



**University of
South Australia**

**Office of the Student Ombud Report
2021**

1. Introduction

This report provides an annual update to University Council, as required under the Student Ombud's protocol. It captures activities undertaken by the Student Ombud office in 2021, a summary of matters raised by students, some outcomes and associated recommendations made throughout the year. Points raised in the report are solely from the neutral perspective of the Student Ombud.

The year 2021 initially promised to be bring a more positive studying and experiential environment for students (and staff) than the preceding year. Although it was hoped that the impact of COVID 19 would not be as serious as 2020 it soon became clear that COVID 19 continues to impact on student and staff morale, mental health, participation, and confidence.

Overall, there was a 16% decrease in student complaints made to the Student Ombud office and a 43% increase in the number of 'proactive' requests from staff for assistance in handling matters or seeking general advice. The number of individual complaints dropped from 149 in 2020 to 125 in 2021. Key themes raised by students remained the same. These included fear and apprehension in formalising a complaint, mental health concerns particularly ongoing uncertainties due to Covid 19 and administrative decisions.

As a designated, neutral, dispute resolution specialist, the Student Ombud aims to resolve complaints where possible while ensuring University processes are followed fairly and improved where necessary. The Student Ombud is effectively an independent and confidential, *last internal resort* for students to approach when all other avenues available to resolve a problem have been exhausted. Acting as the *Advocate for Fairness*, not for the individual student nor for the University, 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 and reporting on any systemic barriers that negatively impact upon students. At times the Student Ombud also makes recommendations for improvements to University, policies, procedures, and practices.

The aim of the Student Ombud is to contribute to the overall quality of the student experience, particularly for those experiencing difficulties whilst they study at UniSA. The consistent message from students is that they value and appreciate the service. The Student Ombud can also play an important role in addressing matters at an early stage and where appropriate refer cases to local areas before they escalate.

The Student Ombud is also available for staff to discuss their intended approaches to managing student concerns and complaints and/or difficult situations. The *proactive/educative* component of the role continued to be a key focus area in 2021. This included advice and suggestions on the Student Complaints Resolution Policy, suggested improvements to sexual harassment and sexual assault investigations, seeking additional assistance for students with ties to Afghanistan and India based on world events at the time, and preplacement compliance requirements (including vaccinations). Other recommendations are summarised in the report.

The role requires University staff to trust that the Student Ombud is operating in *good faith* and in the interests of all students while ensuring University processes are respected and adhered to. The feedback on the Student Ombud service from both students and staff continues to be very positive.

2. Student Ombud 2021 Activities

This section provides a summary of 2021 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. There was a total of 156 Service Requests (SRs) raised through the Student Ombud Office in 2021. Overall, this represents a decrease of 7% from the previous year (167 SRs for 2020). 125 student complaints were received (Responsive matters), 32 requests for advice, presentations, training from staff (Proactive matters). One matter remained 'open' as at 30 December 2021.

(a) Number of Complaint Service Requests (SRs) from students and time taken to resolve

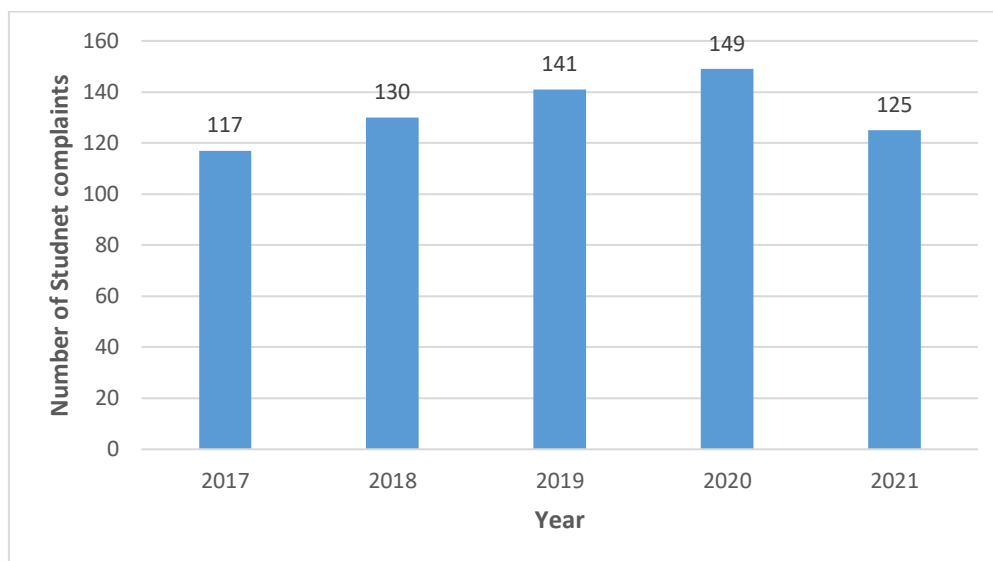


Figure 1: Number of student complaints to Student Ombud office since 2017 (the last 5 years)

A total of 125 students raised complaints through the Student Ombud's Office in 2021. This represents a 16% decrease from the previous year. Students who approach the Student Ombud are, from their perspective, raising a complaint about a decision, action, process, or alleged inappropriate behaviour, conduct or performance of staff. The Student Ombud also assists students to understand whether they have legitimate appeals mechanism(s) still available to them and what the next procedural steps involve for the matter at hand. Overall trend of complaints made to the Student Ombud office remains relatively steady over the last 5 years.

