



**University of
South Australia**

**Office of the Student Ombud Report
2018**

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Executive Summary

This 17th annual report from the Student Ombud Office (the Office) outlines a summary of activities for the 2018 period and some priority areas identified for 2019. It is provided as the annual activity update to University Council, as required under the Student Ombud's protocol. Mr Franco Parrella was appointed as the new Student Ombud and formally commenced in the role on 2 January 2018.

The Office was first established within the University of South Australia in 2002. The intent behind the establishment of the role was (and remains) to provide students with an opportunity to raise concerns or make a formal complaint if they are dissatisfied with the processes or services of the University. The Student Ombud is effectively the last internal resort for students to approach when all other avenues available to resolve a problem have been exhausted.

The Office is open five days per week. As students still prefer to make contact via phone or email, the Student Ombud also monitors complaints received outside office opening hours to ensure service provision to the University community is maintained.

Role Reminder For members of Council who may be new to the role, the Student Ombud acts as the *Advocate for Fairness*, not for the individual student nor for the University. In that regard, the role has both a *responsive* and *proactive/educative* component. That is, to respond to and manage enquiries and complaints received, while also identifying key trends, with a view to reporting on any systemic barriers that negatively impact upon its students and making recommendations for improvements to the University. The Student Ombud service contributes to the overall quality of the student experience, particularly for those encountering difficulties whilst they study at UniSA.

In addition to the *responsive* aspect of the role, during 2018 there has been a greater emphasis placed on the *proactive/educative* component of the role. This in practice has resulted in more recommendations made by the Office for practice improvements and/or policy and procedural changes, presentations to senior staff across the University and closer working relations with the UniSA Student Association (USASA).

The Office provides students with an independent and confidential avenue to pursue their enquiries and/or complaints when they have been unable to receive a satisfactory explanation for a decision and/or resolution of their issue. The Student Ombud advises students on how, and with whom to pursue their concerns or complaints in accordance with University policies. The Student Ombud 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 Ombud can also play an important role in addressing these matters at an early stage and where possible, refers these cases to local areas before they escalate. As the designated, neutral, dispute resolution specialist, the Student Ombud aims to resolve complaints where possible while ensuring that University processes are interpreted and implemented fairly and improved where necessary.

Key initiatives and highlights for 2018 have included the re-convening and review of purpose and membership of the Student Ombud Advisory Group (first since 2014); provision of written assessments on complaint matters to students; implementation of a Student Ombud Service Feedback Survey for students; improvements to the Student Ombud website including online forms; improved relationships with external agencies of review for students, namely the Office for the Training Advocate and Ombudsman SA; enhancements to the (Sorella) reporting system and the development of a 'systemic issues log' and recommendations for practice, policy and/or procedural improvements across the University, some of which are included in this report.

2018 Activities

Synopsis of matters brought to the Student Ombud Office

This section provides a summary of 2018 activities undertaken by the Student Ombud Office and includes some detail about the number of student contacts and the types of complaints or problems raised.

(a) Number of student contacts

A total of 130 students contacted the Student Ombud's Office in 2018. The graph below maps the total number of students who have contacted the Office of the Student Ombud since 2014 (the last 5 years).

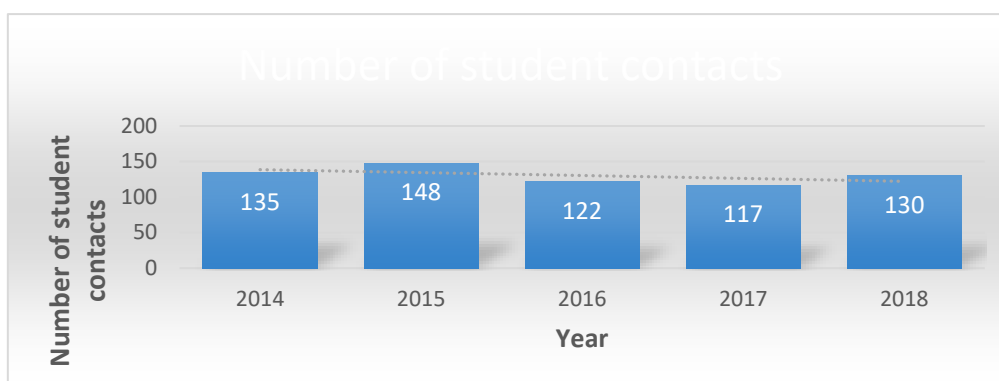


Figure 1: Number of student contacts in 2018

While the number of matters handled by the Student Ombud increased slightly from the last two years, it is important to reiterate, they should **not** be interpreted as the total number of student complaints raised within the University. Rather, they provide an indication of the number of complaints that have filtered their way through to the Student Ombud office that have not been resolved through the local processes. Tracking the total number of student complaints raised across the University remains an ongoing challenge for the University.

The time taken to resolve and close the reported cases varied, based on the complexity and number of stakeholders involved. Out of the 130 contacts, 23% (n=30) of issues were resolved in less than 30 days; 47% (n=61) within 31-60 days; 21% (n=27) within days; 4% (n= 5) in more than 90 days; and 5% (n=7) are still 'Open'.

