meetings and lots of events where you can come and talk to us about it.

Helen: 2024 was also an important year for us internally within the OIA. In response to the ongoing increase in demand for our service, the pressures on the sector and the difficulties being faced by students, we conducted a strategic review, which gave us a really

good opportunity to stand back and really consider how we can support, improving student experience through our work. We can do this in two ways, one of which is by developing the way in which we conduct our casework, and also thinking about how we can improve learning from complaints. We've published revised objectives and priorities and an updated strategy for 2025.

Ben: I think it's fair to say that updating the OIA's governance has been a long and winding road - partly because we had a delay because of the pandemic. But we really, really wanted to get this right and take account of everything that's happened in the last decade, including the expansion in our membership. And think about what we need for the next decade. And we really think our new articles will allow us to be a strong, independent charity rooted in the higher education sector and engaged with students.

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