(b) Number of proactive Services Requests (SRs)

There was a total of 32 proactive SRs received during 2021. This represents a significant (43%) increase from the previous year, almost double the number of requests received from staff for advice on handling matters. These included either specific staff requests for advice from the Student Ombud on policy review, requests for presentations and/or training workshops. One key theme for 2021 was the requests associated with communications to students on replacement compliance obligations including relevant screening certificates and vaccinations.

(c) Time taken to resolve all Service Requests (SRs) – students and staff

The time taken to resolve and close the total 156 SRs varied, based on the complexity and number of stakeholders involved.

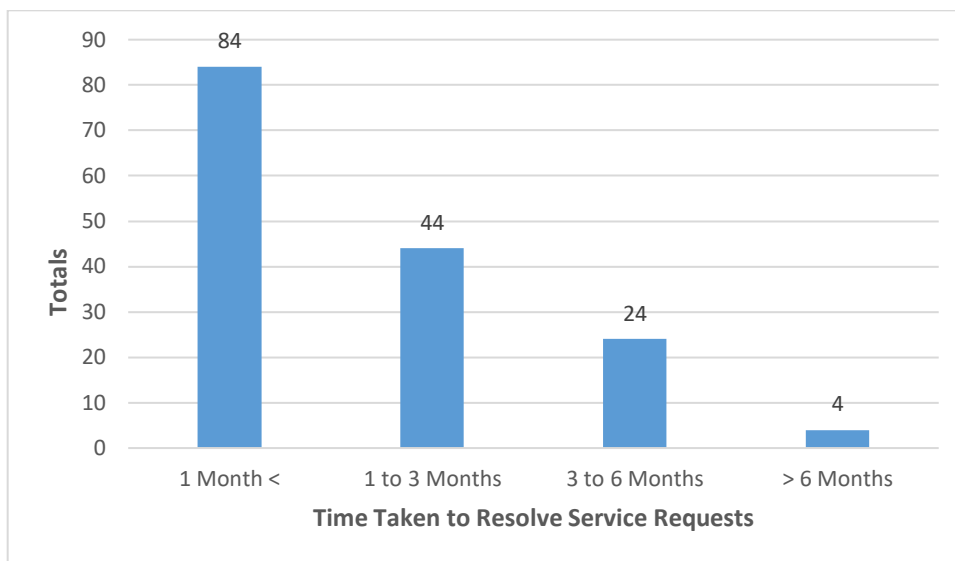


Figure 2: Time taken to resolve all SRs raised 2021

Out of the 156 SR's, 54% (n=84) of issues were resolved in less than 30 days; 28% (n=44) within 31-90 days; 15% (n=24) took between 90 and 180 days; 3% (n=4) took longer than 6 months. 1 matter was still 'Open' as of 31 December 2021.

(d) Type of students contacting the office

The demographic details of the students were as follows:

- 72 (104 in 2020) domestic and 53 (41 in 2020) international students. The decline in complaints from domestic students coincided with a 29% increase in complaints from international students. This may be due to International students' increased awareness of the Student Ombud service
- 72% of SRs from students were from undergraduate students (84% in 2020) and 28% from postgraduate students. (16% in 2020). Again this may be due to increased awareness of the service.

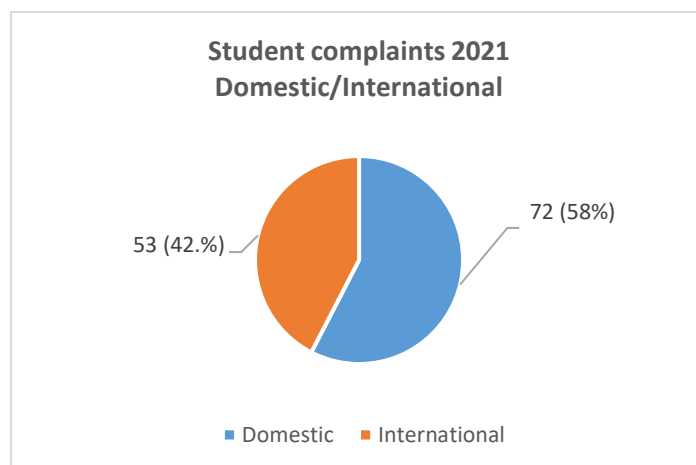


Figure 3: Number of student complaints by residency 2021

(d) Categories of complaints and primary issues

- **APPM Processes and Appeals:** includes specific complaints about the University's assessment policies and procedures manual. This is a new category that was added to the new CRM to be able to track these types of matters more easily in future.
- **Academic Administration:** a previous category used to include matters that relate to credit, supplementary exam considerations, timetabling, practicum allocations, decisions made by professional staff, School based decisions. From 2020 this will now be included in Academic, Teaching and Learning
- **Academic, 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. From 2020 this will now be combined Academic Administration and Teaching and Learning.
- **Bullying and Harassment:** includes matters where a student is specifically alleging bullying or harassment from a staff or another student
- **Central Administration:** mostly includes matters such as Enrolment, Fees and Finance.
- **Discrimination:** where a student is specifically referring to discrimination on one of the anti-discrimination specified grounds, i.e. race, sex, sexuality etc.
- **External to UniSA:** matters that are external to UniSA i.e. historical HECS debts,
- **Placement/WIL Difficulties:** includes specific complaints about problems experienced on placements or work integrated learning, i.e. time taken to find placements, alleged supervisor problems, failed placements
- **Staff Query:** includes situations when staff contact the Student Ombud to seek general advice on how to navigate a situation.

