



**University of  
South Australia**

# **Office of the Student Ombud Report 2019**

## 1. Introduction

The Student Ombud continues 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 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.

As the designated, neutral, dispute resolution specialist, the Student Ombud aims to resolve complaints where possible while ensuring University processes are interpreted and implemented fairly and improved where necessary. The Office provides students with an independent and confidential avenue to pursue their 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.

In addition to the *responsive* aspect of the role, there continues to be greater emphasis placed on the *proactive/educative* component of the role and, where appropriate, providing recommendations around practice improvements and/or policy and procedural changes.

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

## 2. Student Ombud 2019 Activities

This section provides a summary of 2019 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 141 students raised complaints through the Student Ombud's Office in 2019.

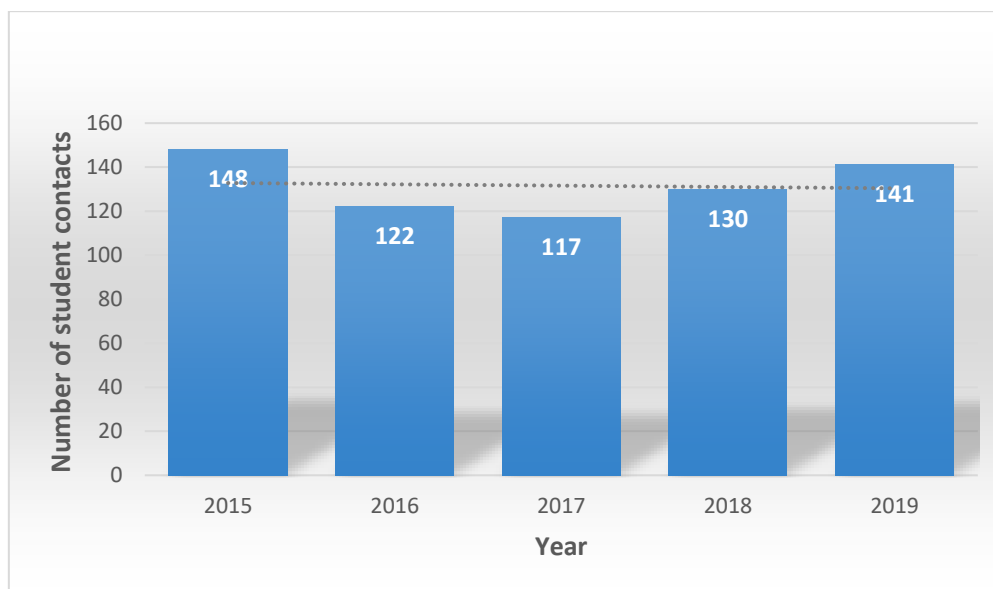


Figure 1: Number of student contacts since 2015 (the last 5 years)

The time taken to resolve and close the reported cases varied, based on the complexity and number of stakeholders involved. Out of the 141 contacts, 44% (n=63) of issues were resolved in less than 30 days; 33% (n=46) within 31-60 days; 13% (n=19) within days; 6% (n= 8) in more than 90 days; and 4% (n=5) were still 'Open'.

### (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 inappropriate behaviour 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 to them and what the next procedural steps involve. As of the 31 December 2019, 5 cases remained 'Open' for further investigation by the Student Ombud.

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

The demographic details of the 141 students, with a 2018 comparison provided in brackets, can be broken down as follows:

- 104 (124 in 2018) undergraduate, 14 (4 in 2018) postgraduates, and 23 (2 in 2018) 'other' enrolment types (including OUA, Foundation Studies, Short Programs and partner institution enrolments).
- 102 domestic and 39 international students.

