The 11th annual GuildHE and Universities UK information legislation and management survey shows for the first time since the start of the survey a decline in the number of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests.

In contrast Environmental Information Regulations (EIR) requests appear to have slightly increased, while Data Protection Act (DPA) requests have increased back to levels last seen in 2012/2013.

The average monthly number of FOI requests received by UK universities has fallen by 3% since 2014.

The average across the 51 participating institutions was 212 FOI requests with the highest of 453 reported by one participant.

The Data

Full results dashboard
Highlights dashboard
Trends dashboard
Benchmarking dashboard
Findings

Request trends

Average monthly FOI requests have slightly decreased since last year. This breaks the trend of a consecutive rise in FOI requests for ten years since 2005, with an average monthly number of requests received per institution of 17.7 in 2015 compared with 18.2 in 2014 (having started from a base of just 2.8 per institution in 2005).

Average monthly DPA requests have doubled since 2006 (from 1.00 in 2006 to 2.75 in 2015). Requests have risen 36% since 2014 (from 2.02 – following a decrease from 2013 when DPA request were at their highest). Rates are now back to similar level as seen in 2013/2014.

Although average monthly EIR requests are higher in 2015 than 2006 (0.24 vs 0.02), they appeared to have largely plateaued since 2011.

Monthly trends

Request rates continue to fluctuate on a monthly basis, however, to a different pattern as seen in 2014. Although in an average month institutions received 17.7 requests, the lowest demand was experienced in May with only 11.55 requests, and the highest in September with 21.96 requests (in contrast February was the busiest month in 2014).

The total number of requests per quarter has also changed its pattern compared with the previous four years.

For the first time in the last 5 years, the third quarter has become the busiest period and the second quarter the least busy. Distribution is more variable than in the previous year too (each quarter: 27%, 20%, 28%, and 25% respectively). Average monthly rates are still quite variable within each quarter.

Response time

With some evidence of a slightly decreased burden on the sector, 95% of the FOI requests were answered within the legislative time limit of 20 working days which indicates a steady increase year on year (94% in 2014 and 93% in 2013). The 5% of all requests received that were not completed within 20 working days in 2015 represents a continued small reduction from the 6% reported in 2014 and the 7% reported in 2013.

This year’s survey shows that it might be taking institutions less time to respond to DPA requests despite the number of requests increasing again –only 24% of DPA requests were dealt with in under 10 days in 2014.
compared with 33% in 2015. The reason for this is unclear; could it reflect decreased complexity of DPA requests or the fact that more staff appear to be involved in responding to DPA requests (13% involved one staff in 2015 compared with 28% in 2014)?

As a result, 93% of all DPA requests were answered within the legislative time limit of 40 working days (an increase from the 92% recorded in 2014).

**Disclosure rates**

Disclosure rates in 2015 are broadly similar to 2014. The number of FOI and EIR requests which were answered in full has risen slightly from 53% in 2014 to 56% in 2015. The responses which were fully withheld have remained at 9% rate in 2015, but the rate of responses partially withheld due to an exemption has seen a small decrease from 18% in 2014 to 16% in 2015.

Over the last eleven years, the proportion of requests fully disclosed has decreased from 63% in 2005 to 56% in 2015 (with 53% in 2014 the lowest disclosure rate so far).

**Subject**

2015 shows a broadly similar profile to 2014 in the subjects of FOI requests. The top subject remains student issues and numbers (23%) but IT provision and use has jumped into second place (13% in 2015, up from 8% in 2014). The remaining subjects are similar to 2014 with financial information in third place (12%), HR and staff issue in fourth place (10%, and down from second place last year) and Admission in fifth place (7%).

FOI requests relating to student issues and numbers have increased steadily over the last eleven years from 0% in 2005 to 23% in 2015, and now represent by far the most common category. It is interesting to speculate again on whether changes to the funding of the higher education sector and tuition fees and students as 'customers' have in part led to this increased focus on student related subjects.

**Requesters**

Again, similar patterns are seen in 2015 with previous years in the types of FOI requesters. Journalists continued to be the most active category of requester submitting 20% of all FOI queries in 2015 (slightly down from 25% in 2014), followed by members of the public (15%) and commercial organisations (15%).

In contrast the profile of EIR requesters has changed since 2014. Campaigning groups are no longer the most common category (31% in 2014 but only 14% in 2015), they are overtaken by commercial organisations (16%). In third place are still staff, researchers, and students from other institutions (11%). While lawyers which featured strongly in 2014 with 11% this year they only account for 1% of requesters.
As a category own students has decreased from 14% in 2005 to 3.5% in 2015 but we are starting to see a small emergence of student journalists (steady at 2% since last year).

Exemptions

The data in relation to exemptions applied continued the trends seen in previous years with the vast majority of exemptions falling under four sections.

Section 12 (excessive cost of compliance) was again the most heavily used, accounting for over 29% of all exemptions applied during 2015. It was closely followed by Section 40 (personal information) and Section 21 (information reasonably accessible to the applicant by other means) which represented 25% and 16% respectively.

Section 43 (commercial interests) represented 16% of all exemptions in 2015.

Staffing issues

All participating institutions have a designated member of staff and/or a team responsible for information compliance. 73% of institutions reported having a designated records manager and/or team, and 90% have a records management policy in place (all down slightly from 2014).

As noted in previous years, it is important to remember we may be seeing an element of self-selection at work here, with those institutions with recognised information governance related functions perhaps being more likely to respond to the survey.

Value of the survey

Now in its eleventh year the information legislation and management survey continues to be a valuable source of information to participating organisations.

Around three quarters (76%) of participants have used the data from previous surveys to inform management of trends or impact and more than half (59%) to benchmark performance or experience against others.

Responses

Responses: 51 (32 via survey, 19 via information request register).
Data notes

Full results dashboard / exemptions tab: requests can be subject to more than one exemption

Trends dashboard / requester trends tab: ‘members of public’ and ‘student journalist’ have data missing for previous years due to question omission in previous years.