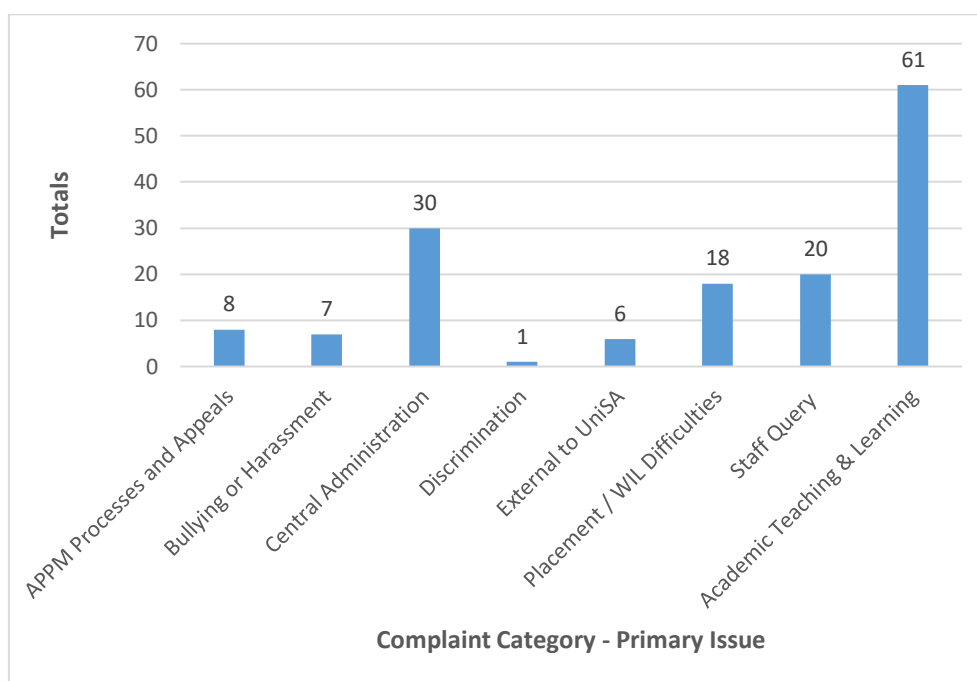


Figure 4: Category of complaints and primary issues raised 2021

Figure 4. does not include five (5) matters as they were raised by staff and the students' identities were not recorded and hence they do not appear in the graph.

(e) Outcomes

The outcome categories have been regularly reviewed and refined from 2019 to 2021. Key categories are summarised in **Figure 5** 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)
- **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).

Thirteen matters resulted in specific recommendations made by the Student Ombud for improvements to either local area practices, policy and/or procedures during 2021.

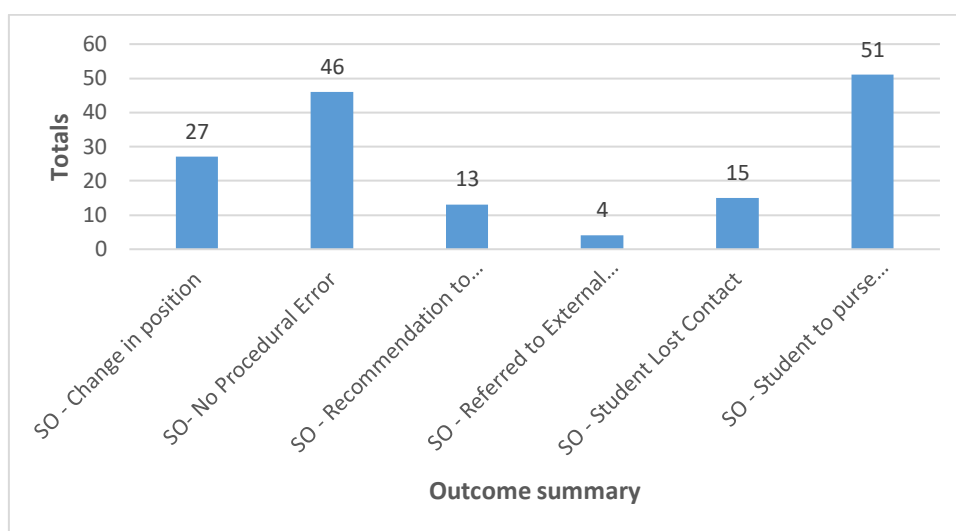


Figure 5: Outcome of student complaints brought to Student Ombud in 2021

(f) Service Requests and Complaints by Academic Unit

Figure 6 below outlines complaints received by Academic Unit.