Many students contact the Student Ombud to seek advice on matters such as how to raise and/or approach the presenting problem; whom they should talk to; how they can obtain assistance; what form they need; or discuss whether the Student Ombud thinks they have a genuine case to pursue.

(b) Contacts or Complaints

While the term **contacts** is used in summative form, students who approach the Student Ombud are from their perspective raising a complaint about a decision, action, process or alleged behaviours or performance of staff. However, one part of the Student Ombud's role is to assist students understand whether they have legitimate appeals mechanisms still available and what the next steps of the complaint process involve.

As of the 31 December 2018, 7 cases remained 'Open' for further investigation by the Student Ombud.

(c) **Type of students contacting the office**

The demographic details of the 130 students, can be broken down as follows:

- 124 undergraduate, 4 postgraduates, and 2 'other' enrolment types (including Foundation Studies and partner institution enrolments).
- 88 domestic and 42 international students.

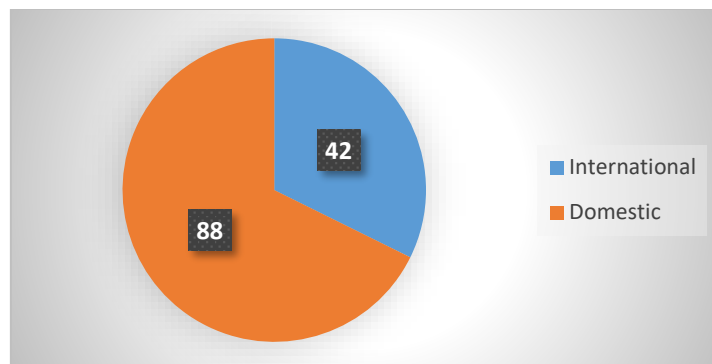


Figure 2: Number of student contacts by residency 2018

(d) **Categories of complaints**

Previous annual reports have referred to **categories** such as Academic Administration, Central Administration, Student Query, Student to student, Teaching and Learning.

While the same categories have been recorded on the Sorella System during 2018, greater emphasis has been placed on reviewing these descriptors to more accurately reflect the type of issues raised with the Student Ombud and the 'true' resultant outcomes.

Academic Administration includes matters that relate to credit, supplementary exam considerations, timetabling, practicum allocations, decisions made by professional staff, School based decisions. **Teaching and Learning** includes matters such as decisions made by academic staff assessments, remarks, grades, exams, supervision, extensions, problems experienced on practicum/placements and associated administrative arrangements surrounding these. **Central Administration** mostly, but not solely includes matters such as Enrolment, Fees and Finance. **Staff Query** refers to situations when staff contact the Student Ombud to seek general advice on how to navigate a situation. **Student to Student** refers to situations when a student's query/complaint relates to another student.

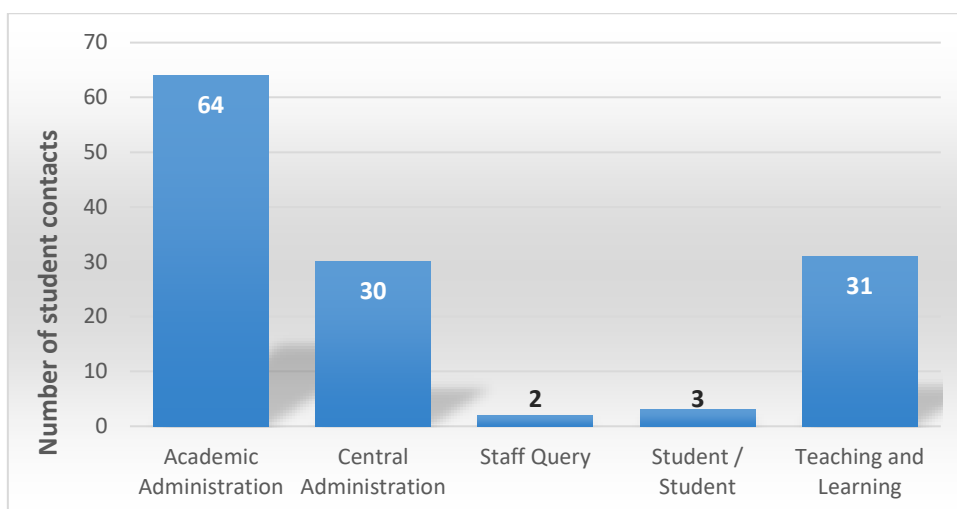


Figure 3: Category of complaints raised 2018

Within the major categories outlined above there are at times, difficulties experienced by students that I refer to as **‘people to people problems’** (or interpersonal difficulties and/or conflict situations or matters where allegations of harassment or discrimination are made) and **‘Placement Problems’** (complaint about time taken to find the, quality of supervisors, particular problems experienced whilst on placement). Technically, these have remained within the Academic Administration or Teaching and Learning categories. However, when delivering presentations across the University I have chosen to separate them out given the unique nature of these types of difficulties that have been brought to my attention throughout 2018.

One of the key new initiatives during 2018 was to ensure students received a written assessment from the Student Ombud outlining the methodology used and the rationale for whether the University has followed its policies reasonably and/or whether there is scope for a conciliated outcome (change in University position) and/or whether a recommendation would be made to a policy or practice improvement as a result of their complaint.

