

Guidance on how the Office for Students will deal with quality and standards related notifications associated with Department for the Economy (NI) funded Higher Education Providers.

Background

The Office for Students (OfS) is a new regulator established under the Higher Education and Research Act 2017. OfS has a duty to promote the quality of the academic experience at English Higher Education Institutions.

We are interested in issues relating to standards and the student academic experience which have an impact on groups of students or the potential to do so. The information in this guidance describes the types of issues that we can look at, how to submit an issue and what will we do once we have received it.

Quality related notifications

The aim of this process is to identify and address a broad range of matters relating to the integrity of academic standards and the quality of the academic experience.

- **Standards:** by this we mean the level of learning your provider requires and how that compares with other providers. You may, for example, have concerns that the provider is not assessing learning outcomes appropriately, they are not classifying awards consistently, or they have created undue pressure to increase the number of good degrees awarded.
- **Student academic experience:** by this we mean the learning experience that you receive in your provider and how you are supported to progress and succeed. This may also include the reliability of information published about the student academic experience.

We are not able to address individual students' complaints against their provider; In Northern Ireland that is the role of the Northern Ireland Public Service Ombudsman (NIPSO) <https://nipso.org.uk/nipso/>. However, we can look at individual complaints for evidence of broader failings in the management of academic quality and standards. Where we consider that these indicate serious systemic or procedural issues we will investigate them. By systemic issues, we mean an issue inherent in the management of quality systems or governance of the provider, rather than one caused by or attributed to a specific, individual or isolated factor.

We are unable to accept submissions that are currently under consideration by another organisation, such as the NIPSO, or other regulatory bodies. Submissions can only be made once the external body has concluded its investigation and issued a final outcome. It is unlikely that we will consider issues that have already been investigated by the external body.

Issues should be brought to us within two years of the date of the last correspondence with your provider.

Remit – what we can look at:

We may investigate the following types of issues:

- standards in higher education
or
- the student academic experience
and
- an issue that affects, or has the potential to affect, a group or groups of students.
We would ask for one person to complete the form on behalf of a group rather than sending individual submissions.

You will need to:

- have completed your provider's internal complaints or appeals processes and be able to provide the formal outcome letter. If you are unsure about this, please contact us at: regulation@officeforstudents.org.uk
- have read this document to check whether this is the right process for you
- provide evidence to support the issue that you wish to raise.

What we can investigate

Which providers?

We can investigate issues at providers who receive funding from the Department for the Economy (DfE) either directly or indirectly for higher education provision in the UK or abroad on behalf of a DfE - funded provider.

Types of issues?

We can look into issues which affect groups of students or a whole cohort, are of a serious nature, compromise standards or academic experience, or have negative implications for the wider student interest.

Below are some examples of the types of issues that we can investigate:

- A lack of fair, effective and timely procedures for handling students' complaints.
- An absence of effective arrangements to support students across the full range of learning environments (for example, collaborative arrangements including transnational education, distance learning, online courses).
- Where the academic standard of qualifications are not set at the appropriate level in line with the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications.
- Failure of assessment and examining to be robust, valid and reliable.

- Misleading information, such as that for admissions or about the accreditation of a course by a professional body.

Issues that do not fit within the process

We cannot investigate:

- isolated student complaints that have no wider implications
- matters of academic judgement
- grievances against individuals
- matters concerning international student visas
- issues relating to further education courses
- issues for which there is another established process (for example, employment matters)
- issues that have already been considered under the Quality Assurance Agency's Concerns process.

Who can raise issues?

Students, parents, staff or members of the public can raise issues with us. Anyone raising an issue will need to have direct experience of it and be able to provide supporting evidence.

Personal representative

If you wish to raise an issue through a representative, or you are a representative, please contact a member of the Transition Period Regulation Team by emailing regulation@officeforstudents.org.uk before completing the online submission form.

Confidentiality

We will use discretion in dealing with the issues raised with us. However, we are not able to guarantee confidentiality. In many cases, the issue will already be known to the provider, and any conversation that we have with a provider about an issue raised through the process will, in all likelihood, lead to the identity of the discloser being deduced.

If you have concerns about this, please contact us by email regulation@officeforstudents.org.uk

We will not normally accept anonymous enquiries for the reasons above.

How to submit

Complete the submission form available on our website, you can also request it by sending an email to regulation@officeforstudents.org.uk. All information and evidence submitted to the will be used and stored in accordance with our privacy notice (<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/privacy/>).

If you are unsure whether to submit an enquiry, please contact us at regulation@officeforstudents.org.uk.

What we will do once we have received your enquiry

1. We will make an initial assessment of the information that has been submitted and respond within seven working days of receipt to let enquirers know whether this is something that we can investigate. If we cannot investigate your issue, we will explain the reasons for this and where possible suggest other routes that you may wish to take.
2. If your enquiry meets our criteria for initial investigation, a case manager will review the information that you have supplied to see if it supports the issue raised and refer to other relevant information. The case manager will then have an initial conversation with the provider to understand how the provider has dealt with the matter and to put the issue to them.
3. Many issues are resolved at the initial investigation stage. We will inform you of the outcome of this stage within four weeks of receipt of your initial enquiry. If we need more time to investigate, we will contact you to explain the reasons for this.
4. If your issue is not resolved through the initial investigation and there is enough evidence to support it, we will take it to a full stage-two investigation. The purpose of a full investigation is to examine the evidence submitted and to ascertain if there are serious issues relating to standards or the academic experience affecting a group of students.
5. The QAA will be running stage-two investigations on behalf of OfS and DfE. These investigations can be lengthy and we will keep you informed of developments in the investigation. We aim to complete all stage-two investigations within three months of receipt of the initial enquiry.
6. Once the investigation has been completed, we will let you know the outcome.

Appeals

Decisions made by the case manager are final and appeals cannot be made in relation to the judgements made by the case manager.

We will not consider appeals from enquirers unless they can provide new and relevant information about the issue that they did not have at the time of making the initial referral and that was not considered during the investigation.

Any appeal must be submitted to the case manager within seven working days of the notification of the outcome.

Timeline	
Stage 1	
0	Enquiry and supporting information is submitted to the OfS
1-7 days	Review of information to assess whether the enquiry falls within scope.
2-4 weeks	If within scope, enquiry goes through to the initial investigation stage. Issues can be resolved at this stage or referred to stage 2.
Stage 2	
4-8 weeks	DfE commissions a full investigation by the QAA. DfE will update the enquirer as appropriate.
8-12 weeks	QAA investigation and OfS decision-making process.
By 14 weeks	We will inform you of the outcome of the investigation.