TEN TIPS FOR UNIVERSITIES ON EFFECTIVE COMPLAINTS HANDLING

Our Rules require universities to have in place internal procedures and systems that are compatible with the OIA Scheme. This section of the Guide offers some suggestions for best practice in the operation of internal procedures for the handling of complaints, appeals and disciplinary matters. It is based on our experience in handling cases and in talking to universities, students’ union representatives and other persons involved with the Scheme.

- Universities should ensure that they have clear, simple procedures that are well-publicised to students and are open and transparent.

- There should not be too many stages to an internal procedure. An informal stage followed by two formal stages before referral to the OIA should be sufficient for complaints. Appeals and disciplinary procedures should not be unduly cumbersome.

- Procedures should be operated fairly and impartially. Personnel involved in investigating a complaint at one stage should not be involved in deciding the outcome at a later stage.

- A file of the complaint, appeal or disciplinary matter should be kept.

- Procedures should have realistic time limits for both students and the university (our experience is that these are often unrealistically short for students). Students should be kept informed of progress and given an explanation if a procedure becomes delayed at any stage.

- Procedures should be followed. It is obviously sensible to try to resolve concerns informally but universities should recognise when a situation needs to be moved into formal procedures.

- Procedures should be internally consistent and coherent. There should be clear pathways to be followed for complaints, appeals, disciplinary matters and any other procedures such as discrimination, harassment and bullying. These should be well-publicised and the relationship between different procedures clearly explained. For example, if a student raises a complaint which cannot be considered under one set of procedures the student should be informed of his or her right to take the complaint through another set of procedures, if this is applicable. Where appropriate, procedures should allow an appeal, for example, to be put on hold while a complaint is considered.

- Furthermore, when a student has completed one complaint stage he/she should be told of his/her right to escalate the complaint to the next stage and of any time limits that may apply.

- The possibility of introducing mediation or a campus ombudsman service to students should be considered. Campus ombudsmen must be independent and observe professional ethics. Regulations requiring compulsory arbitration of student complaints leading to a binding decision would be contrary to the Higher Education Act 2004 as they would deny access to the OIA altogether.

- Procedures must not prevent the OIA from operating the Scheme in an efficient, open and fair manner; for example, by unreasonably delaying a student’s access to the OIA or hindering effective compliance with a decision of the OIA.