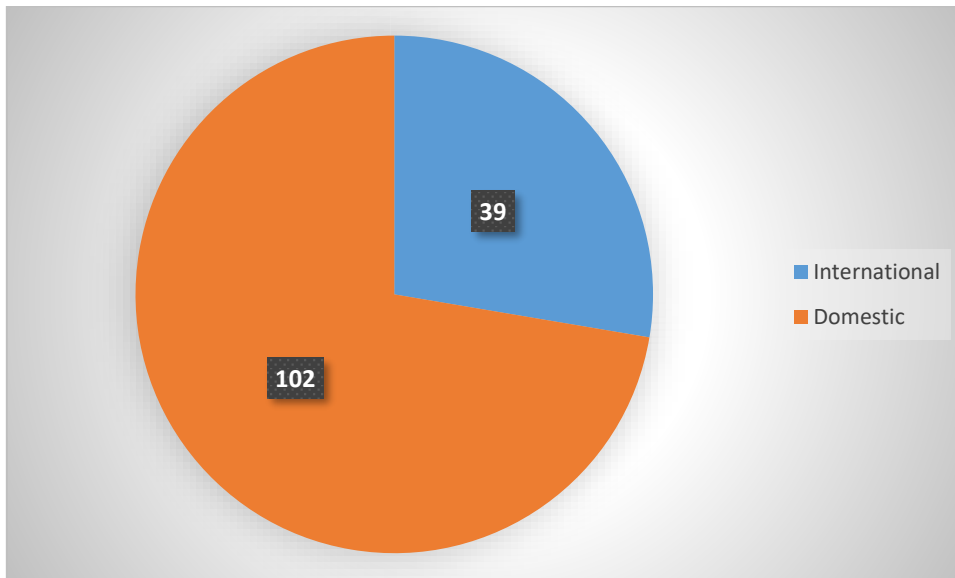


Figure 2: Number of student contacts by residency 2019

(d) Categories of complaints

- **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 includes matters such as Enrolment, Fees and Finance.
- **Staff Query:** includes situations when staff contact the Student Ombud to seek general advice on how to navigate a situation.
- **Student to Student:** includes situations when a student's query/complaint relates to another student.