(e) Outcomes

Previous annual reports have referred to outcomes such as *Advice/Advice provided, pursued (and closed) or Referred* by the Student Ombud. A review of the outcome categories was undertaken during 2018. The aim here was to more accurately describe the ‘true’ nature of the result of bringing a matter to the Student Ombud office. In short, the categories summarized in the **Figure 4 below** include the following:

- Conciliated (matters resolved through negotiation and/or change in University’s position and/or specific recommendations made by the Student Ombud)
- UniSA processes followed reasonably (Student Ombud’s assessment indicates University policies were followed reasonably and may or may not include recommendations for improvements to practices);
- Student to Pursue (Matter pursued/resolved by student themselves internally or externally)
- Lost Contact (student did not continue with follow up through Student Ombud Office)

Twelve matters resulted in specific recommendations made by the Student Ombud for improvements to either practice, policy and or procedures during 2018.

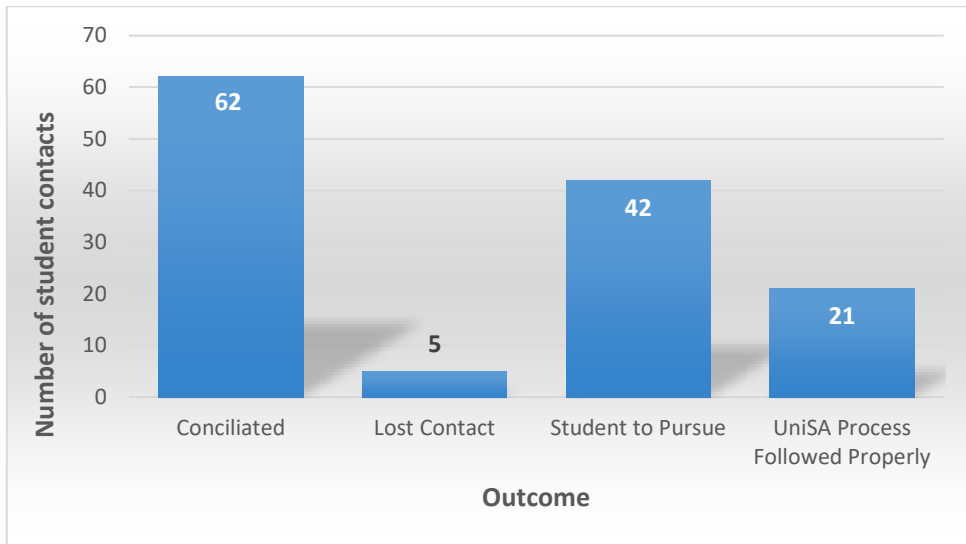


Figure 4: Outcome of student contacts in 2018

Figure 5 (below) indicates the Unit or Division to which students' queries or concerns relate and provides a breakdown of the outcomes for each of these areas.

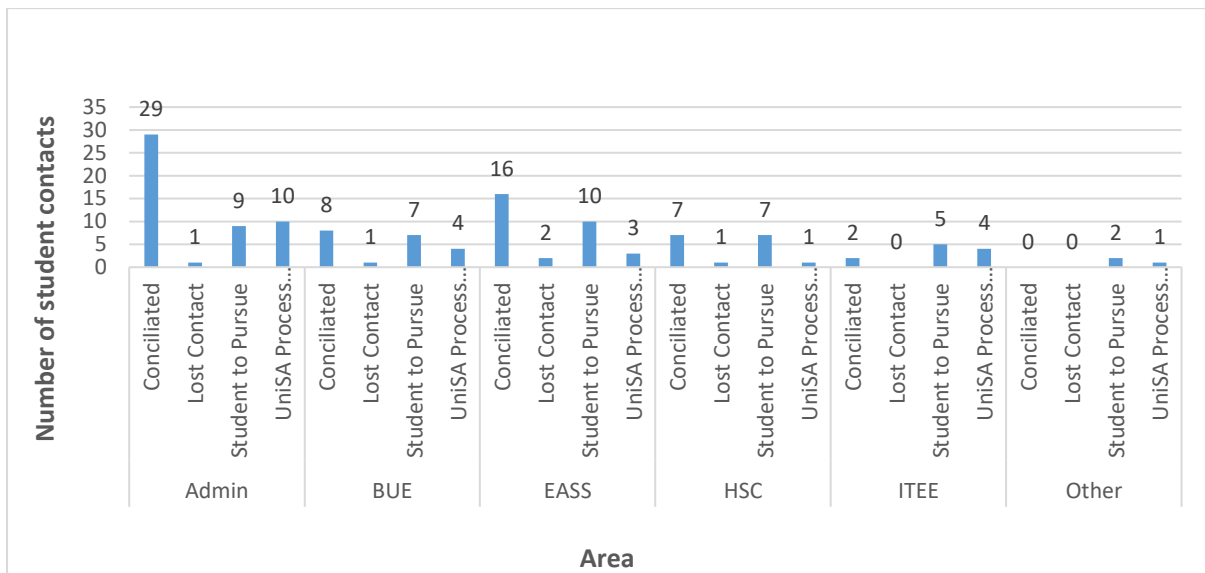


Figure 5: Outcome of student contacts by Unit or Division

Key themes, observations and trends

While the nature of concerns raised with the Student Ombud have been summarised above there are some consistent themes that emerge that continue to pose challenges for students and the University as outlined below.

