



The Council, 27 November 2015

Annual Report on Student Case Reviews 2014-15

- Section 7.6 of Regulation II provides that the Council “may consider, adjudicate upon and if thought fit redress any grievances of the officers, staff or students of the University”. The exercise of The Council’s responsibility in respect of student grievances is via a Case Review stage within the University’s student complaints procedures. The Case Review process is led by a Pro-Vice-Chancellor with support from Student Services.

In total, thirty six Case Review requests were submitted during 2014-15 (see comparisons with previous years in table below – N.B. Admissions cases were not reported prior to 2013-14).

	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
UG	11	4	8	7	24	15
PGT	3	4	6	5	4	11
PGR	3	1	3	5	3	10
TOTAL	17	9	17	17	31	36

2. Taught Course Students

Twenty three Case Review requests were submitted in 2014-15 by taught students not satisfied with Faculty decisions made in their academic appeal cases, in the current or previous academic session. Three further cases were brought by taught students who were not satisfied with the outcome of their complaint dealt with by Faculty. Of the total twenty six cases from taught course students, four were referred back to an Academic Appeals Committee for review; one was upheld in the student’s favour (an academic appeal); in nineteen cases there were insufficient grounds to consider the cases further, and two cases remain ongoing. Cases were submitted by students in all five Faculties: Arts & Humanities (2 UG); Engineering (2 PGT & 3 UG); Medicine, Dentistry & Health (3 PGT & 2 UG); Science (1 PGT & 1 UG) and Social Sciences (5 PGT & 7 UG). Cases were submitted by fourteen Home, one European and eleven Overseas students.

Research Students

In 2014-15, four Case Review requests were submitted by research students against the outcome of a complaint, and six against the outcome of academic appeals. Of the total ten, in four cases there were insufficient grounds to be considered further; one was referred back to the faculty; three were upheld in the students’ favours, and two are still ongoing. Cases were submitted by students in all five of the Faculties: Arts & Humanities (3); Engineering (2); Medicine, Dentistry & Health (1); Science (3), and Social Sciences (1). Cases were submitted by three Home and seven Overseas students.

3. The Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education

Where students are not satisfied with Case Review decisions, they have recourse to external review via the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA). For information, an Appendix containing the 2014-15 Annual Report to Senate of the cases reviewed by the OIA, is attached.

The Senate, 16 December 2015

Annual Report of cases reviewed externally by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator 2014-15

1. The Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) for Higher Education is an external organization which provides an independent scheme for the review of student complaints. All HEIs are required to participate in the scheme. Students who are not satisfied with the outcome of decisions made by the University in cases related to academic appeals, complaints, discipline, fitness to practise and progress, and who have exhausted relevant internal University procedures, may have recourse to the OIA by submitting a complaint.
2. Nineteen new cases have been referred to the University by the OIA during 2014-15, notably the highest in any year to date, and almost double the number in 2013-14 (see comparison with previous years in Table 1 below).

Table 1: New OIA Cases by Academic Session

	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
UG	2	4	2	6	7	8
PGT	1	3	2	-	-	5
PGR	2	2	3	-	3	6
TOTAL	5	9	7	6	10	19

Four of the eight undergraduate cases in 2014-15 comprised academic appeals; two progress appeals and two student complaints. Of the six cases concerning postgraduate research students, two were submitted by the same student, where a second OIA case was initiated following the first being deemed not eligible. This is true also of one undergraduate case where again, one student submitted two cases to the OIA. It is perhaps pertinent to comment here therefore, that the OIA do allow continued submissions, with new evidence, but only where the student has already submitted the complaint through the university. Of all nineteen cases brought, three were rejected by the OIA as not eligible, with a further three being found not justified. The remaining thirteen are ongoing.

It is important to note that OIA cases usually take a number of months to be investigated and concluded, and this will often mean that a case submitted in one academic session will still be ongoing in the next (or a subsequent academic session in some more complex cases). Table 2 shows comparison data of the OIA outcomes of new and ongoing cases by the end of each academic session, for the last six years.

Table 2: Outcomes of OIA Cases by end of Academic Session

OIA Outcome	2009-10		2010-11		2011-12		2012-13		2013-14		2014-15	
	New	On going	New	On going	New	On going	New	On going	New	On going	New	On going
Justified	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
Partially Justified	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	-
Not Justified	-	4	6	3	-	2	-	3	1	4	3	4
Settled	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	-
Not Eligible	-	-	-	-	1	-	2	-	3	-	3	-
Ongoing	5	-	3	1	6	-	3	2	5	1	13	-
TOTAL	5	4	9	5	7	4	6	6	10	4	19	4

Of the 42 cases which have been concluded over the last six years with an OIA outcome: 31 were not justified (73.8%); 3 were partially justified (7.14%); 1 was justified (2.4%); 1 was settled (2.4%); and 6 were not eligible (14.2%).

3. In line with established monitoring arrangements, the profile of OIA cases is examined each year for any relevant trends. Though it remains difficult to draw firm conclusions when the caseload is so low overall and the case content is so varied, we must recognise that there has been a rising trend over a three year period. It is further noteworthy that OIA cases almost doubled in 2014-15, with a 90% increase: 19 cases in 2014-15 compared with 10 cases in 2013-14 (see Table 1 above). This appears indicative of a rising trend in students committed to pursuing their case through the University's internal procedures and onto external review by the OIA. It is interesting to note that this increase in cases appears to coincide with the introduction of higher tuition fees in 2012. Where issues emerge during the consideration of cases which require reference back to the relevant Faculty or academic department, these are dealt with as they arise.
4. The OIA Annual Letter received in July 2015, provided a summary of OIA complaints handling for the calendar year 2014. HE institutions in England and Wales are placed in an OIA band, based on the numbers of students at the institution. The University of Sheffield is in Band F (20,001 – 30,000 students), and compared favourably to the relevant band F median values, as illustrated by the table below.

Table 3: OIA Annual Letter Statistics for 2014

for Calendar Year 2014	University of Sheffield	Band F Median Value
No. of complaints received at the OIA	13	22
No. of Complaints closed by outcome:	11	23
Justified	0	1
Partially Justified	0	2
Not Justified	5	14
Settled	1	1
Not Eligible	5	2
Suspended/Withdrawn	0	1

Separate analysis of the annual letter data for all 21 Russell Group (RG) institutions, reveals that the University of Sheffield had the joint-fourth lowest figure for the number of complaints received by the OIA in 2014. Figures for other RG institutions ranged from 6 (Imperial College London - Band E) to 64 (University of Liverpool - Band F).

5. In conjunction with the Students' Union, the University of Sheffield has been running a scheme for the Early Resolution of Complaints (PERC). This is a conciliation service where trained volunteer student conciliators meet with individual students presenting a "dissatisfaction" of some sort, to help resolve their concerns at an early stage. The service, which features on the University website under the Student Complaints and Appeals (SCA) banner, continues to receive feedback of a very positive nature, despite the relatively small number of students utilising the scheme.