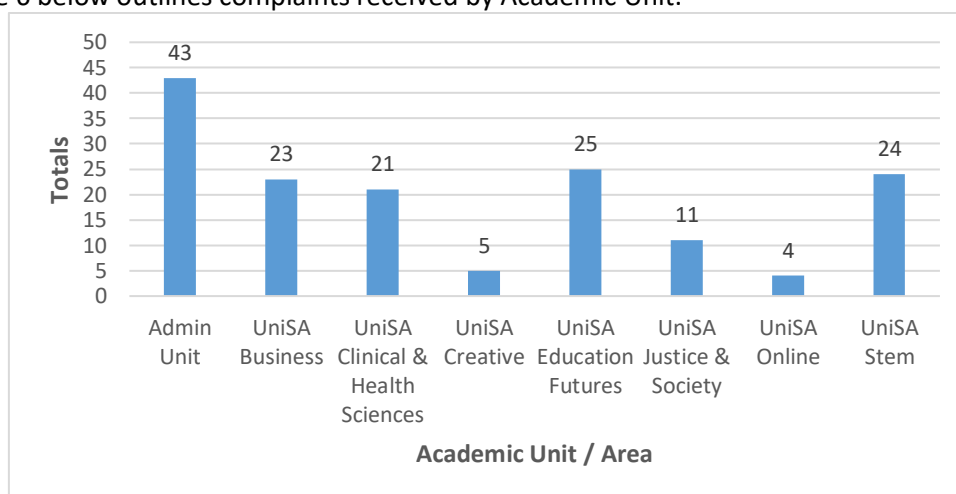


Figure 6: Service Requests and student complaints by Academic Unit in 2021

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

At several stages throughout the year, the Student Ombud made specific recommendations to senior managers within the University. Some recommendations arose from complaints raised by students and others were initiated by the Student Ombud. Not all recommendations are necessarily taken up or accepted by the University. A focus for 2022 will be on monitoring more closely the acceptance or otherwise of recommendations made by the Office.

The recommendations included the following:

- Recommendations on improvements to preplacement communications practice and processes for students on placements particularly within Education Futures and Clinical and Health Sciences, particularly in relation to compliance requirements for screening and vaccinations
- Improvements in documentation of 'problems on placements' for students and particularly where a Fail grade is recorded for students
- Amendment to Enrolment and Fees Special Circumstances as per Fees and Loans Policy
 - Pre-process – improvements to communications to students on Special Circumstances assessments including suggested FAQs for students explaining the process
 - Post-process – improvements to final letters including more reasons provided.
- Improvements to wording in Student Conduct Agreements
- APPM 1.1.6 - consistency in use of and application of assessment rubrics
- Increased exam time across the board for all students of 1 hour
- Increased student support services due to ongoing difficulties experienced by Covid 19 and responding to circumstances for students from and/or with family in India and Afghanistan.
- Recommendations for improvements to communications to students on complaint handling processes and options
- Review of 'confidentiality commitments' given to students involved in Academic Integrity.
- Guidance notes on undertaking fair investigations including tips in relation to sexual harassment and sexual assault complaints provided to individual Academic Unit managers
- Suggestions regarding the University's preparations for Jobs Ready Package and changes to Assessment Policies and Procedures Manual (APPM) particularly in relation to communication to students on matters such as transferability between courses

4. Proactive focus areas

Placements / WIL related matters

During 2021 significant time was spent with both Clinical and Health Sciences and Education Futures Placement organizers (for nursing and teaching in particular) to examine systems improvements for students. Discussions and work centered around the following issues

1. time taken to find placements and communications to students regarding placement availability
2. responding to problems on placement alleged supervisor problems or harassment – greater clarity of ‘evidence trails’ of assessments/investigations and communications to students,
3. communications regarding failed placements and time taken to find repeat placements – resulting impact on fees and graduation times – circumstances where fees might be waived for ‘second go’ attempts if related to a placement harassment issue
4. study load impact dilemmas when student is trying to avoid delays in graduation timelines – for example when the University says, ‘it is too much for a student to take on’ versus THE student saying, ‘they believe they can do it’.

The Student Ombud notes the significant improvements made in relation to communication to education/teaching students, ensuring placements were in place in first course week, protocols for assessing concerns raised on placements and in particular University staff systems for engaging with and documenting the steps taken to assist the student.

Amendment to Enrolment and Fees Special Circumstances

During 2021 the Student Ombud outlined specific suggestions regarding the development of a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) for students to improve the clarity of information provided to students before undertaking this process. This was in relation to increasing numbers of complaints raised about these applications being rejected by the University. In addition, recommendations were made on suggested ways the University could improve its final correspondence and communication to students at the end of the process, namely the provision of better reasons for decisions to students.

Placements and Vaccinations

Hesitancy towards COVID vaccinations on the part of some students involved in placements was also a challenging area to manage throughout 2021. Suggestions by the Student Ombud were made to relevant Academic Units to ensure communication to students was clear and provided early-on including a preference for this information to be provided at the enrollment and pre-enrollment stage.

4. Case Studies for 2021

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. Further case study examples can be provided.

5. Administrative Matters

The Student Ombud Office now uses the Oracle Cloud as its Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system. The CRM was purposely designed for the Student Ombud Office to record its work. The new platform retains 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 other University’s records. The CRM enhanced the capacity to record and retrieve

information relating to the whole scope of the Student Ombud's work for reporting purposes. The ability to log/register 'service requests' from staff for education/presentations and proactive advice now allows the Student Ombud to track these more proactive aspects of the service.

6. Focus Areas for 2022

The following activities have been identified as key priorities for the Student Ombud in 2022:

- Focus on increasing knowledge for students at orientation stage on relevant complaints and appeals mechanisms and the Student Ombud service
- Continue to assist with any education and training for staff involved in receiving local level student complaints in line with the revised Student Complaints Resolution Policy and intended establishment of the Tell Us team and student complaints portal
- 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 experienced whilst on placements/Work Integrated Learning
- Maintain both student and staff feedback systems
- Resume visits to regional centres, Whyalla and Port Augusta to meet with students, COVID precautions permitting
- Continue to raise recommendations to the University on practice, policy improvements
- Monitor the CRM system to ensure it meets Student Ombud Office needs

7. Summary

The Student Ombud's approach continues to be one which aims to respectfully 'raise what needs to be raised' in relation to both preventing and/or addressing problems when they arise. By formally raising recommendations for improvements to policy and/or practice the Student Ombud aims to contribute positively to the student experience within the University. The previous three years have focused on achieving greater balance between the *responsive* and *proactive* aspects of the role.

