



University of
South Australia

Student Ombudsman Report 2014



University of
South Australia

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INTRODUCTION

The Student Ombudsman's Office at the University of South Australia recognises that students have the right to raise concerns or make a formal complaint if they are dissatisfied with the processes or services of the University.

The Office of Student Ombudsman was first established in 2002 and this is the 13th annual report from this office. Since the beginning of 2014, the position of Student Ombudsman has been held by Dr Geoff Page who works on 0.6FTE arrangement in this role. For most of 2014, Sandra Ciaramella worked on a part time basis as project officer in the Ombudsman's Office whilst carrying out her normal duties within Chancellery. The Ombudsman's Office is physically open for approximately 20 hours per week, which is less than previous years, but as most students prefer to make contact via phone or email, the Ombudsman picks up cases outside office opening hours ensuring that the service provision to the University community is maintained.

As per University protocols, the Student Ombudsman has the authority to investigate complaints where either proper procedure has not been adhered to, or where despite following established procedures, the student is still dissatisfied with the outcome. The Student Ombudsman plays an important role in addressing these time consuming matters at an early stage, and where possible channels these cases to local areas before they become a major issue. The role of the Ombudsman does not exist to advocate for an individual student, but rather it adds value to the University by providing a specialist area which aims to ensure that University processes are implemented fairly and improved where necessary.

The purpose of the Ombudsman's Office is to provide students with an independent and confidential avenue to pursue their complaints when they have been unable to receive a satisfactory solution to their issue. The Ombudsman's Office has also played an important role in advising students on how, and with whom, to pursue their complaint or concern in accordance with University policies. Most of the issues handled by the Student Ombudsman are not complaints of unfair treatment, but rather requests for help in resolving a situation where a student continues to be dissatisfied (despite multiple requests) when seeking a reasonable or timely response. Therefore the Student Ombudsman's Office contributes to the overall quality and experience of students whilst they study at UniSA.

This report provides an annual activity update to University Council, as required under the Student Ombudsman's protocol.



ACTIVITIES – 2014

(a) Number of student contacts

In 2014, 135 students made contact with the Ombudsman’s Office and of these, 131 issues have been resolved and closed and 4 student cases are still open for further investigation. The majority of contacts with the Office were via email and phone.

The time taken to resolve and close the reported cases was variable based on the complexity and number of stakeholders involved in a particular situation. Out of the 135 student contacts, 70% (n=94) of enquiries/issues were resolved in less than 30 days, 12% (n=17) in 31-60 days, 4% (n=5) in 61-90 days, 11% (n=15) in more than 90 days 3% (n=4) are still ‘Open’ and in the process of being followed up.