Problems experienced with or on Placements or Work Integrated Learning (WIL)

There are various types of challenges a student may experience while on placement or a WIL experience. These might relate to time delays experienced in finding suitable placements; poor communication with the student during these delays; concerns about lack of support, feedback or supervision either from the placement provider supervisor or relevant University staff member or how

'incidents' including alleged harassment or discrimination are managed if they occur during a placement.

There have been examples where students have claimed they have raised concerns regarding alleged harassment experienced while on placement, reported these to both the host agency and within the University and have not been provided with feedback on whether these matters have indeed been investigated (at all) nor the outcome. In the examples examined by the Student Ombud throughout 2018 the most common 'outcome' where these incidents have occurred has been to move the student and provide them with a commitment that another placement will be found as soon as possible. These have all then resulted in long waiting periods for the student until the subsequent placement can be found.

The concern from the Student Ombud perspective is twofold. Firstly, the impact on the student at the time, including a longer waiting period to complete their course requirements and degrees and secondly, the systemic risk that may arise in continuing to place students with 'known difficult mentors or supervisors' in future.

There are of course complexities associated with some of the incidents/situations that arise on placement. Some of these can include difficulties with the supervisor/student relationship itself; whether the student is receiving and/or accepting the feedback; the student's performance on placement where it may be affected by medical illness, personal circumstances, personality clashes or indeed suitability.

The Student Ombud has recommended to the relevant Schools and placement organisers that greater consistency in approach be developed regarding how these matters will be assessed/investigated in future. The Student Ombud will be requesting a documented evidentiary trail be provided from the University demonstrating how it has assessed or investigated concerns or allegations regarding alleged harassment while on placement, should they be raised by a student in future. This specifically relates to the procedural fairness aspects as outlined in the University's Student Complaints Resolution policy.

Fitness to Practice (FTP)

This is an ongoing and sensitive issue to address. This may relate to both a short-term decision regarding fitness to undertake a placement or a WIL experience and of course the possible longer-term assessment regarding whether a student has the capacity and/or indeed is fit enough to practice in their chosen area of study and practice. For many professions i.e. Nursing, Midwifery, Teaching, Psychology, Social Work, this is also closely related to existing external legal and/or screening requirements, professional codes, requirements to be registered to practice and safety of the public.

A recommendation raised by the Student Ombud to the WIL Working group in 2018 was to ensure the University consider the benefits of developing a consistent policy position whereby the assessment regarding FTP is undertaken where possible, prior to accepting students in certain programs.

A clearer position on (involuntary) Medical Leave for students

There are times when a student's complaint is related to action(s) taken by the University out of concern for a student's health and wellbeing and ability to study. This is sometimes observed through inappropriate behaviour/conduct, inability to keep up with study, regular leave of absences and/or an unwillingness or non-preparedness to consider whether an underlying psychological health issue may be a significant cause of the difficulty.

A recommendation raised by the Student Ombud in 2018 to Student Academic Services (SAS) was to explore the benefits of developing a clearer policy position on this topic. One possibility might be to

provide an option to include a managed return to study for students with a serious health condition that might negatively affect their capacity to study or undertake a WIL or cause or contribute to behaviour which risks harm to self or others or otherwise disrupts the business or activities of the University. The Student Ombud has undertaken some research into similar initiatives developed within other Australian universities and made these available to the University's policy team for consideration.

University Timelines for (School led) Formal Inquiries (Academic Integrity) and Student Appeals Committee (SAC)

Most 'student relevant' University policies or procedures such as Assessment Policies and Procedures Manual (APPM) provide specificity regarding timelines placed on students to raise concerns and for the University to make their decision(s) known to the student. However, with regards to these two processes, there is **no specified timeline** regarding how long the University can take to **convene** the relevant committees. This has resulted in significant delays in the outcome being known to the student. For example, while the student may continue to study while the SAC convenes, it can result in lengthy periods of uncertainty (6 – 12 months) for the student.

A suggestion was made by the Student Ombud and accepted by the SAC Project Officer during 2018 to schedule set dates throughout 2018 to provide greater certainty.

The need for better University wide record management systems for tracking and monitoring of student complaints

As outlined above the number of students who eventually access the Student Ombud services represent only a small percentage of total complaints raised by students across the University. While improvements have been made to the University's Student Feedback and Complaints website, it remains a challenge to quantify the total number of complaints raised by students particularly as complaints are also raised and handled internally within schools and units. Any improvements that can be made in this area by the University when considering a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system would be welcomed by the Student Ombud.

Recommendations made for practice, policy or procedural improvements

As outlined above, the approach undertaken throughout 2018 has been to increase the focus on proactive/educative aspects of the Student Ombud role and to highlight areas where improvements can be made for students. To that end, the Student Ombud has developed and maintained a 'log of systemic issues/recommendations for improvements' throughout 2018. While more information is available upon request, the areas in which recommendations have been made included the following.

