



2012  
Report

# Student Ombud

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## Introduction

This is the 11<sup>h</sup> annual report from the Office of the Student Ombud.

The Office was established in 2002, and the post of Student Ombud has been held on a .6 basis by Associate Professor Anne Simpson since 2003. She is supported by Sandra Ciaramella, who in addition to her Ombud duties, also undertakes other Chancellery tasks as required.

Sandra is in the Ombud Office 9-5, five days a week so that students needing assistance are responded to immediately. This ability to respond quickly is a critical function of the Office as many problems are caused by students not knowing whom to contact, not being able to make contact with the right person or having to leave messages for absent staff.

The purpose of the Ombud Office is to provide students with an independent and confidential avenue to pursue complaints when they have failed to find a satisfactory outcome to their issue by following the established University procedures. In addition the Office provides students with information about how and with whom to pursue their complaint or concern in accordance with University policies.

The Student Ombud has the power to investigate complaints where either proper procedure has not been adhered to, or where despite following established procedures, the student is still unhappy with the outcome and the Ombud considers further investigation is warranted.

Many of the issues which are brought to the Office are not complaints of unfair treatment, but are requests for help in resolving a situation where the student feels that he or she has done as much as they can, but has not been able to get what they consider to be a reasonable or timely response. By addressing problems quickly, and where possible at the local level, many potentially time consuming matters can be dealt with by the Ombud before they become major problems.

## Number of student contacts with the Ombud Office

There were 165 contacts with the Ombud office during the reporting period. This equates to 1 contact for every 205 students.

Table 1 compares total contacts since 2002.

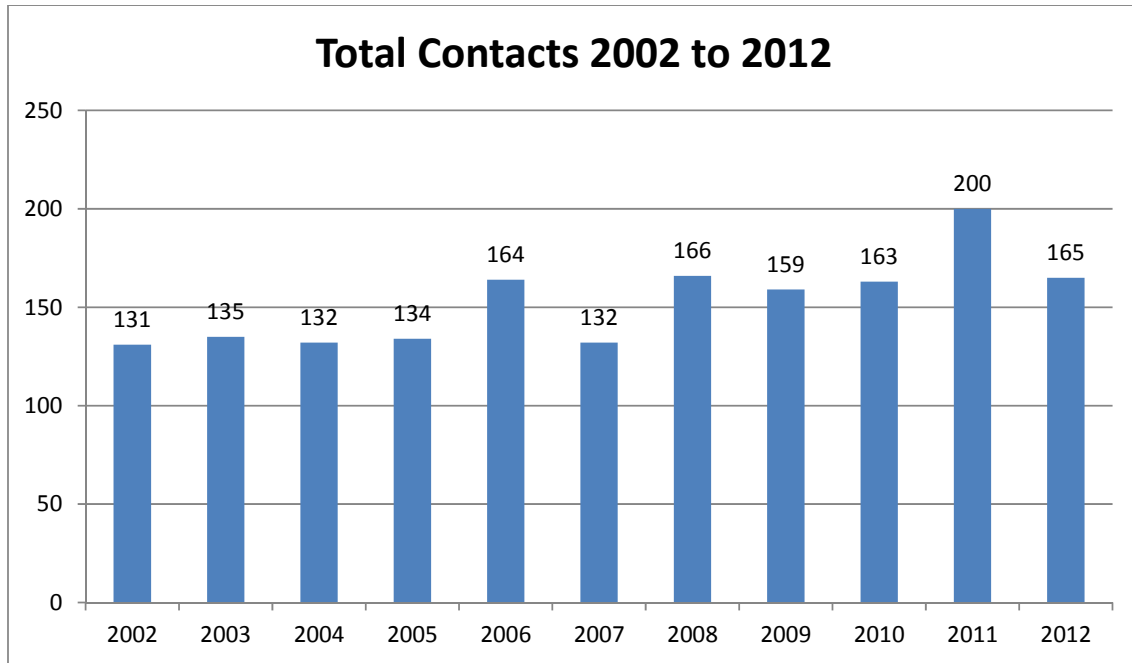


Table 1

The majority of contacts with the Office were via email and phone.