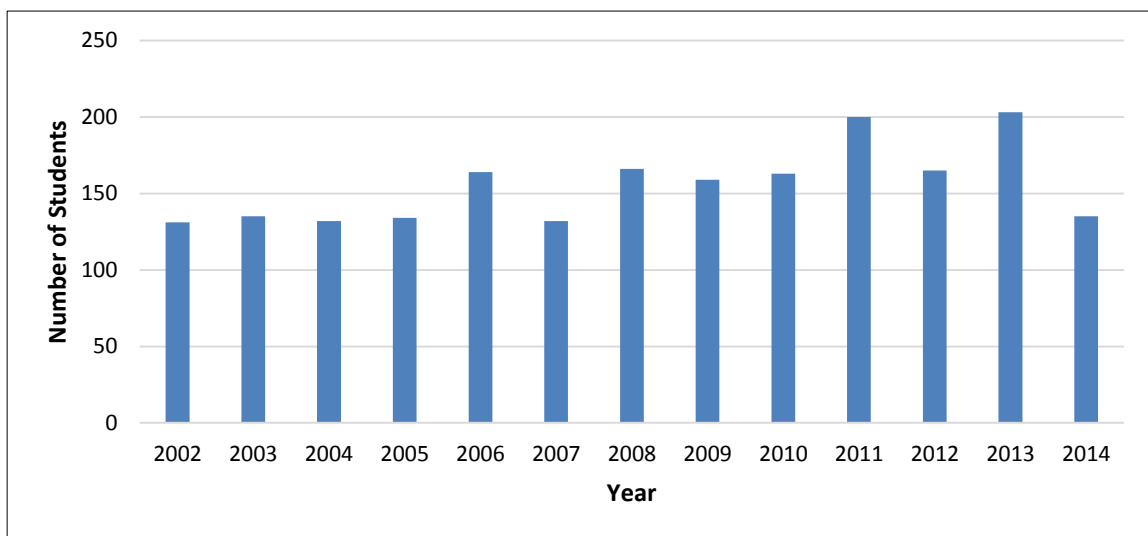


Figure 1: Number of student contacts in 2014

As highlighted in the introduction above, many students make contact with the Ombudsman’s Office simply to seek advice on matters such as, how to approach their problem; who they should talk to; how they can obtain assistance; what form they need; whether we think they have a genuine case etc. In 2014, out of 131 closed cases, 61% (n=80) student enquiries were advised and referred this way. In 34% (n=44) of cases, student concerns were followed up, or pursued, by the Ombudsman to seek clarification and more information in an attempt to resolve the problem and in the remaining 5% (n=7) of cases students were assisted in other ways.

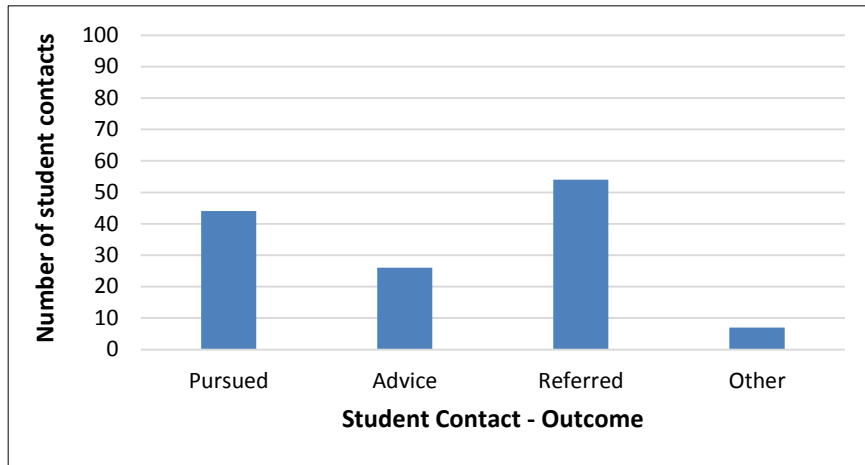


Figure 2: Outcome of student contacts in 2014

It is important to emphasise that not all the complaints investigated were justified. Some complaints were pursued and dismissed as unfounded, or the ‘problem’ laid in part on both sides. The common outcome was a compromise reached through negotiation on the issue. Consequently, it is not easy to categorise such complaints as either ‘with substance’ or ‘unfounded’ as most often they sit somewhere in between. Figure 3 below indicates the unit or division to which the student’s query or concern related and the outcome for each student contact.