- Interpretation and Application of Leave provisions for PhD Scholarship recipients
- Placements – Review of Work Integrated Learning
- Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault Guidelines Feedback
- Student Complaints Resolution Procedure and Student Ombud Role
- Practice of awarding Fail to Assessments when wrong assignment document is uploaded
- Communications on supervision and academic matters between staff and students
- Timelines regarding convening Internal Formal Inquiry Student Appeals Committees
- Notification Letters (Academic Review Letters)
- Insurance coverage for Students on placement
- Feedback on Student Recording of learning activities Policy
- Feedback on Enrolment and Fees and Finance A-47 and A-48

- Feedback on APPM
- Fees for students on semester exchanges
- Two Year Rule reminder email or text

Case Studies for 2018

Appendix 1. includes a summary of several case studies to provide the University with some examples of the types of matters raised the approach undertaken by the Student Ombud and the outcomes reached. More are available on request.

Student Ombud Advisory Group

The Student Ombud convened the Student Ombud Advisory Group (SOAG) on the 26 March 2018. It was the first time SOAG had met since 2014. SOAG was originally established to assist with resolving more complicated issues involving multiple stakeholders across the University. The Group was intended to act as a sounding board for the Student Ombud and to provide an avenue to seek advice based on members' area of expertise. SOAG was comprised of the following staff members:

Dr Geoff Page (until 31/12/17)	Student Ombud
Dr Penny Moore	Director: Council Services
Mr Allan Tabor (or nominee)	Director: Student and Academic Services
Ms Jane Booth (or nominee)	Executive Director: People, Talent and Culture
Mr Brendan Hughes	Director: Student Engagement Unit
Professor Pat Buckley	Dean: Graduate Studies
Mr Luis Gardezabal	USASA Student Advisory Officer

Historical Terms of Reference for SOAG

Historically, SOAG met at the discretion of the previous Student Ombud with the following purpose;

- to act as a sounding board for the Student Ombud
- to assist with resolving more complicated issues involving multiple stakeholders across the University
- provide specialist advice on matters pertaining to student complaints and grievances including those of harassment and unlawful discrimination
- provide an avenue to seek advice based on members' area of expertise.

SOAG met to discuss the Student Ombud's key messages regarding the role, his observations based on complaints received, emerging issues and potential challenge areas and to review its Terms of Reference (TOR) and membership. The consensus was that the SOAG be disbanded in its present form and that the Student Ombud continue;

- to avail himself of the expertise available within the University as needed, as well as interstate counterparts in the same or similar positions,
- with providing presentations and updates to Heads of Schools, Program Directors et al
- to look at the best means of providing more regular Student Ombud updates on matters, trends and outcomes to a wider audience than may currently be the case.

Regional visits to UniSA campus

The Student Ombud visited both Whyalla and Mt Gambier campuses to meet with Regional Managers, Student Engagement leaders, students and staff in August 2018. The purpose of the visits was to meet

with students and staff and to provide a reminder on the Student Ombud role, share some early observations, listen to issues raised by students and staff that impact on the student experience and promote the Student Ombud's services. The visits took place on the 1st and 14th August 2018 and were positively received by both students and staff.

UniSA Student Association

Relationships between the UniSA Student Association (USASA) and the Student Ombud have been further strengthened during 2018. Collaboration between the areas has increased with regular meetings and sharing of information regarding the best strategies to improve a student's chance of success in raising and articulating their concern or complaint. Where appropriate, cases are referred to a USASA Student Advocate to provide advice and assist students with such things as appeals, procedures, and attendance at meetings with staff. USASA continued to provide valuable feedback throughout the year, on behalf of our students, which was used to improve the quality of the service provided. Specifically, the focus of improvement and collaboration has been to call on USASA Advocate's help in assisting a student to organize/structure their case or argument, thereby allowing the Student Ombud to make a more informed assessment of what may or may not be a policy or procedural breach.

Student Ombud Service Feedback

During 2018, the Student Ombud developed and implemented a post service feedback survey for students. The survey is comprised of 6 questions that provide some feedback on the nature of the service provided and the level of satisfaction or otherwise with it. This is the first time the Student Ombud Office has actively sought feedback from students themselves. A response rate of 46% was achieved with the results very pleasing. The results are summarised in **Appendix 2**.

Student Ombud submission on proposed merger of University of South Australia and University of Adelaide

A submission was provided to the NOUS consultancy group on the 23rd August 2018.

Interstate collaboration and networking

The Student Ombud attended the Australian University Grievance and Complaint (AUGC) Conference held in Brisbane in September 2018. The conference, held annually, brings together Student Ombuds, Deans of Students, and other relevant complaint handlers to share perspectives and experiences on managing student complaints within the higher education sector. Given the independent (at arm's length) nature of the Student Ombud role, and it being the first year in the role, the conference provided an excellent avenue to establish relationships and share ideas on best practice, policy improvements and approaches used by the different universities across the country.

Administrative Matters

Records Management

The University's Customer Relationship Management System (Sorella) has now been used throughout 2016 to 2018 to record details of student contacts. Sorella provides a central storage area for Student Ombud Office matters and information entered into Sorella is used to prepare this report. The Student Ombud has continued to raise and discuss with ISTS potential adjustments and improvements to enhance the efficiency of recording and retrieving information for reporting purposes.

Some of the main areas that would assist for future reporting include greater flexibility to

- more easily draw reports from different areas of the data base
- track the last contact made with students.
- more accurately record the outcomes following Student Ombud intervention. At present, to formally close a file, the 'resolution status' filed automatically defaults to 'successful resolution'. This is not always the case.
- report on matter that have led to recommendations for practice, policy or procedural change or education initiatives.
- record enquiries received from staff seeking advice from the Student Ombud. At present, the data base is all 'student ID' led which means it is not easy to maintain records of staff led initiatives to proactively address student concerns.