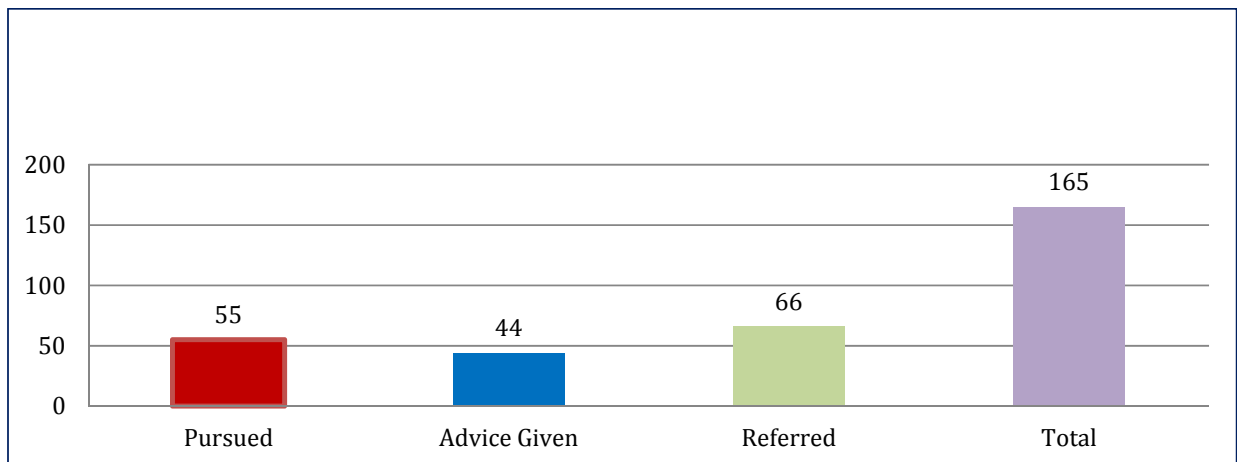


Table 2

As noted in the Introduction above, many students come to the Office for advice as to how to approach their problem; whom they should talk to; how they can get assistance; what form they

need; whether we think they have a genuine case etc. One hundred and ten students who contacted the Office were supported in this way. In 55 instances students' concerns were followed up by the Ombud to seek clarification and more information in an attempt to resolve the problem.

It is important to emphasise that not all complaints which were investigated were justified. Some complaints were pursued and dismissed as ungrounded, or the 'problem' lay in part on both sides. Compromise reached through negotiation was a common pattern and outcome. Consequently it is not easy to categorise the complaints as either 'with substance' or 'unfounded' as most often they are somewhere in between.

Table 3 below indicates the unit or division to which the student's query or concern related.

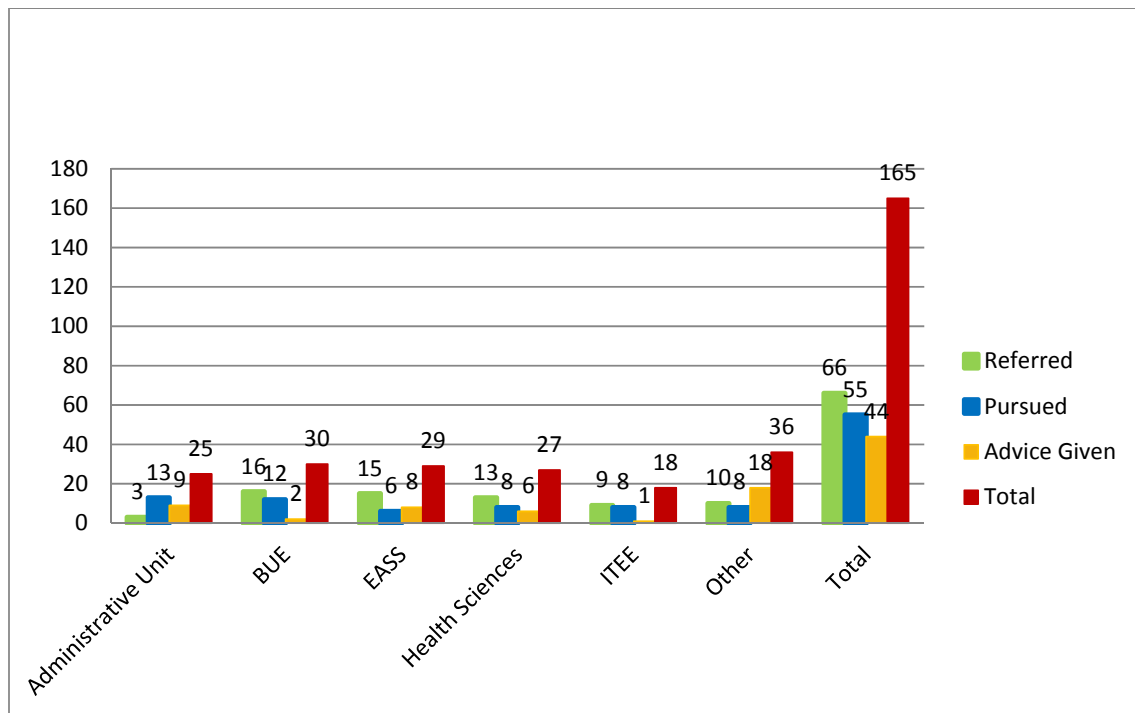


Table 3

## Type of students contacting the Office

In terms of gender, 79 males and 86 females approached the Office.

