



University of
South Australia

**Office of the Student Ombud Report
2022**

1. Executive Summary

The Student Ombud (the Ombud) received a total of 154 service requests (SRs) in 2022 (compared with 156 in 2021). There was a 14% decrease in student complaints made to the Ombud and a 46% increase in the number of *'proactive'* requests received from staff for assistance in handling matters or seeking general advice from the Ombud. While the number of individual complaints dropped to 107 from 125 in 2021, key themes raised by students who approached the Ombud essentially remain the same. These often include fear and apprehension in formalising a complaint, dissatisfaction with administrative decisions and reasons provided and problems experienced whilst on placements.

Suggestions and recommendations for improvement were made by the Ombud during the year to various senior staff members within Academic and Administrative Units across the University. These suggestions are raised usually following a complaint to the Ombud or initiated by the Ombud following enquiries received by students and/or staff, and include:

- a review of the wording to a particular Appeal clause in the then Assessment Policies and Procedures Manual (APPM 2022)
- the need to consider providing more 'program specific learning advisor' assistance for students
- feedback on certain aspects of the Student Complaints Resolution Policy and Procedures
- potential improvements to pre-placement preparation, including closer assessment of English language proficiency
- seeking additional assistance for students with ties to Sri Lanka, and Ukraine based on world events at the time.

Additional recommendations are summarised in this report.

The Ombud continues to receive requests for presentations, advice and suggestions on handling more complex matters and complaints at the local Academic Unit level. There appears to be some correlation between the increased demand for *proactive* services provided by the Ombud and the decline in formalised student complaints over the last two years.

The 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 that can impact on students. By formally raising recommendations for improvements to practice and/or policy the Ombud aims to contribute positively to the student experience within the University. The Ombud continues to focus on achieving greater balance between the *responsive* and *proactive* aspects of the role.

Based on cases received by the Ombud, the impact of COVID and its subsequent variants continued to present ongoing challenges for students and staff in 2022. Students reported to the Ombud that their morale, mental health, and confidence had been negatively impacted because of 2 years of COVID related interruptions and changes to delivery modes. The resumption of face-to-face teaching and research activities initially looked promising but were interrupted again and many courses moved back online. Interestingly, based on the numerous enquiries received by the Ombud, 'flexible learning' initiatives is sometimes 'at odds' with students who expressed a keenness to return to campus and face to face delivery, while for many staff, a preference to remain online seems evident. Approximately 30% of students complaining to the Ombud also reported they wished there was more face-to-face delivery. Again, this is based on confidential feedback provided to the Ombud throughout the year by students and staff.

The feedback from students and staff on the Student Ombud service through the survey continues to be very positive. This is often despite the student not always being able to achieve the desired outcome from their complaint. Some students would prefer an ‘Ombud model’ where decisions could be overturned by the Ombud. The role requires University staff to trust that the Ombud is operating in *good faith* and in the interests of all students while ensuring University processes are respected and adhered to. To date, the feedback suggests the role is well received across the University community.

2. Introduction

The Ombud is an independent and confidential dispute resolution specialist, and a *last internal resort* for students 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* (responding to and managing enquiries and complaints) and *proactive/educative* component (identifying key trends, reporting on systemic barriers that negatively impact upon students and raising recommendations for improvements to policies or practices). The Ombud takes the time with students to explore the best pathway(s), or referral options for them, while upholding confidentiality and impartiality.

The Ombud’s report to University Council provides an annual update on key activities undertaken by the Ombud in the previous year. It includes a summary of matters raised by students, examples of outcomes achieved, and some recommendations made throughout the year. Points and issues raised in the report are solely from the neutral perspective of the Ombud.

3. Student Ombud 2022 Activities

This section provides a summary of 2022 activities undertaken by the Ombud and includes some detail about the types of complaints or problems raised. There was a total of 154 Service Requests (SRs) raised through the Ombud in 2022 as compared with 156 SRs for 2021. 107 student complaints were received (*Responsive matters*), 47 requests for advice, presentations, training from staff (*Proactive matters*). 1 matter remained ‘open’ as at 31 December 2022.