Focus Areas for 2019

The following activities have been identified as key priorities for the Student Ombud in 2019.

- Extending the Student Ombud Service Feedback to staff
- Closer monitoring of recommendations accepted or otherwise by the University
- Assistance with University led training for academic staff on managing student complaints
- Identify opportunities for further improvements to resolving problems for students whilst on placements/Work Integrated Learning
- Identify better means of explaining/delineating between Appeals and Complaint pathways for students

Summary

The focus of the Student Ombud has historically been on obtaining a resolution to a problem that both the student and University can work with, rather than focusing on and trying to lay blame.

The year has been one focused on trying to achieve greater balance between the **responsive** and **proactive** aspects of the role. The approach undertaken has been one of (hopefully) respectfully 'raising/saying what needs to be said' in relation to both preventing and/or addressing problems when they arise. By formally raising recommendations for improvements to practice and/or policy the Student Ombud aims to contribute positively the student experience within the University. The Student Ombud wishes to thank both students and staff for their assistance in working with him resolve matters through consultation and discussion wherever possible.

A small number of cases could not be pursued as they related to former students or graduates and 7 matters remained active as at the end of 2018.

Appendix 1: Student Ombud Case Studies for 2018

(To disguise the identity of students, pronouns 'them' / 'their' are used instead of 'his' / 'her'.)

CASE STUDY 1: Policy interpretation error – University addresses current and historical implications

Case Study: A student complained that the University was incorrectly interpreting certain terms and conditions for PhD Scholarship students. The student attempted to raise and resolve the matter internally within the School and the administrative unit but was consistently told that the University was interpreting its own policy and the associated Commonwealth guidelines correctly. The student was particularly offended with this response and proceeded to provide documentary evidence to support their assertion that the University had indeed been misinterpreting the relevant provision for a significant period. The student's concerns focused not only on their own circumstance but raised the risk that other students in similar circumstances were being disadvantaged because of the University's error.

Steps taken: The Student Ombud formally outlined his assessment to senior management within the University. The assessment of the matter was based on the documentary evidence at hand and emphasised the risks to the University's reputation in not conciliating the matter. The Student Ombud assisted with brokering a conciliated outcome between the student and the University.

Outcome: Following negotiations with relevant senior managers within the University, the student received an apology from the University, reinstatement of the 'lost days' of leave and some recompense for the distress this had caused. The University also agreed to undertake an independent review and audit of the relevant policies. The relevant amendments to policy were put in place and other students who may have been impacted by the previous policy interpretation were advised of the corrections made. The student was very appreciative of the outcome and the University's efforts to resolve the matter in good faith.

CASE STUDY 2: Transition v transfer of program - University corrects error

Case Study: An international student complained that they had been transitioned from one program to another because of the University's review of programs. The student then received a letter informing them their fees had increased and that the course was no longer aligned to the program they had initially enrolled in. The potential impact was that their international fees were now going to be substantially higher than were reflected in their original contract agreement with the University.

Steps taken: The Student Ombud approached the School and Student Finance to discuss the matter. Subsequent investigations revealed the student had been transitioned into the new program as opposed to voluntarily transferring into the program. Given it was a 'University led' transition, there should have been no negative impact on the student's fees.

Outcome: The University agreed to rectify the situation and informed the student that there would be no negative consequence. That is, that their fees would remain the same. The student was happy with the outcome.

CASE STUDY 3: Withdrawing on time - A systems glitch

Case Study: A Student complained that they had incurred an outstanding debt as they did not withdraw before census date in the previous year. The student maintained they thought they had done so, as they had correctly withdrawn from one course and thought they had also correctly withdrawn from another course at the same time. However, this was not reflected in an audit of the University's system. The student had since transferred to an interstate university to continue their studies.

Steps taken: The Student Ombud approached Student Finance to re-examine the chronology of contact made by the student at the time they claimed they had withdrawn from their studies. Agreement was reached whereby the University agreed to reconsider its position if the student was able to demonstrate they had enrolled and been accepted into the other University's program prior to census date.

Outcome: The Student was indeed able to demonstrate they had been accepted by the interstate university prior to census date. The University accepted the student had made a mistake when withdrawing. The student had withdrawn from one course but not the other. The student's record of enrolment and fees were removed. The student was very satisfied with outcome which resulted in removal of debt in the order of over \$1500. This case, as well as other similar cases has resulted in the Student Ombud making recommendations for improvements to electronic confirmation of withdrawals for students, rather than the onus always being on the student to check they have withdrawn on time.

Case Study 4: HECS debt removed

Case Study: An ex-student contacted the Student Ombud after receiving notice from the Australian Taxation Office (ATO) of a HECS debt. The student had withdrawn from their studies with the University 3 years prior but had withdrawn post census date. The student claimed they had been advised by staff within the University at the time that they would not incur fees. However, they were unable to provide any documentary evidence to support their assertion.