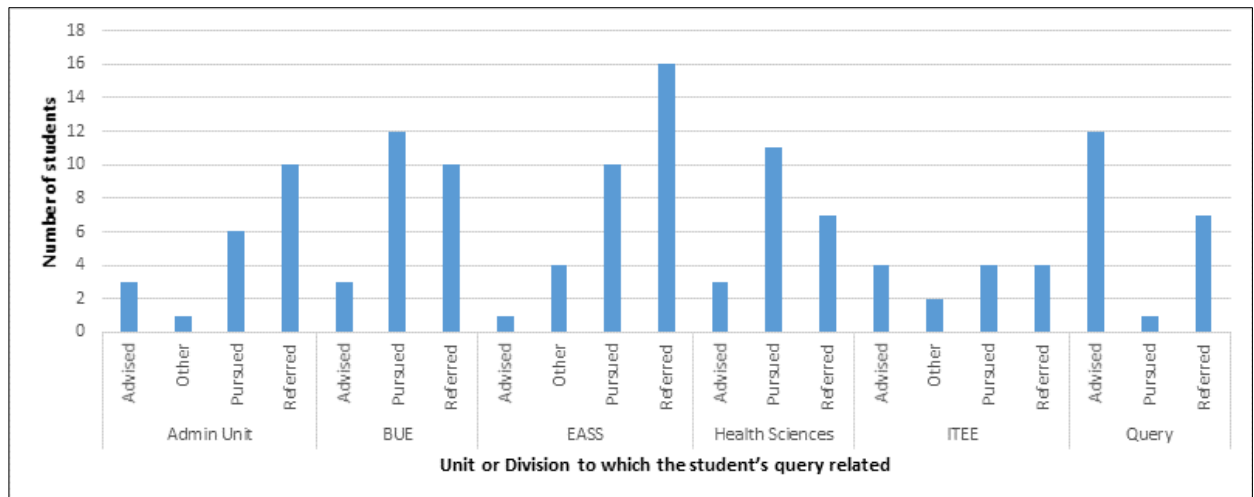


Figure 3: Unit or division to which the student’s query or concern related

(a) Type of students contacting the Office

In making a contact with the Ombudsman’s Office, students may request to record their identity as anonymous and choose not to provide their personal particulars. Out of the 135 contacts made by the students last year, 15 have been recorded as anonymous.

Following are the demographical details of the 120 students who chose to disclose their identity based on factors including their level of study at UniSA, enrolment type (domestic or international) and gender:



- 87 undergraduate, 33 postgraduate
- 97 domestic and 23 international
- 56 male and 64 female

(b) Category of problem or complaint

The contacts made with Ombudsman’s Office is broadly grouped into the following categories for the 120 students who disclosed their identity:

- *Academic Administration:* This category refers to situations when a student’s query is in regard to administrative matters relating to their Divisions or Schools and comprised 26% (n = 31) of total contacts in 2014.
- *Central Administration:* This category refers to situations when a student’s query is in regard to matters relating to central administrative matters and comprised 27% (n = 32) of total contacts in 2014.
- *For Information:* This category refers to situations when students, parents and others outside of the University contact the Ombudsman’s Office for general information about scholarships, programs, facilities etc. and comprised 2% (n = 2) of total contacts in 2014.
- *Staff Query:* This category refers to situations when University staff contact the Ombudsman’s Office comprised 3% (n = 4) of total contacts in 2014.
- *Student to Student:* This category refers to situations when a student’s query/complaint relates to another student and comprised 1% (n = 1) of total contacts in 2014.
- *Student Query:* This category refers to situations when students contact the Ombudsman’s Office to seek general advice on how to navigate a situation and comprised 9% (n = 11) of total contacts in 2014.
- *Teaching and Learning:* This category refers to situations when a student’s query relates to their assessment results and comprised 33% (n=39) of total contacts in 2014.