Further information can be provided on request.

CASE STUDY 1: University acknowledges complaint not handled well

Case Study: A student approached the Student Ombud office about the way their complaint had been handled, the time taken to deal with it and the lack of follow up communication regarding the University's actions and outcome. The student initially raised a complaint about the way they were spoken to by a staff member after they had attended a feedback session for failing an assessment. The student felt that the comments made towards them were disparaging and that they were being discriminated against based on their race, culture, and ethnic origin. After being initially told the complaint would be investigated, the student became increasingly frustrated after 5 months had passed and no outcome/conclusion had been communicated to them, despite requesting an update on 3 separate occasions.

Steps taken: The Student Ombud outlined the aspects of the process that were of concern and his assessment of the situation to senior University management within the Academic Unit.

Outcome: The matter was reviewed by the relevant Executive Dean who then contacted the student personally and offered an apology for both the time taken and the way in which the matter was initially handled. The relevant staff member was counselled for their communication style. The University also agreed to ensure adequate measures were put in place in the form of a moderator. The student was satisfied and relieved to hear of the outcome.

CASE STUDY 2: An educative approach to a placement matter 'nips the problem in the bud'

Case Study: An international student was found to have breached university and placement policies and protocols after they posted photos of students whilst undergoing their placement. The example is one that would normally fit the criteria for a Fail grade for the placement. The student was performing well in their placement and was genuinely not aware of the consequences/seriousness of their actions. The student was very remorseful, deeply regretting the situation. The Academic Unit sought advice on how best to manage the situation.

Steps taken: In this case the Student Ombud worked closely with the Academic Unit to develop a planned approach which included discussions with the student, host placement provider on how best to use the opportunity as an educative process for the student on this occasion.

Outcome: The matter was reconsidered by the University and the student was issued with a caution but no further penalty outcome. The host placement provider was also satisfied with the outcome given the circumstances and the student's remorsefulness and overall performance on placement. The student was very appreciative of the outcome.

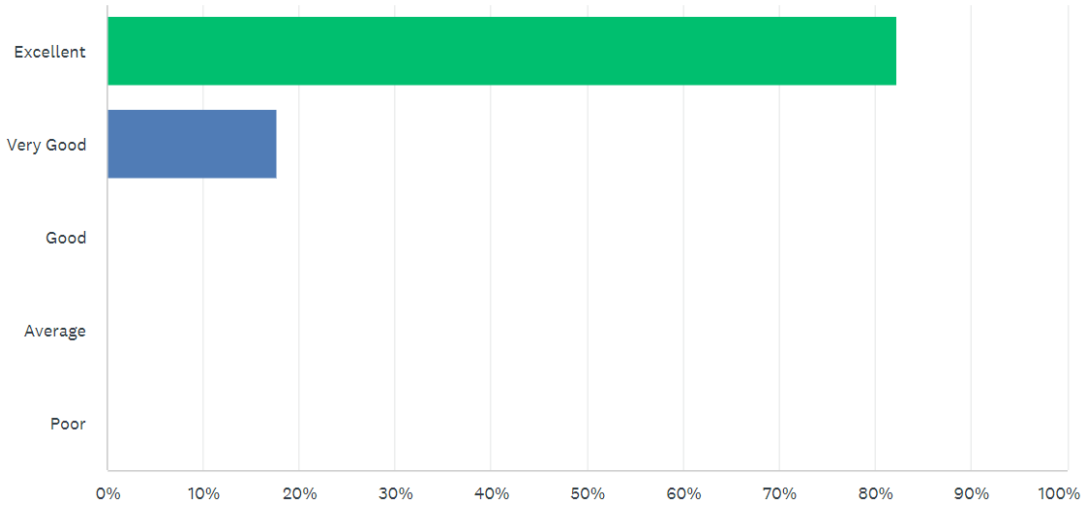
Additional Case studies can be provided upon request.

Summary Student Ombud Service Feedback Results - Students and Staff

Student Feedback: Note: 36% Response Rate

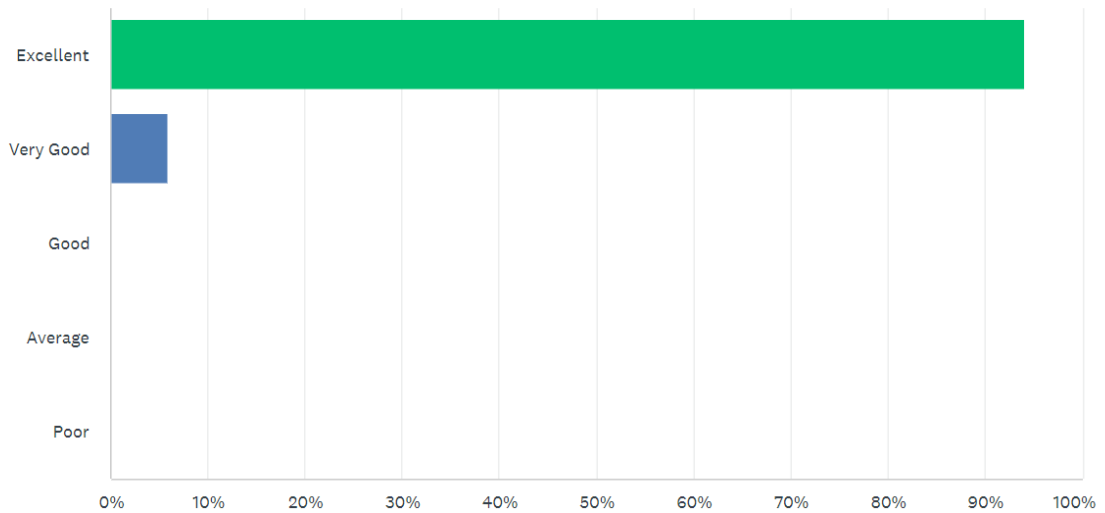
The Student Ombud Office tries to respond to your enquiry within 24 hours. How would ...