(a) Number of Student Complaints

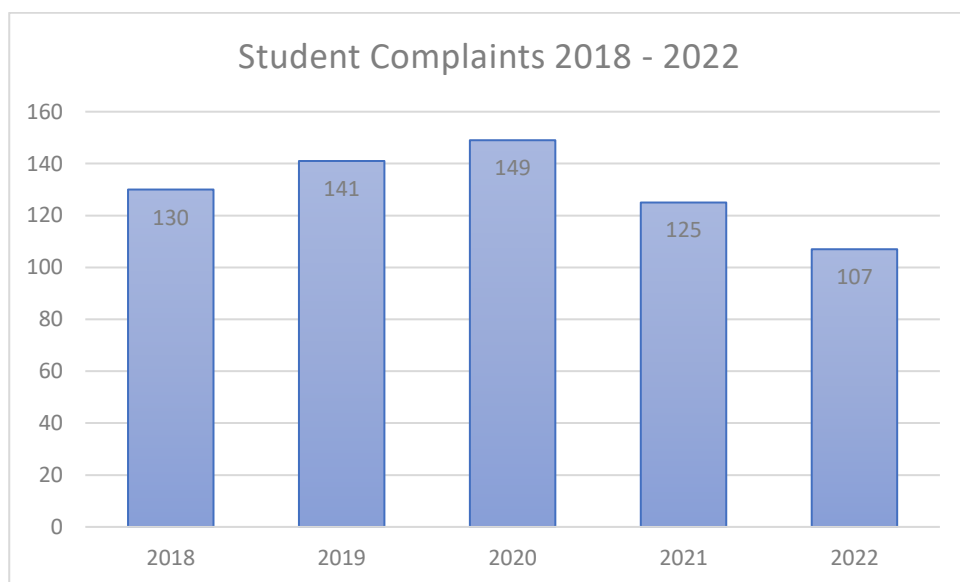


Figure 1: Number of student complaints to Student Ombud office since 2018 (the last 5 years)

A total of 107 complaints were raised through the Ombud’s office in 2022. This represents a 14% decrease from the previous year. Students who approach the Ombud are, from their perspective, raising a complaint about a decision, action, process, or alleged inappropriate behaviour, conduct or performance of staff. The Ombud also assists students to understand whether they have legitimate Appeals mechanism(s) available to them and what the next procedural steps would involve. The overall trend of complaints made to the Ombud office remains relatively steady over the last 5 years.

(b) Number of proactive Services Requests (SRs)

There was a total of 47 proactive SRs received during 2022 (32 in 2021), representing a 46% increase from the previous year. This continues the trend of increasing requests from staff for advice on handling matters. These included specific requests for advice from the Ombud on policy review, advice on handling matters and presentations or training workshops. A key theme in 2022 was the handling of problems and communications associated with Failed placements.

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

The time taken to resolve and close the total 154 SRs varied and is dependent on the complexity of matters raised and often the number of stakeholders involved.

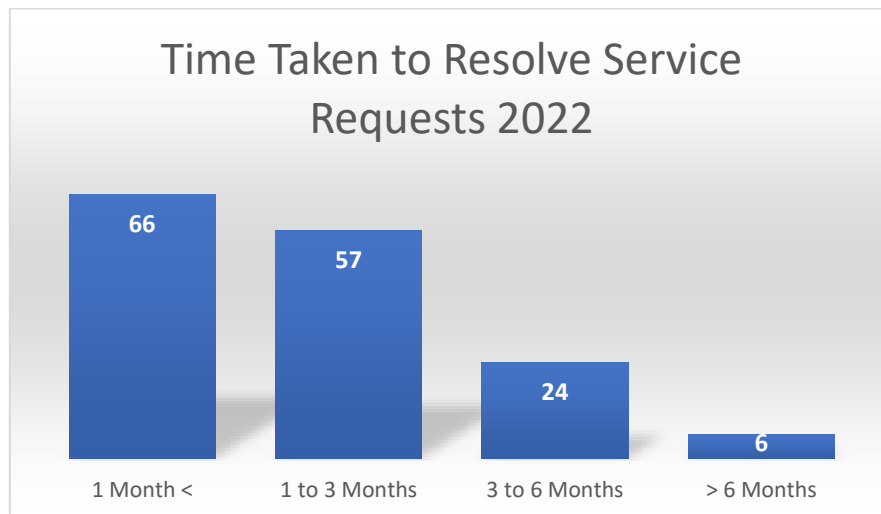


Figure 2: Time taken to resolve all SRs raised 2022

Out of the 154 SR’s, 43% (n=66) of issues were resolved in less than 30 days; 37% (n=57) within 31-90 days; 16% (n=24) took between 90 and 180 days; 4% (n=6) took longer than 6 months. 1 matter was still ‘Open’ as of 31 December 2022.

(d) Type of students contacting the office – Domestic v International, and Undergraduate v HDR

The demographics of students making complaints were as follows:

- 75 domestic (72 in 2021) and 32 international (53 in 2021) students.
- 79% of complaints were from undergraduate students (72% in 2021) and 21% from HDR students (28% in 2021). Generally, the nature and types of complaints received from HDR students are quite difficult to resolve and are usually associated with difficulties experienced with the supervisory relationship, either finding one, keeping one and/or disagreements over assessment.