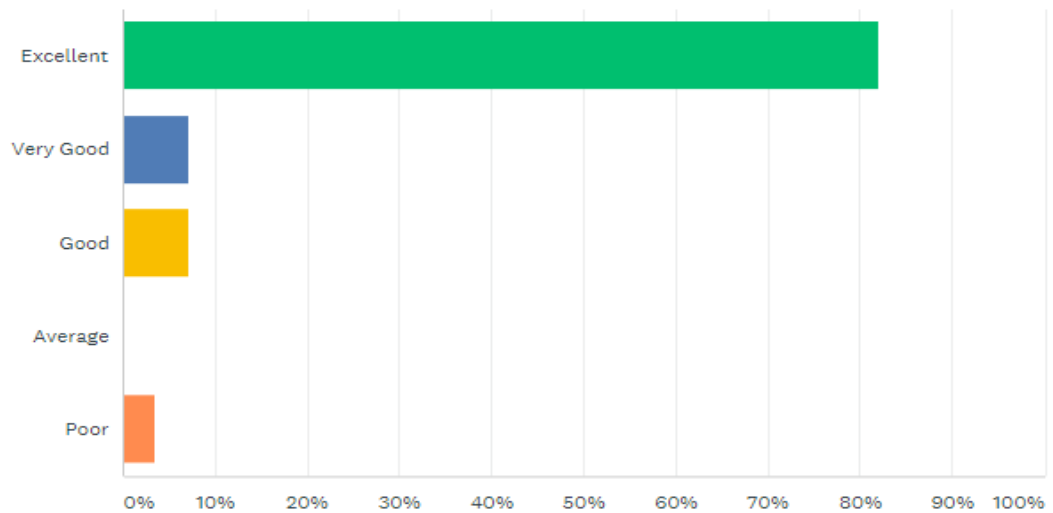
Steps taken: The Student Ombud encouraged the ex-student to outline their rationale and reasons as to why they believed they had withdrawn in time and to provide any other relevant documentary evidence to support their position. The Student Ombud contacted Student Finance to encourage them to seek some further explanation from the student.

Outcome: The University agreed to remove the ex-student's record and associated fees as the student was able to demonstrate they had commenced in employment at the time of withdrawing from their studies. The ex-student was very satisfied with the outcome.

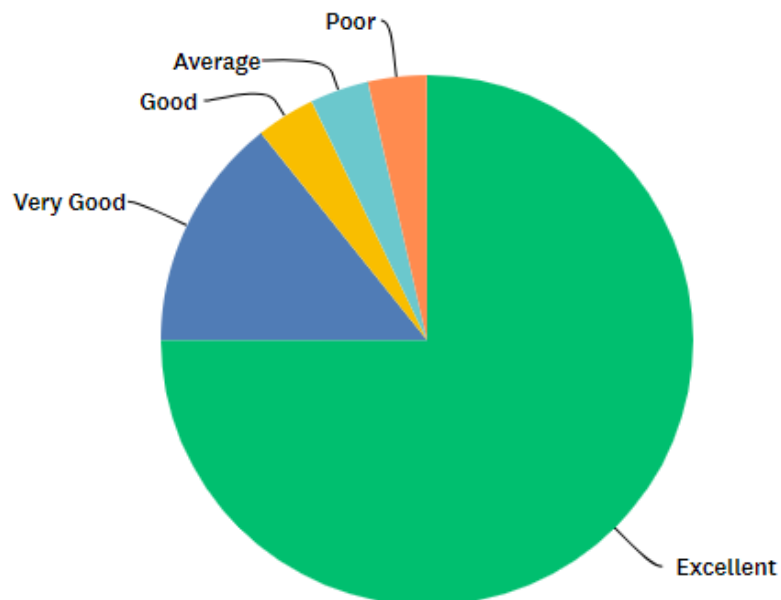
Appendix 2: Student Ombud Service Feedback Results

Note: 46% Response Rate

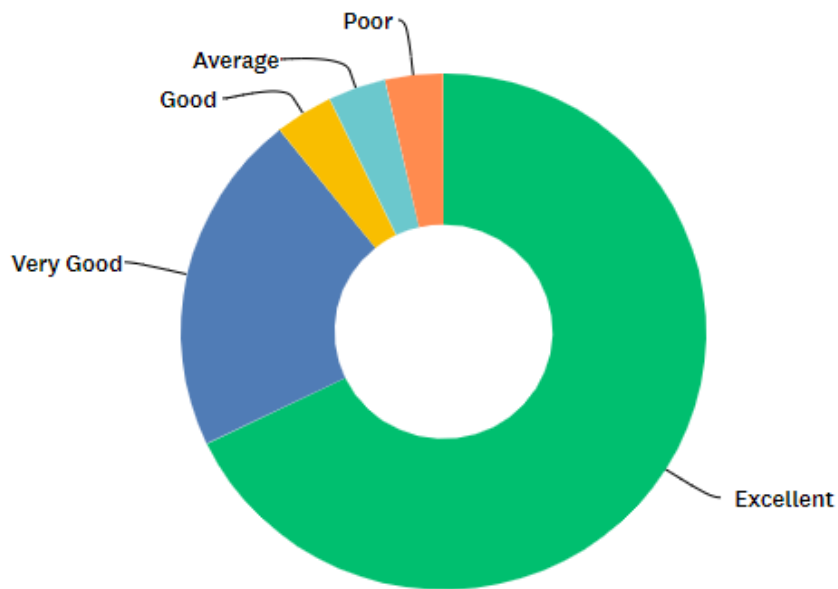
1. The Student Ombud Office tries to respond to your enquiry within 24 hours. How would you rate the response time from the Office with regards to your communications?