The number of domestic students seeking assistance was 126 and there were 24 international students and one off shore. In 14 instances it was not known whether they were domestic or international – for example the caller was anonymous, not currently enrolled, precluded or did not disclose that information.

40 postgraduate students contacted the office 11 of whom were PhD students (9 by coursework and 2 by research) and 125 undergraduate.

Sixteen students were studying through the Open University of Australia.

Four contacts were from staff seeking advice about how to handle a complaint, or advising the Office about a potential problem. Staff contacts with the Office are also treated confidentially.

### Category of problem/complaint

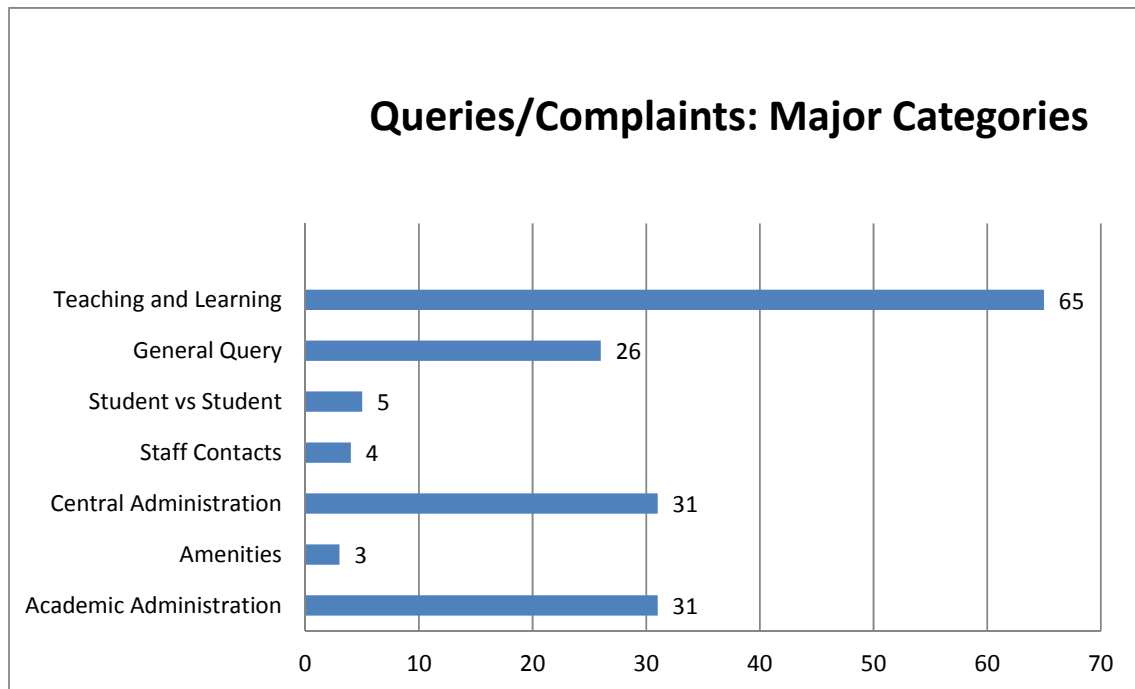


Table 4

The distribution of complaints within these categories is relatively consistent with previous years except in the area of academic administration, where there has been a decline in the number of students contacting the Office for help.

Queries about assessment, which make up the bulk of numbers in the teaching and learning category, are most often referred back to the appropriate academic staff members.

'General queries' include students, parents and others outside of the University contacting the Ombud office for general information about scholarships, programs, facilities etc.

## **Workshop for complaint handlers in Australian universities**

In 2012 this one day workshop was held in Melbourne at Victoria University. It was modelled on the workshop initiated in 2010 by UniSA and which was followed up in 2011 by UTS.

Indications are that the continuing success of this day means that it will become an annual event.

This year it was attended by more than 30 representatives from universities across the country and included Ombuds, Deans of Students, complaint managers, lawyers and mediators.