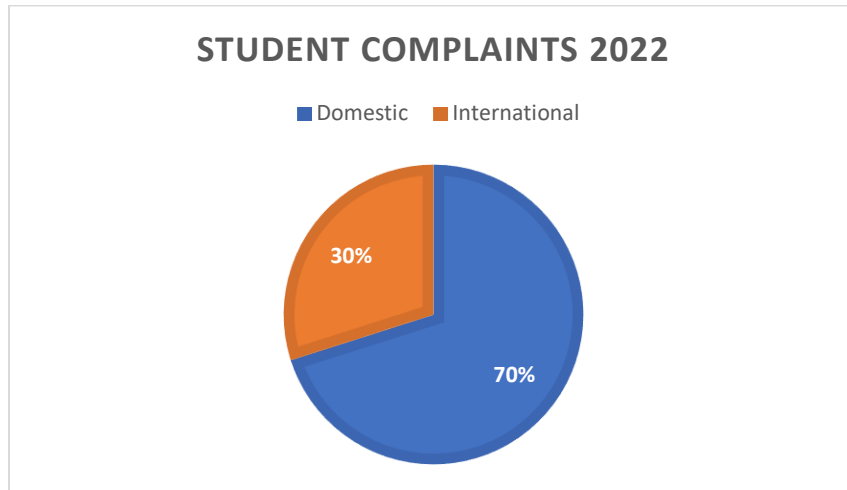


Figure 3: Percentage of student complaints Domestic / International 2022

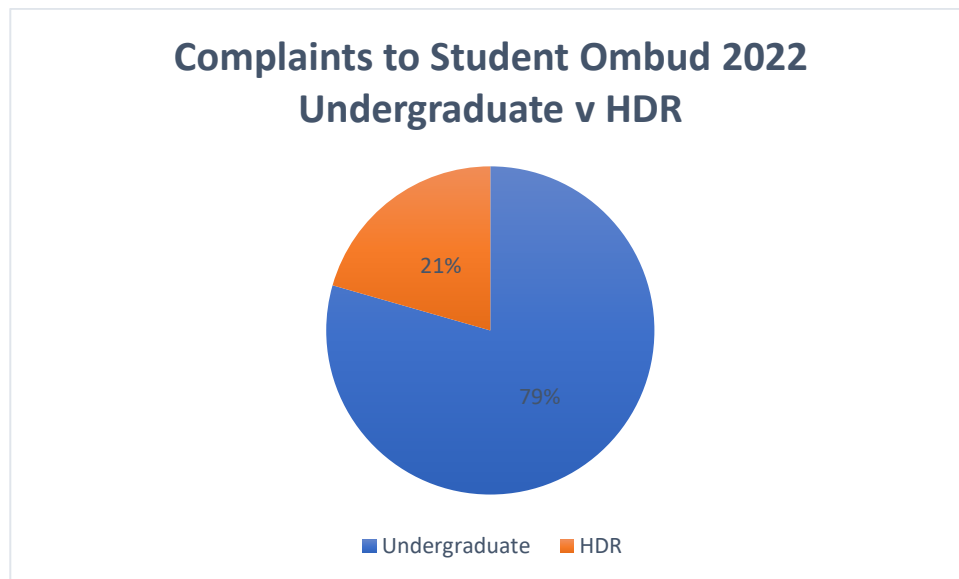


Figure 4: Number of student complaints Undergraduate v HDR 2022

(d) Categories of complaints and primary issues

- **Academic Teaching:** includes matters such as decisions made by academic staff, assessments, remarks, grades, exams, supervision, extensions, credit, supplementary exam considerations, timetabling, decisions made by professional staff, Academic Unit based decisions.
- **APPM Processes and Appeals:** includes specific complaints about the University's assessment policies and procedures manual. Given the APPM document will no longer be used this category will change to Academic Processes and Appeals in 2023.
- **Bullying or 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, disability 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 or interpret an existing policy.

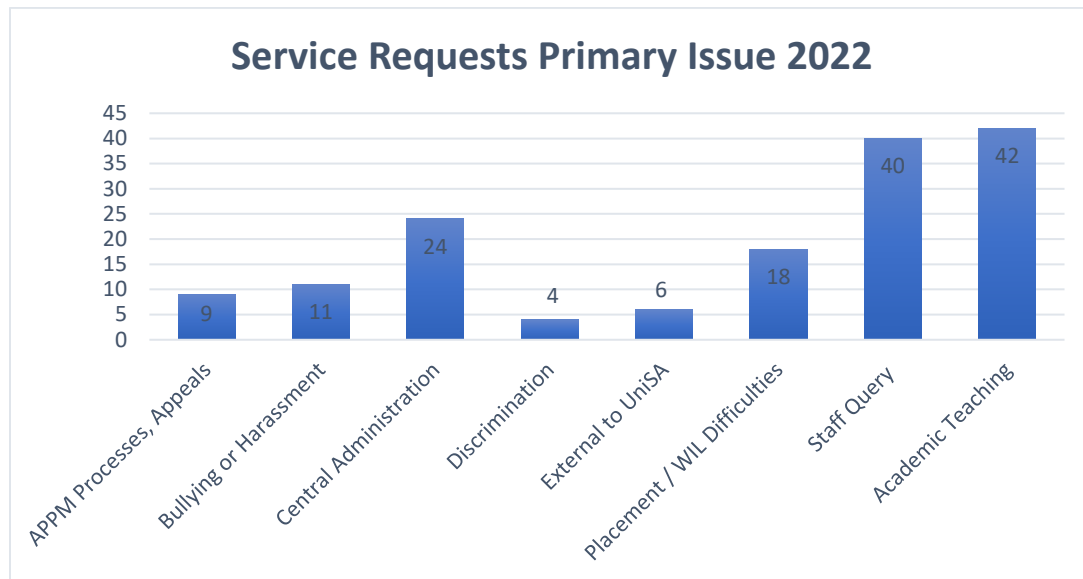


Figure 5: Category of primary issues and complaints raised 2022

(e) Outcomes

Key outcome categories are summarised in **Figure 5** below and include the following:

- **Conciliated - change in the University's 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)
- **No Procedural Error/UniSA processes followed reasonably** (Student Ombud's assessment indicates University policies were followed reasonably by the University. This 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).