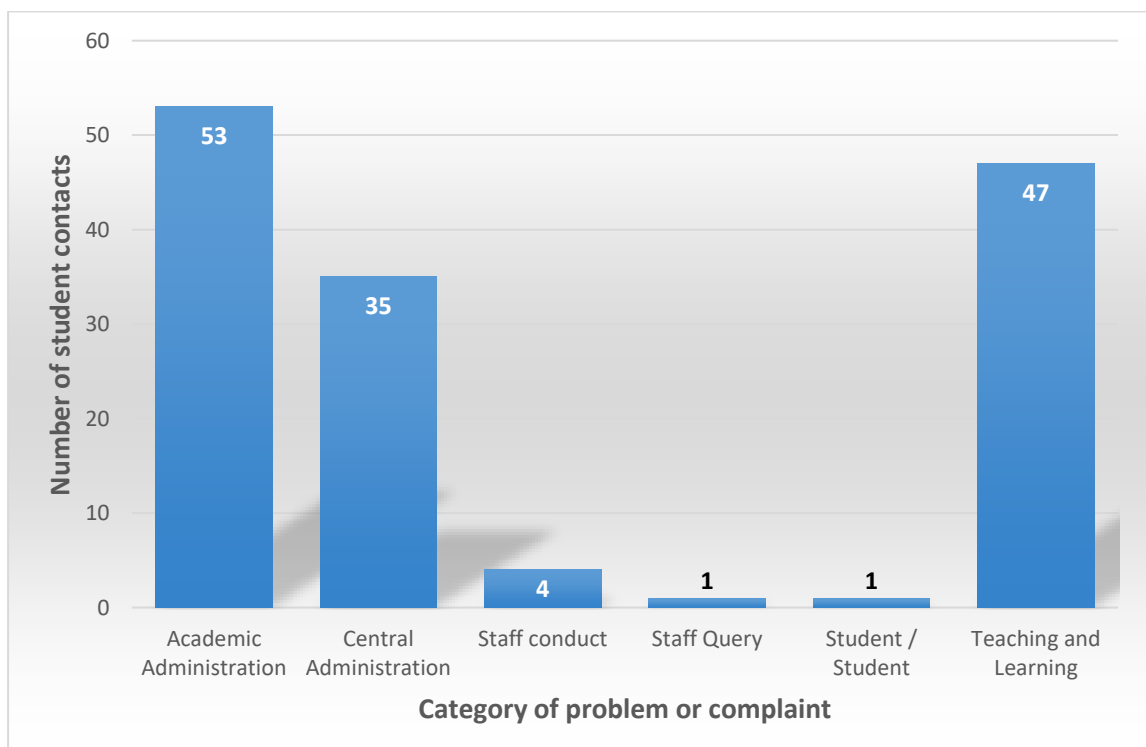


Figure 3: Category of complaints raised 2019

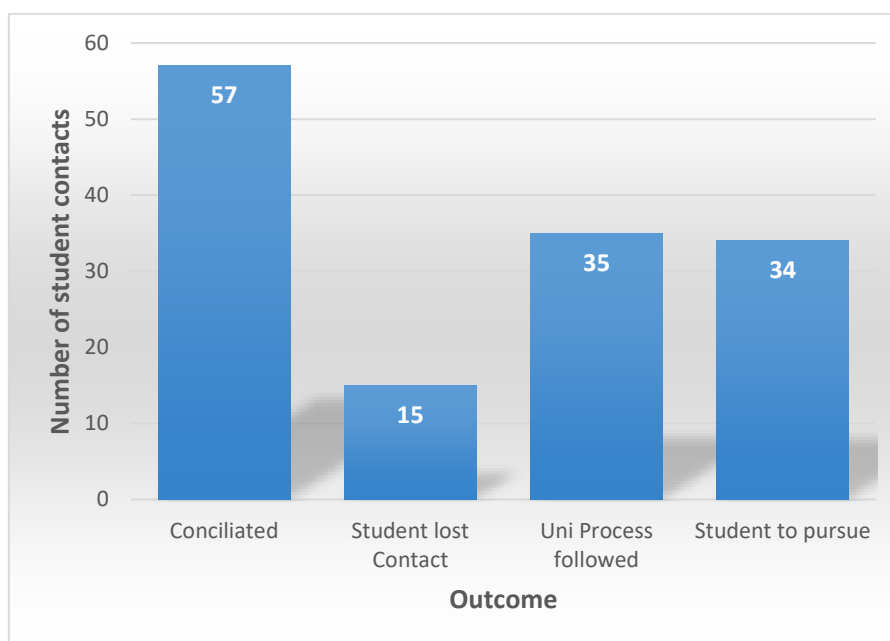
Within the major categories outlined above there are at times, difficulties experienced by students that can be described as **‘people to people problems’** (interpersonal difficulties and/or conflict situations or matters where allegations of harassment or discrimination are made) and **‘Placement Problems’** (complaints about time taken to find placements, quality of supervisors, particular problems experienced whilst on placement). Technically, these still appear within the Academic Administration or Teaching and Learning categories. The Student Ombud continues to highlight the unique nature of these types of placement difficulties when delivering presentations across the University.

**(e) Outcomes**

The outcome categories were reviewed in 2018. During 2019 the key categories were refined further and are summarised in **Figure 4** below and include the following:

