

## **Update for the Minister for Further and Higher Education: The Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) Annual Report 2024**

1. The OIA is the designated operator of the independent student complaints scheme for England and Wales. It reviews complaints from higher education students about their higher education provider. Where the OIA finds that the provider has done something wrong, they make Recommendations for the provider to put things right. The OIA also share learning to help improve policies and practices across the higher education sector and work with stakeholders to contribute to the development of policy, both in the wider regulatory framework for higher education and in the ombuds sector.
2. This update provides a summary of the key points from the OIA's Annual Report 2024 published on 29 April 2025.
3. In 2024 OIA received 3,613 complaints, an increase of 15% on 2023. This is the ninth consecutive year that complaints have increased - the increase of 476 complaints is the largest year-on-year increase in the last decade.
4. The report is about the OIA work for England and Wales as a whole. It includes a bar chart (page 7) that shows the total number of complaints received and the percentage for England and Wales for the last ten years. For 2024 it is 5% Wales / 95% England, which is broadly consistent with the last few years where Wales has fluctuated between 4% and 5 %.
5. The proportional rise in complaints is greater than that in the total student population. The report notes that the increase in complaints does not necessarily indicate an overall rise in student dissatisfaction - it could equally indicate improvements in complaints processes and signposting.
6. Of the complaints received:
  - 56% are Undergraduate, 37% Postgraduate, 6% PhD, and 1% other.
  - 61% percent are home students, 34% non-EU and 5% EU students. International students continue to be overrepresented in complaints to OIA.
  - Subjects allied to medicine and business and management continue to be the highest subject areas, likely reflecting volume of learners on these types of courses.
  - 47% are categorised as academic appeals and 30% service issues.
7. The outcomes of complaints were:
  - 3% justified,
  - 6% part-justified,

- 15% settled in favour of the learner,
  - 35% not justified,
  - 16% not justified because the provider made a reasonable offer (which would still be open to the learner),
  - 8% withdrawn, and
  - 16% not eligible.
8. Disabled students remain over-represented in complaints – from around one-third of the OIA caseload in 2023, to just over 40% in 2024. It is possible that some of these students' conditions may not meet the definition of a disability under the Equality Act 2010. Some other students may have a disability but choose not to tell the OIA. Some students choose not to disclose details of their disability or health condition. Of those who did describe their disability, the largest categories selected were "mental health issues" (46%) and specific learning differences (33%).
  9. Although numbers remain below 5% of OIA caseload, there is an upward trend in the number of complaints that contained some element of bullying, harassment, or sexual misconduct. Most students that complained about the behaviour of others were female. The majority were complaining about the behaviour of other students, although some complaints involved the actions of members of staff. The OIA upheld or settled a higher proportion of complaints involving bullying, harassment, and sexual misconduct than other complaints. The OIA indicate these complaints are often complex, multi-faceted and providers may not be able to fully control events where outside agencies including the police or placement providers are involved. OIA will be continuing to focus on harassment and sexual misconduct in 2025 and consult on a new section of their Good Practice Framework.
  10. The OIA made recommendations for financial remedies totalling £677,785 when a practical remedy was not possible or did not sufficiently address the complaint. In addition, students received a total of £1,809,805 through settlement agreements. The highest single amount of financial compensation was £63,650 and 143 students received amounts of £5,000 or more, of whom 74 received £10,000 or more. The larger sums of compensation were where there had been serious disruption studies for prolonged periods, or where a provider's actions had led to the student being unable to complete the qualification which they were studying for. Some of the higher amounts awarded reflect the high costs international students have faced (including tuition fees and visa costs). In a small number of cases where a provider had treated a student unfairly for a long time, or repeatedly missed opportunities to put things right, the OIA recommended compensation above £5,000 for distress and inconvenience.

11. The report contains a highlighted reference to OIA's work with Wales: *"We continue to work with the Welsh Government and Medr on the implementation of the expansion of our remit into further education (FE) in Wales. The timing of this alongside Medr's wider timetable and regulations has proved complicated. The delays in establishing the wider regulatory landscape have impacted on our planned work in preparing providers and we are conscious of the wider sector pressures to be ready for implementation of the new regime. We are hopeful that the necessary changes will be in place for September 2026."*
12. Further information will be available later in the year as the OIA usually publish their annual statements around May – there is one for each provider and you can compare against previous years. The statements show the number of completion of procedures letters issued (i.e. how many formal complaints the institution received), how many complaints were subsequently referred to the OIA, comparison to the band median, category of complaint, whether justified, partly justified etc., the institution's response times to information requests, compliance with recommendations. Further briefing will be provided at this point.