A total of 27 SRs resulted in specific recommendations and suggestions made by the Ombud for improvements to either local area practices, policy and/or procedures during 2022. Not all of these are from formal student complaints. Some are also generated after staff-initiated requests for advice and assistance.

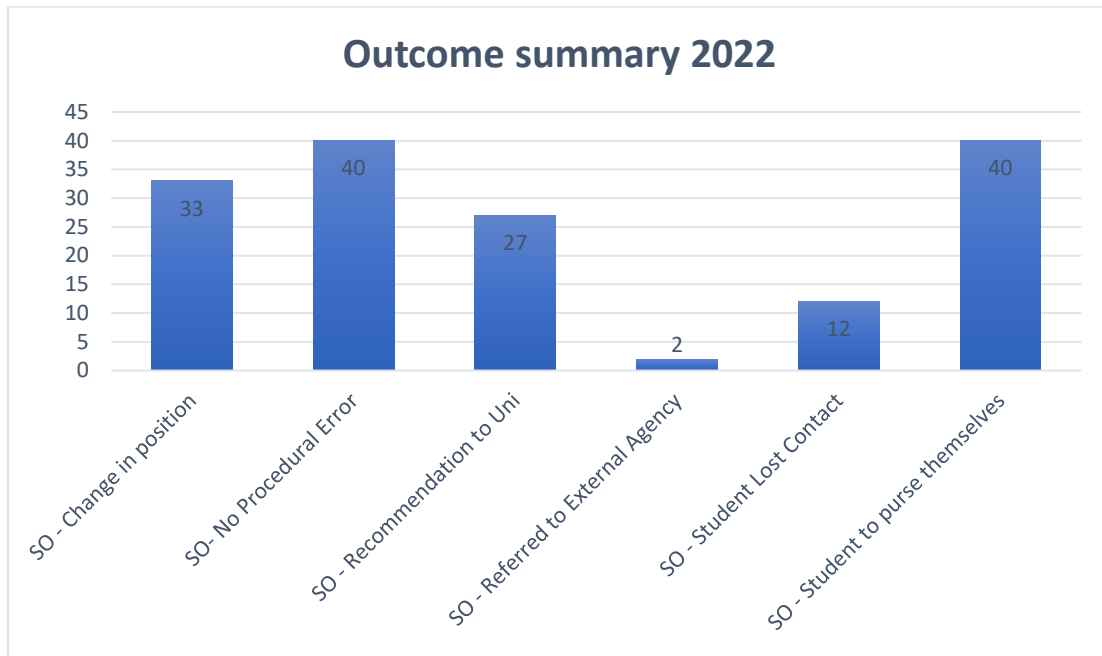


Figure 5: Outcome of service requests brought to Student Ombud in 2022

(f) Service Requests and Complaints by Academic Unit

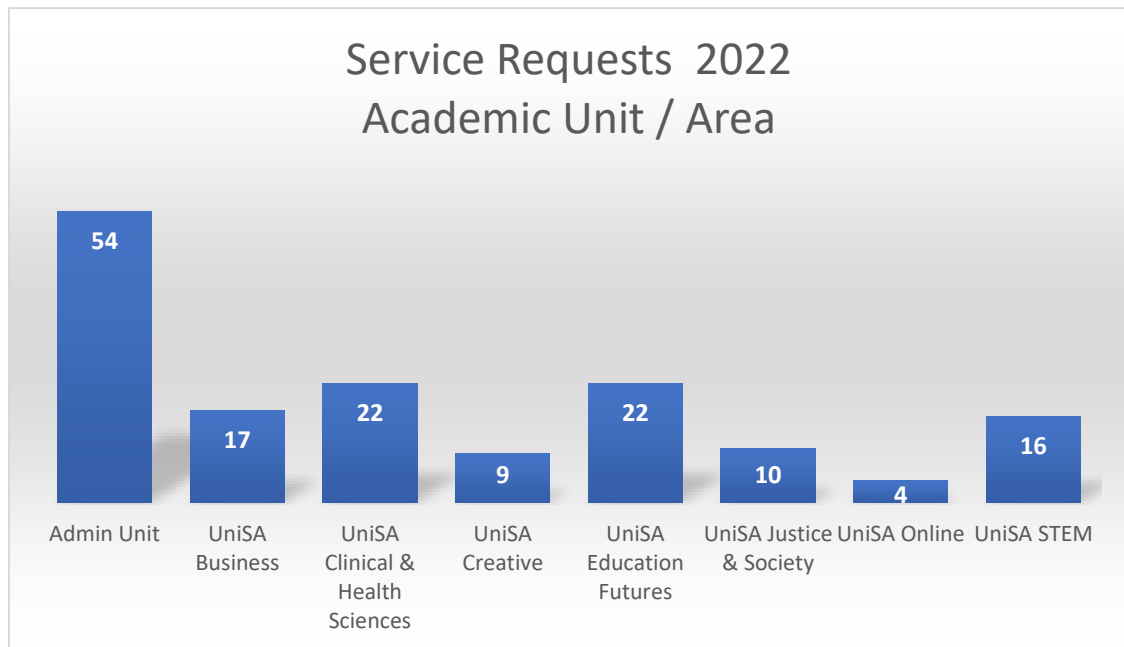


Figure 6: Service Requests and student complaints by Academic Unit / Area in 2022