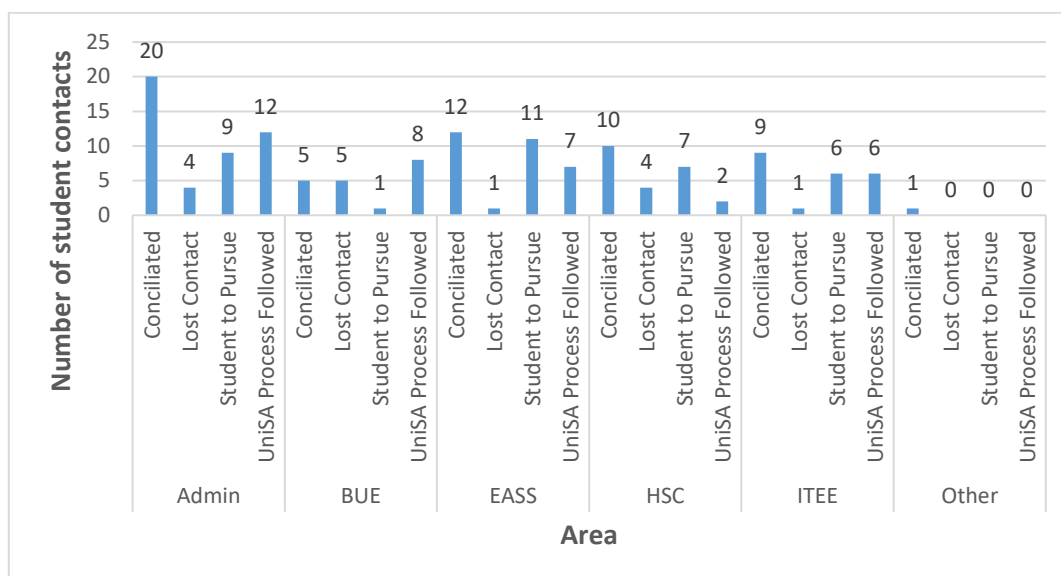
- Conciliated - change in University position (matters resolved through negotiation that have resulted in a change in the University’s position)
- Conciliated - with recommendations (matters resolved through negotiation and accompanied with a specific recommendation made by the Student Ombud)
- UniSA 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 themselves (matter pursued/resolved by the student themselves after receiving advice and options, internally or externally)
- Student Lost Contact (student did not continue with follow up through Student Ombud Office)
- Unable to resolve (matters where the resolution process lies outside of the University’s remit i.e. historic HECS debts matters, Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT) matters).

Twelve matters resulted in specific recommendations made by the Student Ombud for improvements to either practice, policy and or procedures during 2019.



**Figure 4: Outcome of student contacts in 2019**

**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 in 2019**

### 3. Recommendations made for practice, policy or procedural improvements

The areas in which recommendations have been made and/or guidance notes provided included the following:

- Feedback and suggestions on a guide for managing student complaints (ITEE)
- Recommendations for a guide for staff on managing real or perceived conflicts of interest (HSC)
- Feedback and suggestions on the Students with Disabilities Policy and Procedures
- Feedback to Office Strategic Projects on collection of data and information on student and staff complaints
- Guidance notes on undertaking fair investigations
- Recognition of Prior Learning and Entry (and Applying for Credit) Policy and clarification of when and how RPL assessment takes place
- LANTITE testing be part of entrance requirements rather than pre-final placement
- Student Services and Amenities Fees (SSAF) and how to better manage practice of students having to pay additional fees outside HECS for topics that are non-award
- Cancellation of Enrolment Communications and process and how to address ongoing problems with students not accessing emails or telephone call when enrolments are cancelled
- Enterprise 25 submission to discussion papers
- Participation and feedback provided to working group on review of Students with Disability policy with a focus on simplifying existing policy and procedural documents and greater clarity on key support areas such as Access Plans, understanding inherent requirements and what to do if a problem arises.

## 4. Case Studies for 2019

**Appendix 1.** includes two case studies as examples of the types of matters raised, the approach undertaken by the Student Ombud and the outcomes reached.

