Introduction

The 10th annual Jisc, GuildHE and Universities UK information legislation and management survey shows a rise in the number of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests for the tenth consecutive year. In contrast, Environmental Information Regulations (EIR) requests appear to have levelled off to a fairly consistent rate, while Data Protection Act (DPA) requests have declined back to levels last seen in 2008.

The average monthly number of FOI requests received by UK universities has risen by 19% since 2013 and by almost seven times over the last decade since our survey began.

The average across the 46 participating institutions was 219 FOI requests with the highest of 454 reported by one participant.

The data

Highlights dashboard
Full results dashboard
Benchmarking dashboard
Trends dashboard

Findings

Request trends

Average monthly FOI requests have increased again since last year albeit at a lower rate (19% compared with 43% in 2013). FOI requests have risen for the tenth consecutive year, with an average monthly number of requests received per institution of 18.2 in 2014 compared with 15.3 in 2013 (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 2.04 in 2014). However, requests have fallen 35% since 2013 (from 3.13 - the highest since our records began). Rates are now back to similar level as seen in 2008. Although average monthly EIR requests are higher in 2014 than 2006 (0.22 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 2013. Although in an average month institutions received 18.2 requests, the lowest demand was experienced in December with only 10.5 requests, and the highest in February with 23.7 requests (in contrast November was the busiest month in 2013).

The total number of requests per quarter has also changed its pattern compared with the previous four years. The distribution has now become much more evenly spread with almost a quarter of annual requests received in each quarter: (27%, 25%, 24%, 23% respectively). However with the exception of Q3, average monthly rates are still quite variable within each quarter.

Response time

Despite the evidence of an increased burden on the sector, 94% of the FOI requests were still answered within the legislative time limit of 20 working days (93% in 2013). The 6% of all requests received that were not completed within 20 working days in 2014 actually represents a small reduction from the 7% reported in 2013.

This year’s survey shows that it might be taking institutions longer to respond to DPA requests despite the number of requests decreasing – 35% of DPA requests were dealt with in under 10 days in 2013 compared with only 24% in 2014. The reason for this is unclear; could it reflect an increasing complexity of DPA requests or the fact that fewer staff appear to be involved in responding to DPA requests (28% involved one staff in 2014 compared with 6% in 2013)? Despite this, 93% of all DPA requests were still answered within the legislative time limit of 40 working days.

Disclosure rates

Disclosure rates in 2014 are broadly similar to 2013. The number of FOI and EIR requests which were answered in full has fallen slightly from 54% in 2013 to 53% in 2014. The responses which were fully withheld have remained at 9% rate in 2014, but the rate of responses partially withheld due to an exemption has seen a small increase from 16% in 2013 to 18% in 2014.

Over the last ten years, the proportion of requests fully disclosed has decreased from 63% in 2005 to 53% in 2014.

Subject

2014 shows a broadly similar profile to 2013 in the subjects of FOI requests. The top three remain the same; Student issues and numbers (21%), HR and staff issues (13%), and Financial information (11%). However, HR and staff issues has crept up to 2nd place this year and Management and administration of the institution has made an appearance in the top five (now in 4th place).

FOI requests relating to Student issues and numbers have increased steadily over the last ten years from 0% in 2005 to 21% in 2014, 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 2014 with previous years in the types of FOI requesters. Journalists continued to be the most active category of requester submitting 25% of all FOI queries in 2014, followed by Members of the public (14%) and Commercial Organisations (12%). In contrast the profile of EIR requesters has changed since 2013. While Campaigning groups are still the most common category (31%), they are followed up Lawyers (11%) and Staff, researchers, students from other institutions and Members of the public (both at 9%). As a category Own students has decreased from 14% in 2005 to 4% in 2014 but we are starting to see a small emergence of Student journalists (2%).

**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 2014. It was closely followed by Section 40 (Personal information) and Section 21 (Information reasonably accessible to the applicant by other means) which represented 28% and 15% respectively. Section 43 (Commercial interests) represented 14% of all exemptions in 2014.

**Staffing issues**

All participating institutions have a designated member of staff and/or a team responsible for information compliance. 76% of institutions reported having a designated records manager and/or team, and 93% have a records management policy in place (all up slightly from 2013). As noted last year, 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 tenth year the Information legislation and management survey continues to be a valuable source of information to participating organisations. Around three quarters (78%) of participants have used the data from previous surveys to inform management of trends or impact and two thirds (67%) to benchmark performance or experience against others.

**Responses**

Responses: 46 (27 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.