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

Throughout 2022 the Ombud office made suggestions and recommendations to the appropriate senior staff members within the University. While recommendations and suggestions are considered by the University, not all are necessarily adopted. Follow up on recommendations occurs but it is not always the case that the recommendations are accepted. Suggestions and recommendations for 2022 include:

- A review of wording included in appeal clauses in the (then) APPM to review threshold tests for deciding which matters proceed to appeal. Not adopted however a new Student Appeals Committee Procedure for 2023 has been established.
- Proposed improvements to pre-placement communications practice and processes for students on placements, particularly in relation to English language proficiency. This is currently under consideration by the relevant Academic Unit.
- That increased student support services be provided for students experiencing ongoing difficulties due to COVID, and responding to circumstances for students from and/or with family in Sri Lanka.
- Proposed a review of pre-enrolment information to ensure accuracy around course offerings and to advise students of possible changes to program and courses offerings. This was actioned by the relevant Academic Unit.
- That student support managers provide more program and course specific assistance for students. This is currently under consideration by the relevant areas.
- Encouraged the University to continue to make available a 'one -document' option for the assessment policies and procedures that replaced the APPM in 2023.
- Encouraged a review of student-centred policies to ensure the Student Ombud service is mentioned as a last internal contact option.

4. Ombud's observations, proactive focus areas and ongoing sector wide challenges

The following points are based on the Ombud's observations not only during the 2022 period but over the last 4 years. They are based on experiences gained from receiving and handling confidential enquiries and concerns raised by students who often do not wish to formalise their issues as complaints. They should not be viewed as a criticism of this University but rather a challenge to all Australian universities. The issues briefly outlined below are based on both complaints raised by students with the Ombud and anecdotal matters raised by students and staff with the Ombud.

Program and course specific student support

A number of students who contacted the Student Ombud in 2022 described existing support services as being 'too generic' in nature. These students reported being provided with links to web-based resources such as 'proper referencing' guidelines, when what they are asking for is someone to 'sit with them and help them understand' the course content and assist them with assignments. This is not an easy dilemma to resolve. Students need to understand they have enrolled in a higher education setting and are required to understand that 'student led learning' is a key component of this. Some possible improvements for consideration could be greater availability of course-specific Tutors or the establishment of a 'preferred Tutors' provider system for students who have asked for this type of assistance.

Feedback has been provided accordingly, to the relevant areas.

Flexible Learning, Face to Face and the Student experience – how satisfied are students?

Another challenge is that of measuring how satisfied students are with what appears to be a sustained move to 'flexible learning' delivery methods. What might be referred to as flexible learning by the University is by some students, perceived as 'not getting what we signed up for', particularly for those that have enrolled in what they thought would be largely face to face course delivery as opposed to selecting the UniSA Online offerings.

English language proficiency and readiness to undertake relevant placements

Across the sector, universities require international students to pass/comply with external English language proficiency tests, such as IELTS prior to entry. However, once a student has commenced their studies and problems appear with their ability to communicate effectively and to a standard expected in certain sectors such as education, teaching, and nursing there is often little 'work readiness language' support available and/or offered to students.

One key observation raised with relevant university senior managers by the Ombud is that for some international students in particular, the University could more proactively let the student know that they may not yet be ready to undertake the program required placements. 12% of complaints to the Ombud are about students failing placements. A third of these complaints were based on the 'local work-placement supervisor's' assessment and feedback on the student's language abilities. These students reported that 'no one within the University' had raised their language proficiency as an issue prior to placements.

5. Case Studies for 2022

Appendix 1. includes three brief 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 upon request.

6. Administrative Matters

The Ombud office continues to use the Oracle Cloud as its Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system which was purposely designed in 2021 for recording work. The platform retains the integrity of a separate record keeping system for the Ombud office. Importantly this is to ensure security of information provided to the Office, confidentiality, and independence from the other University records. The CRM has enhanced the capacity to record and retrieve information relating to the whole scope of the Ombud's work for reporting purposes. The ability to log/register 'service requests' from staff for education/presentations and proactive advice has now allowed the Student Ombud to track and report on the more proactive aspects of the service.

7. Focus Areas for 2023

The following activities have been identified as key priorities for the Student Ombud in 2023.

- Contribute to and provide feedback on the proposed new University.
- Review existing student-oriented policies and procedures to include references to the Ombud service as a last internal port of call for internal review.

- Work with Academic Units to further improve pre-placement (language proficiency) preparation and work integrated learning particularly for international students.
- Maintain both student and staff feedback systems.
- Continue to raise recommendations to the University on practice, and policy improvements.

8. Summary

The report outlines both responsive and proactive areas of the Ombud's work during 2022. While formal complaint numbers to the Ombud dropped during 2022, the number of requests for proactive assistance from staff increased. Feedback on the Ombud service remains very positive. The Ombud is happy to provide Council with further information if required.