Answered: 17 Skipped: 0



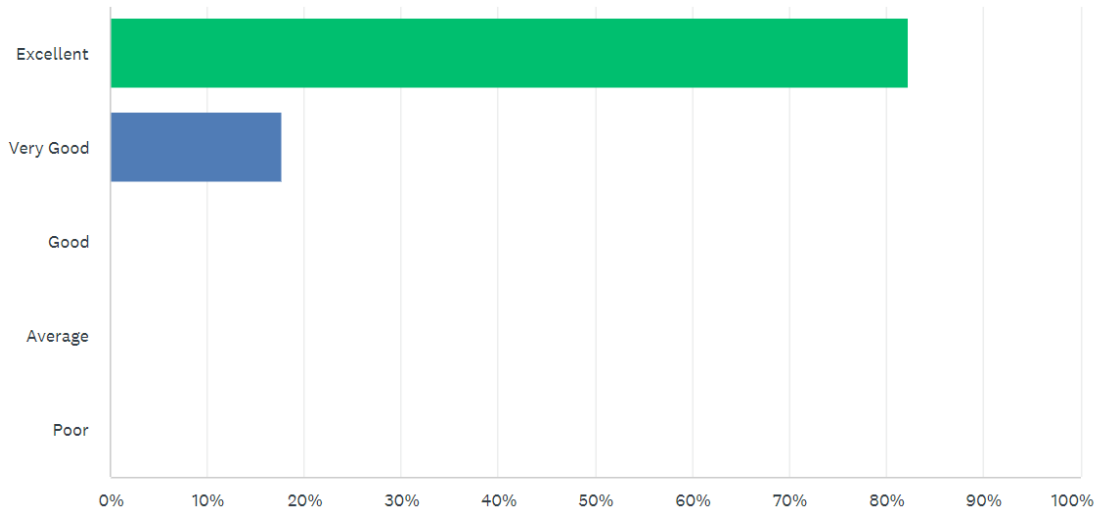
How clear was the Student Ombud's explanation of their role and possible options availa...

Answered: 17 Skipped: 0



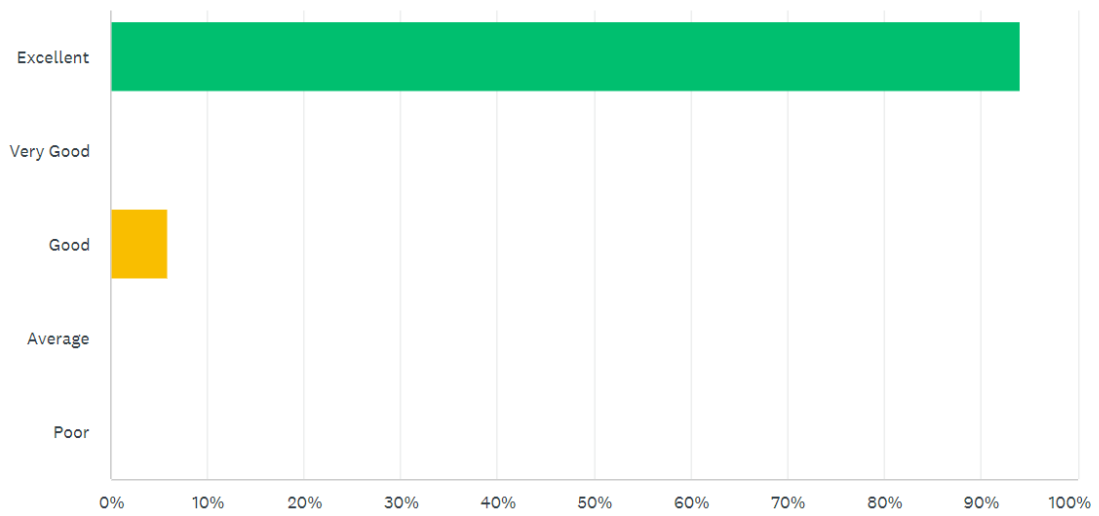
Whether you agreed or not with the outcome, how clear was the Student Ombud's asses...

Answered: 17 Skipped: 0



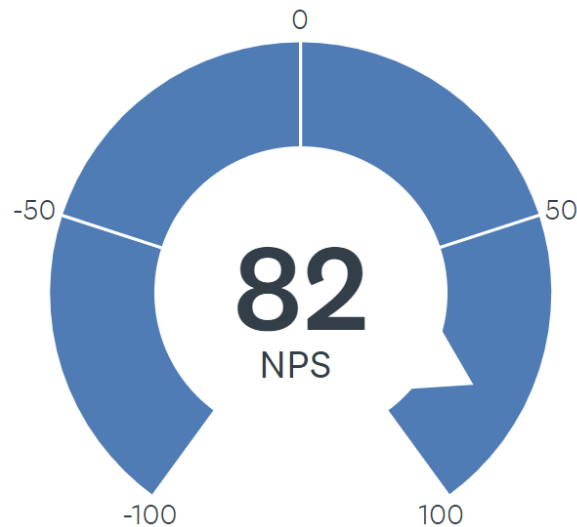
Overall, how would you rate the quality of your customer service experience with the Stu...