The group was addressed by personnel from the Victorian Ombudsman's Office (Outcomes of the 2012 Victorian Ombudsman roundtable on complaint handling by universities; Handling difficult complainant conduct), as well as legal representatives presenting on Complaint procedures; Disability discrimination (and the pitfalls of attributing a mental health diagnosis); and Universities, social media and the law.

There was also time for small group discussion, round table discussion and networking with people doing similar work in other universities.

As in previous years much discussion focused upon dealing with disruptive students, serial complainers and students with mental health issues.

A new theme which emerged related to the need to protect vulnerable staff from aggressive or persistent student behaviours, particularly with the increase in temporary and contract staff.

The importance of independent Student Advocates was raised, and it was of general concern that not all universities had them. Some institutions seemed to think that the role could be managed by professional staff who could advise students of procedures and their rights.

The session on social media caused some delegates to feel somewhat alarmed and out of touch with the pace of technical change and the legal implications of the use/misuse of social networking.

## **Ombud Advisory Group**

The Ombud Advisory Group meets as required when there is sufficient business and when there are sufficient members available.

The Ombud advisory group currently comprises:

Student Ombud (Anne Simpson)  
Project Officer (Sandra Ciaramella)  
Director, Council Services (Penny Moore)  
Director, Learning and Teaching Unit or nominee (Stephen Parsons)  
Dean of Graduate Studies or nominee (Kym Murphy)  
Director, International Office or nominee (Rob Greig)  
Director, Student and Academic Services or nominee (Allan Tabor)

Director, Human Resources or nominee (Ruth Blenkiron)  
Academic staff member (also an Integrity Officer) (Ian Clark )  
UniLife Student Advisory officer (Marieke de Graaf).

Marieke will be on leave in 2013 and her place as the second advocate is to be filled by Prashant Joshi.

The Student Advocates perform a tremendously important role in supporting students with appeals, procedures and fronting up to meetings with staff. When a student needs guidance with filling out a form or advice as to what information and circumstances are important and/or relevant we will most often refer them to an Advocate. Indeed in approximately 50% of the instances where we refer or advise a student about procedures and to whom they should take their problem, we also advise them to get support from one of the UniLife Advocates.

Both Emeritus Professor Robert Crotty and Associate Professor Chris Provis are highly regarded and experienced retired academics who have made themselves available to act as Student Ombud should the Ombud take extended leave. We are very grateful that they are there for back up if needed, and hope they will be available to continue to offer their time and expertise if required in 2013.

Sandra Ciaramella continues to perform an invaluable job listening to students, advising them of options and procedures, and sifting through the information they provide before passing the more problematic cases on to the Ombud. She also deserves many thanks for her contribution to this report, particularly in terms of data entry, collection and presentation.

## Summary

In 2012 all genuine complaints were resolved successfully through consultation and discussion with staff and students both having their point of view listened to and taken into account.

Most of those students who remained unhappy generally either had complaints about assessment, which is not within the Ombud's terms of reference, had issues with the expectations of placements, or had mental health issues which contributed to their unresolved and/or ongoing problems.

One important aspect of the role of the Student Ombud is to ensure that if a student takes his or her complaint outside of the University, (to for example the State Ombudsman, the Equal Opportunity Commission, the Training Advocate or The Australian Human Rights Commission), that the Ombud is satisfied that the University has treated the student fairly. For example if a student complains to the State Ombudsman, then staff from the State Ombudsman's Office will normally check with the Student Ombud to ensure that the Ombud has investigated the matter and that proper procedure has been followed. This can and does save the University considerably in terms of time, money and resources as the University does not then have to involve staff in another full investigation and report.

The Ombud Office – often in conjunction with Student and Academic Services – maintains a good working relationship with these outside bodies.

Given the size of the University and the complexity of the student population, there were relatively few real complaints that were considered to have substance and where the student was considered



to have been treated unfairly. In those cases where a recommendation was made that was at odds with a previous decision, staff were agreeable to the outcome. The relationship between academic and professional staff of the University and the Student Ombud Office remains positive and productive.

It is clear that the vast majority of students have a satisfying and rewarding experience during their time here at UniSA. My interactions with staff have also confirmed that they work hard to accommodate the variety of students and their needs with positive good will.

The work that the Ombud Office does is not so much 'dealing with complaints' as that of problem solving. In this sense it is a positive and rewarding role which supports the goals of the University in ensuring that as far as possible students have the opportunity to focus on their learning and attain their aspirations.