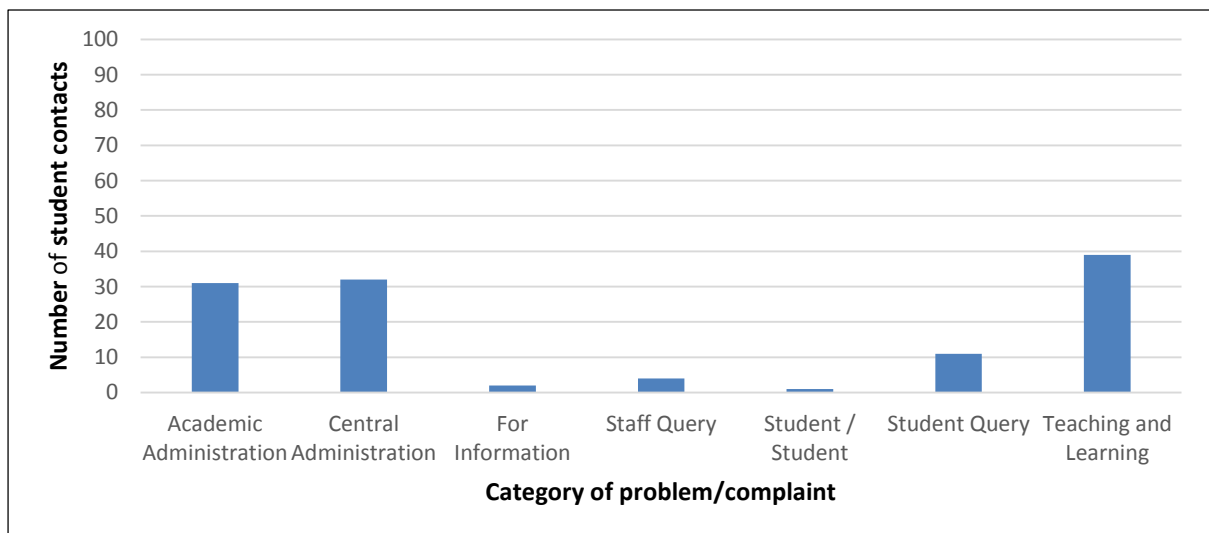


Figure 4: Category of problem or complaints reported



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The overall distribution of student complaints within these categories is relatively consistent with previous years except in the area of academic administration, where there has been a slight decline in the number of students contacting the office for advice or assistance. The category of Teaching and Learning has consistently made the bulk of numbers as it relates to all enquiries that relate to student's dissatisfaction with their academic results and grading of assessments.

OMBUDSMAN ADVISORY GROUP

The Ombudsman Advisory Group assists in resolving more complicated issues involving a number of stakeholders across the University. The Group also acts as a sounding board for the Ombudsman and provides an avenue to seek advice based on members' area of expertise.

The Advisory Group meets annually to undertake a yearly review, however meetings can also be convened on an ad hoc basis throughout the year. In 2014 the Ombudsman Advisory Group comprised the following staff members:

- Student Ombudsman (Dr Geoff Page)
- Director, Council Services (Dr Penny Moore)
- Academic Representation (Associate Professor Chris Provis)
- Director, Student and Academic Services or nominee (Mr Allan Tabor)
- Director, Human Resources or nominee (Ms Ruth Blenkiron)
- Deputy Director, Student Experience Team (Ms Anne-Marie Parsons)
- Manager: Graduate Research Student and Academic Services (Ms Kim Murphy)
- USASA Student Advisory officer (Luis Gardezabal).

The UniSA Student Association (USASA) Student Advocates also undertake a tremendously important role in supporting students. Approximately 50% of cases are referred to a USASA Student Advocate to assist students with such things as appeals, procedures, attendance at meetings with staff and advice as to what information is relevant when completing forms

ADMINISTRATIVE DEVELOPMENTS IN 2014

Late in 2014 the IT system being used by the Student Ombudsman's Office for daily administrative activities was found to be no longer 'fit for purpose' and the need for migration to a new system was identified. The Student Ombudsman's office worked in collaboration with ISTS to create a customised version of University's customer relationship management system (Sorella) which is now being used as a platform for recording student contacts and other administrative details. It is envisaged that the new system will offer enhanced functionality and greater efficiency in recording and retrieving student data which will also be helpful in bringing forward the timelines for the presentation of the Student Ombudsman report to the Council.

This new database is being piloted in 2015 and further enhancements will be incorporated throughout the year.



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SUMMARY

All genuine complaints were resolved successfully through consultation and discussion with staff and students.

Most of the students who remained generally dissatisfied had complaints about their academic assessment (which is not within the remit of the Office of the Student Ombudsman), issues with the expectations of placements or had mental health issues which contributed to their unresolved and/or ongoing problems.

Given the size of the University and diversity of its student population, the number of complaints needing investigation are relatively small in comparison to total number student contacts made with the Student Ombudsman Office. Where further investigation was needed and where a recommendation was made that was at odds with a previous decision, staff usually agreed to the outcome. The Office of the Student Ombudsman maintained positive and productive relationships with the academic and professional staff involved in these cases.

The total number of student contacts made in 2014 equates to 1 contact for approximately every 220 students. Based on the engagement of the Ombudsman's Office across the University, staff have genuinely worked to assist and accommodate the needs of our diverse student population on academic, administrative and pastoral matters.

The role of the Ombudsman Office has not focussed on 'dealing with complaints', but has instead assisted students to navigate through particular situations which in the majority of the cases has resulted in a satisfactory outcome for the student.