CASE STUDY 1: University acknowledges administrative error at enrolment and allows student entry

Case Study: A student approached the Ombud office after they were initially offered a place into a university program. The offer was then rescinded a month later after an administrative error was identified. The student was very disappointed as they believed they had their position confirmed formally and were preparing to commence studies. The University initially refused to offer the student a place into their preferred program and instead offered an alternative pathway.

Steps taken: The Ombud outlined the aspects of the decision making and administrative error that were unfair and the significant distress it had caused the student and asked for a reconsideration.

Outcome: The matter was reviewed by the relevant senior managers within the Academic Unit and Central administration. The matter was conciliated after the University provided an apology and identified an entry pathway for the student into their preferred program based on an agreement between the two that the need to achieve a set, agreed GPA in the first Semester. The student was very happy with the outcome.

CASE STUDY 2: University agrees to reconsider an Appeal outcome after new information is made available

Case Study: A student approached the Ombud office after their appeal before the Student Appeals Committee was rejected. The student provided evidence that certain aspects of their account of events were not considered by the University and outlined aspects of the assessment process they believed was unfair and the time delay in dealing with their appeal. When the student received the initial outcome there was no mention of further appeal rights for the student. The student is a high performing student who outlined aspects of the assessment that were not properly understood or considered.

Steps taken: The Ombud outlined the new information and their assessment of the situation to senior University management and asked for a reconsideration.

Outcome: The matter was reviewed by the University, and the student was allowed to have their Appeal heard. The student was successful at appeal and was very satisfied with the outcome.

CASE STUDY 3: University agrees to reinstate Scholarship after administrative error

Case Study: A student complained that they had initially received a formal Scholarship award but had then had the offer rescinded. The student approached the Ombud office after having their request for it to be reinstated refused. The student provided evidence that their application had been approved. The University then discovered the student's results were just short of the level required and informed the student of its own error.

Steps taken: The Ombud outlined the aspects of the administrative process that were of concern and asked the University for a reconsideration.

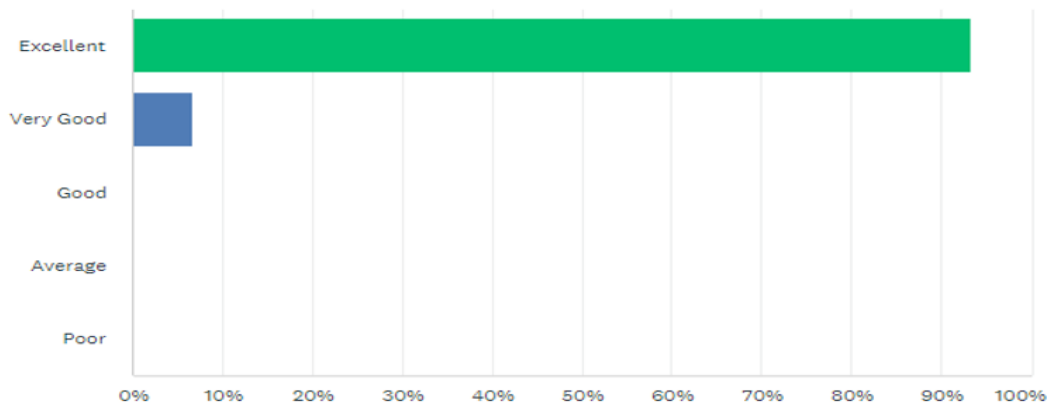
Outcome: The matter was reviewed by the University, and the administrative error was acknowledged and rectified. The student had their Scholarship reinstated and was very excited to be able to commence their studies.

Additional Case studies can be provided upon request.

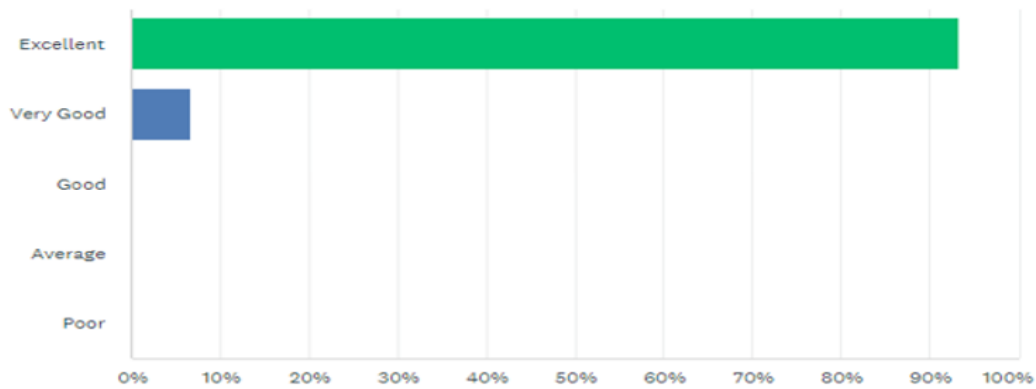
Summary Student Ombud Service Feedback Results - Students and Staff