Answered: 17 Skipped: 0



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

Answered: 17 Skipped: 0



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

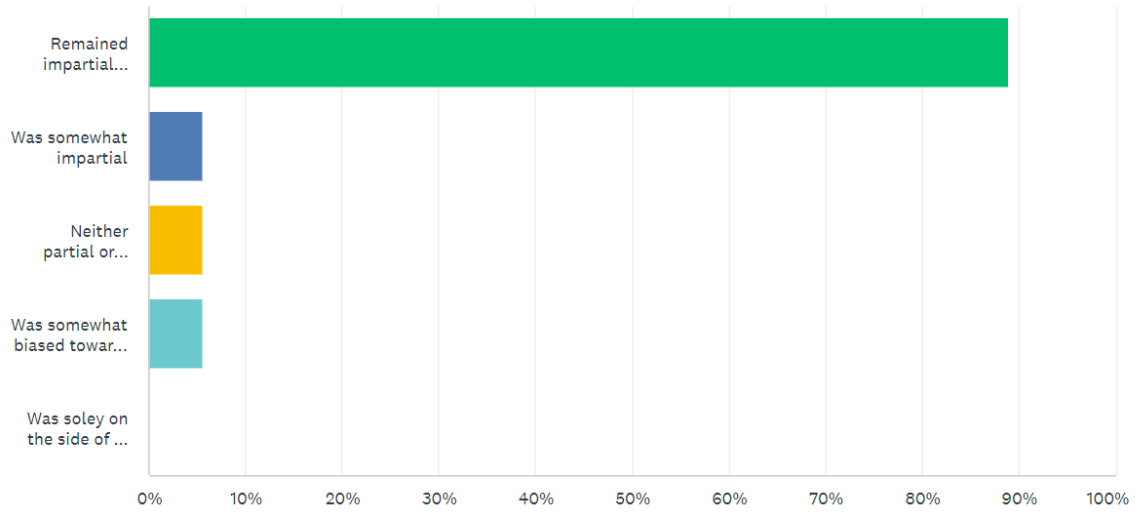
Answered: 12 Skipped: 5

- "Franco was amazing and understanding of my presented issues. He responds in a timely manner and always takes initiative to keep me updated."
- "Franco has been Fantastic in supporting me with a very complex matter. He is very thorough, very pleasant and an excellent Student Ombud. Keep him!"
- "Franco very sweet and understanding."
- "Franco was very helpful and assisted very well in my dispute. He was very prompt and was friendly in approach. I felt very secure and reassured."
- "I did not know the Student Ombud Office was a pathway before stumbling upon the services and fund the service to be invaluable, without the service I would not have achieved the result I did after Ombud involvement. Excellent follow up, excellent customer service with clear expectation of the process."
- "Franco has been exemplary in his willingness to fully grasp my complicated grievance which remains a 'work in progress'."
- "He was approachable and easy to talk. He follow-up on the issues in a short period of time which was excellent."
- "Franco was very responsive, compassionate and helpful. His knowledge, kindness and support was very helpful."
- "I wish they had more power to create change regarding University decisions when, in their impartial role, they find an inequitable situation (I bet they wish so too)."
- "I am really impressed with the services offered by the student ombud team. Despite being on a holiday, Franco had contacted me within a short time frame."
- "I am satisfied that the Student Ombud Officer tried his best."
- "None."

Staff Feedback - Note: 45% Response Rate

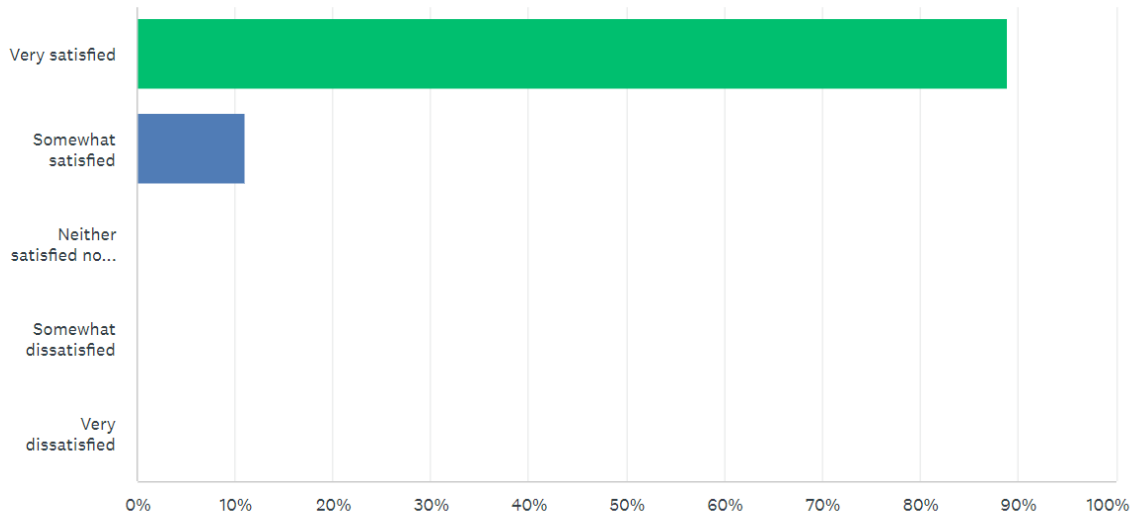
To what extent do you believe the Student Ombud maintained impartialty in their appro...