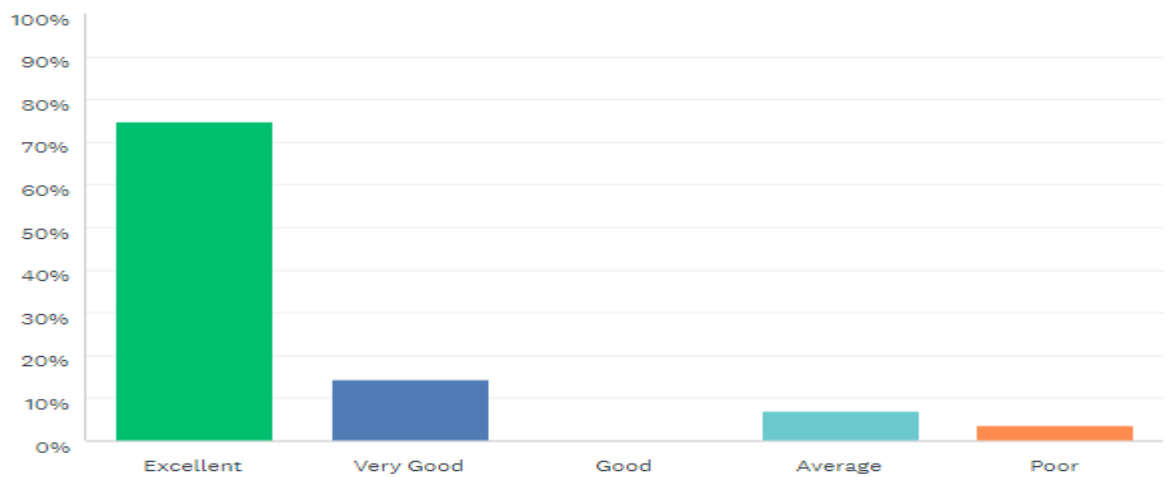
2. How clear was the Student Ombud's explanation of their role and possible options available to you?



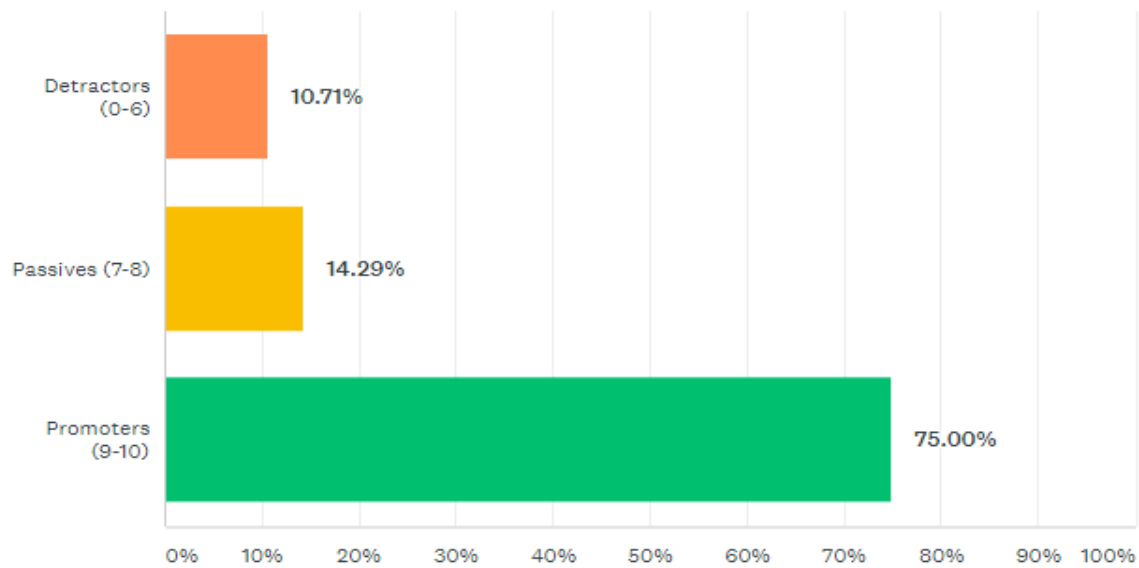
3. Whether you agreed or not with the outcome, how clear was the Student Ombud's assessment of your matter?



4. Overall, how would you rate the quality of your customer service experience with the Student Ombud?



5. How likely is it that you would recommend the Student Ombud service to a friend or colleague?



6. Do you have any other comments you would like to make about your experience with the Student Ombud Office?

All feedback comments obtained through the feedback survey can be made available upon request. For brevity, however, the feedback comments emphasised the students' high level of satisfaction with the timeliness, courtesy and professionalism of the Student Ombud's approach. Students were particularly appreciative of the time taken to listen to their concerns, the clarity with which the Student Ombud role and available options was explained and the willingness on the part of the Student Ombud to attempt to find resolution to matters at hand. The high level of customer service satisfaction was also reflected in comments such as the willingness to follow up with students and check on their status.