Student Feedback: Note: 48% Response Rate

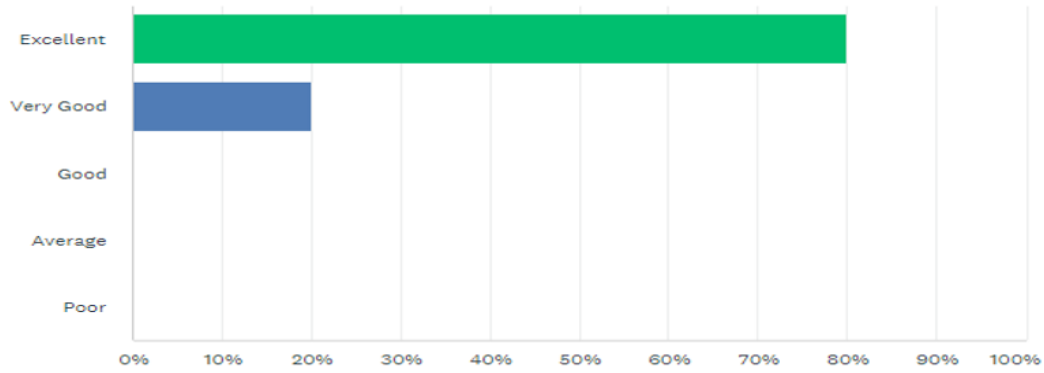
Q1. The Student Ombud tries to respond to your enquiry within 24 hours. How would you rate the response time from the Office with regards to your communications?



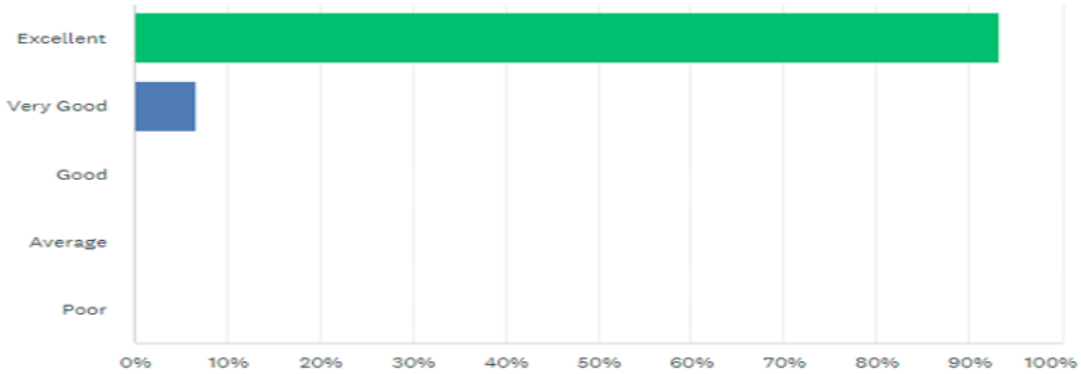
Q2. How clear was the Student Ombud’s explanation of their role and possible options available to you?



Q3. Whether you agreed or not with the outcome, how clear was the Student Ombud’s assessment of your matter?



Q4. Overall how would you rate the quality of your customer experience with the Student Ombud?



Q5. How likely is it that you would recommend the Student Ombud service to a friend or colleague?

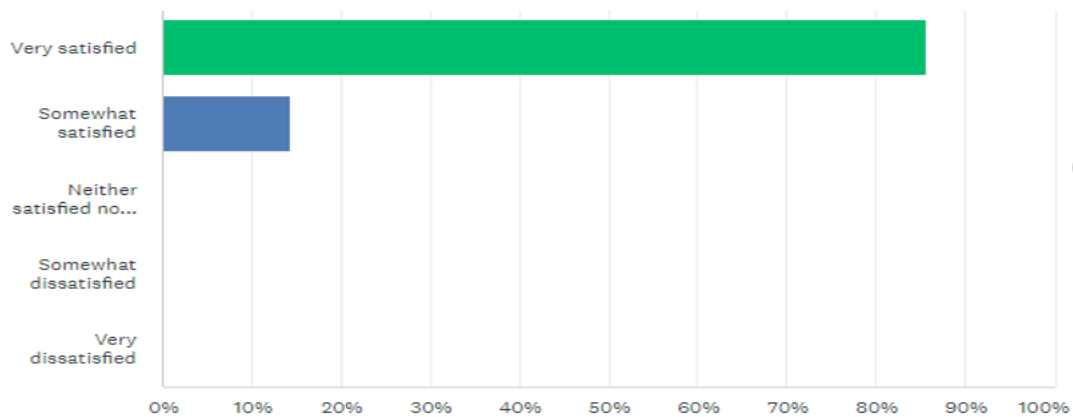


Q6. Do you have any other comments you would like to make about your experience with the Student Ombud office?