Answered: 18 Skipped: 0



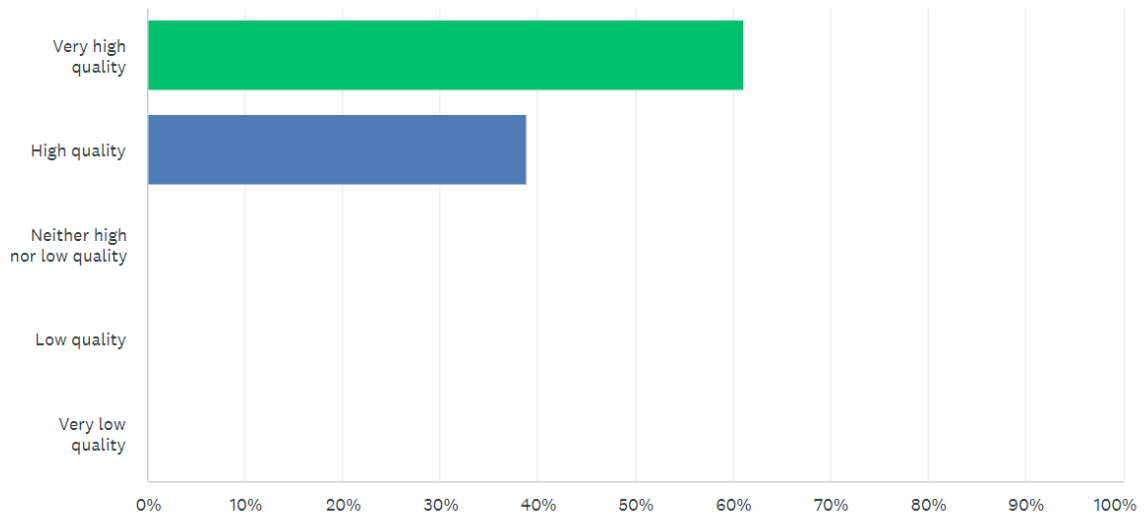
Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the approach undertaken to matters w...

Answered: 18 Skipped: 0



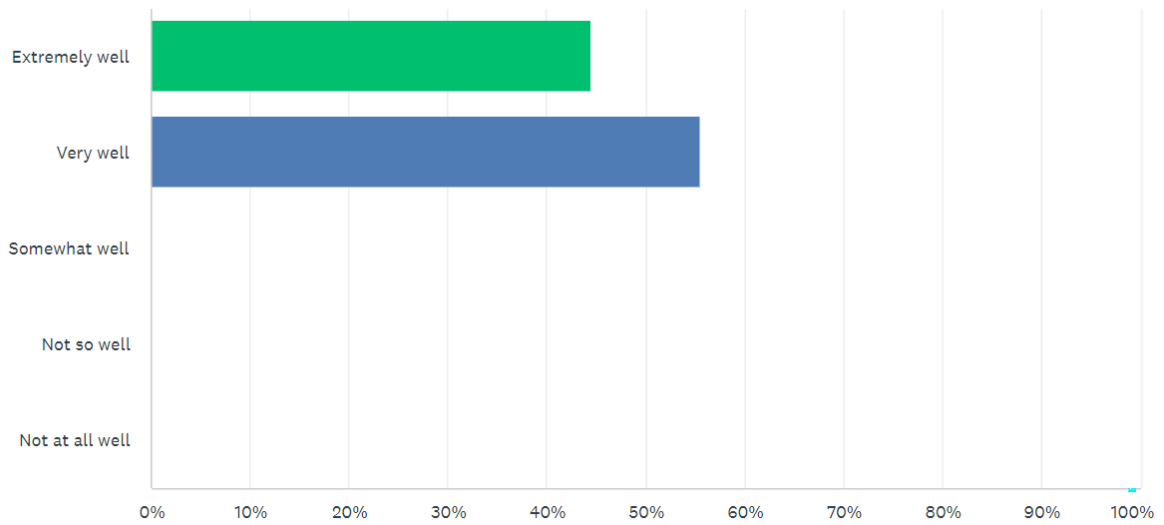
Overall how would you rate the quality of the Student Ombud service?

Answered: 18 Skipped: 0



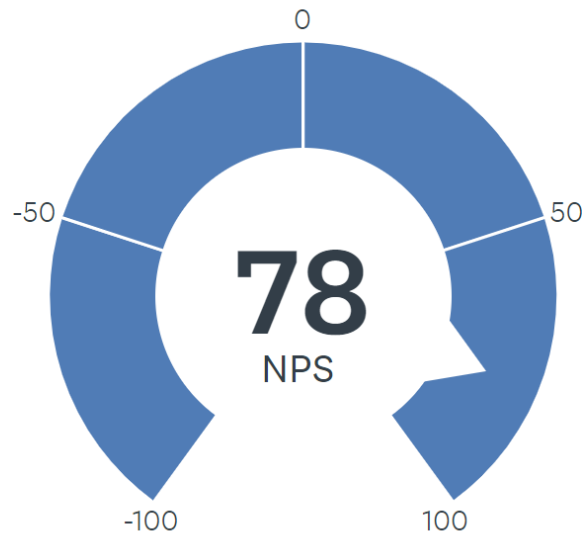
Overall, how well does the Student Ombud meet your needs as a staff member, when res...

Answered: 18 Skipped: 0



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

Answered: 18 Skipped: 0



Do you have any other comments about your experience with the Student Ombud office?

Answered: 6 Skipped: 12

“Every experience is collegial and helpful for staff and students Well done Franco ”