## 5. Administrative Matters

While the University's Customer Relationship Management (CRM) System (Sorella) continued to be the system used throughout 2019 to record details of student contacts, the University is exploring a new CRM platform, Oracle. The Student Ombud took part in a series of mapping meetings with Oracle consultants to identify the requirements and types of improvements required for future record keeping. Importantly, any proposed improvements will retain the integrity of the record keeping system for the Student Ombud Office, namely to ensure security of information provided to the Office, confidentiality and independence from the University's records. The new CRM will enhance the efficiency of recording and retrieving information for reporting purposes in future.

A short [introductory video](#) was developed and uploaded to the Student Ombud Office website. A link to the video is provided to students who contact the office with the aim of providing a personalized message to allay any concerns or apprehensions about contacting the service. Feedback to date has been positive.

## 6. Focus Areas for 2020

The following activities have been identified as key priorities for the Student Ombud in 2020.

- Assisting new reviews of policies, systems and practices for resolving student complaints by new Academic Units as part of the transition stages of E25 to ensure consistency for students
- Maintain both student and staff feedback system
- Resume visits to Regional Centres, Whyalla and Port Augusta to meet with students
- Closer monitoring of recommendations accepted or otherwise by the University
- Ensure changes to the University's new CRM system meets Student Ombud office needs
- Continue to assist with University led training for academic staff on managing student complaints and management of student complaints system
- Identify opportunities for further improvements to resolving problems for students whilst on placements/Work Integrated Learning and Amendment to Enrolment and Fees Applications process.

## 7. Summary

The previous two years have focused on achieving a greater balance between the **responsive** and **proactive** aspects of the role. The approach undertaken continues to be one which aims to respectfully 'raises what needs to be raised' 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.

A small number of cases could not be pursued as they related to former students or graduates and 5 matters remained active as at the end of 2019.

**CASE STUDY 1: Taking the time to listen properly to the student resolves a placement difficulty**

**Case Study:** A student complained that they received a Fail grade for an inappropriate comment made during a group review exercise. The student was told a formal complaint would be made to an external body for a comment they stated was taken out of context when they were trying to share their reflections on an issue. The student was informed they had failed the course and could not take part in further placement. This would have resulted in the student being prevented from completing/graduating from her course for a 12 month. The student was particularly offended with being described as having 'ingrained racism' particularly when she maintained no one within the University had taken the time to sit, listen and consider her perspective properly. There were several procedural steps that had not been completed properly

**Steps taken:** The student outlined their experiences and provided documentation to support their position, including a subjective opinion offered by a staff member on the issue at hand, without the student's knowledge of her involvement. The Student Ombud outlined his assessment of the situation to senior University management focusing on key procedural matters such as confidentiality, fairness and opportunity for the student to clarify and respond to any evidence gathered.

**Outcome:** The matter was reviewed by the Head of School, and the outcome resulted in the student being allowed to resume their studies immediately. The University undertook to educate the relevant staff on using appropriate, objective assessment criteria when reviewing matters such as the one at hand. The student was satisfied with the outcome.

**CASE STUDY 2: Visa status and financial impact**

**Case Study:** A student had been accepted into a Commonwealth Supported Place (CSP) when they were neither a Permanent Resident nor Permanent Humanitarian Visa holder. The student complained that after having studied with the University for almost 2 years, they were informed that there had been an error in their enrolment status. The student was advised that due to the error they were now subject to having to reimburse the University for courses undertaken to date, at International student rates. The student complained that they came from a refugee family who could not afford to pay the fees. Importantly the student had openly made clear their Visa status prior to enrolment with the University.

**Steps taken:** The student was able to provide documentation that showed they had declared their correct Visa status at the outset, prior to enrolment. The student provided copies of the correspondence and asked the Student Ombud to intervene. The Student Ombud outlined his assessment of the situation to senior University management focusing on the student's honesty and good faith and asked for a reconsideration based on 'willingness to resolve' and 'no-blame' approach.

**Outcome:** The matter was reconsidered by the University and the student's fees were waived. The student was informed that any future studies would however be charged at the International student rate. The student and their family were very satisfied with the outcome.