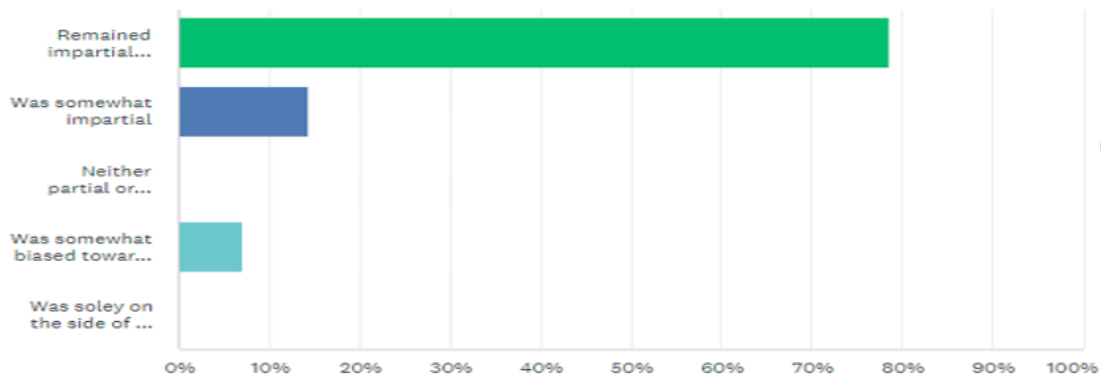
- Franco is fantastic. He responds to emails extremely quickly and presents himself with perfect balance of professional, friendly and understanding. He takes matters very seriously and its clear that he really cares about what he does.
- The Student Ombud attended to my inquiry very quickly and explained me very well his role. The communication was excellent and he attended to my matter without delay and I received the outcome within few days. His efforts are very much appreciated and I am fully satisfied! I recommend him to others who may be in a similar position.
- Recommendation is tarnished by personal outcome, not due to the result but the process itself. The office, with its powers and mechanisms seems unnecessarily hamstrung in how it can resolve issues, with too great an emphasis on preventing an issue from reoccurring rather than rectifying the issues that has occurred. While this singular goal certainly meets the office’s purpose, I believe both outcomes could be better facilitated by empowering the office further. It is moot whether the Ombud is ultimately meant to serve the University or Students, nor is it for me to say which it should, but I certainly would argue it is currently the former. This is not a reflection on Franco, who went above and beyond, but the office itself.
- Franco was wonderful and gave very specific and relevant advice to my case. He provided peace of mind and explanation of what was going on and what my options were. He was extremely helpful and would 110% recoomend him.
- Franco is amazing and honest
- I did not expect such considerate quick and detailed service.

Staff Feedback - Note: 40% Response Rate

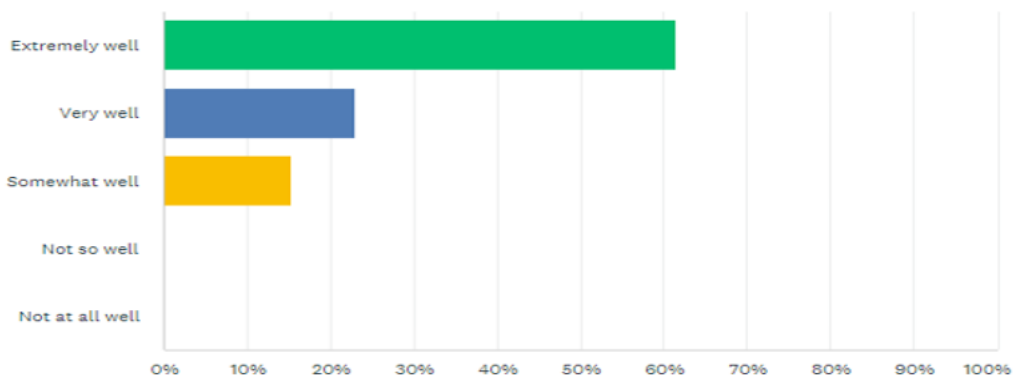
Q1. Overall, how satisfied, or dissatisfied are you with the approach undertaken to matters when the Student Ombud is involved?



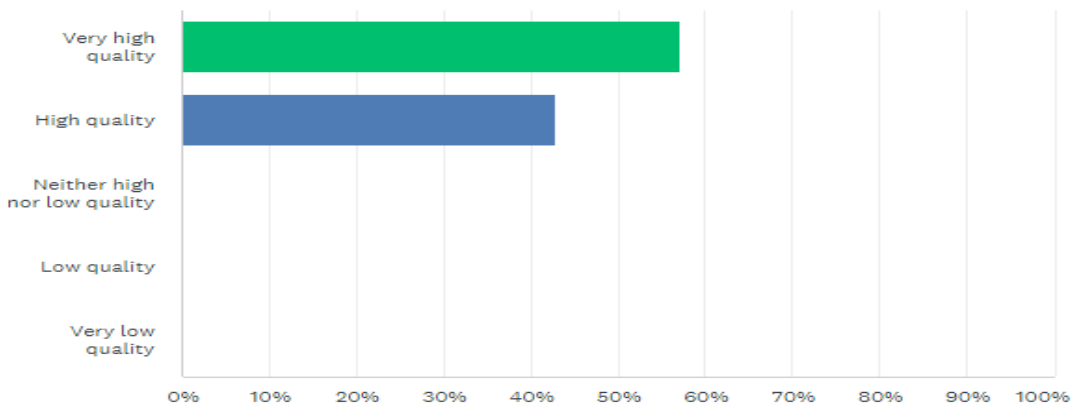
Q2. To what extent do you believe the Student Ombud maintained impartiality? Select the one that most applies



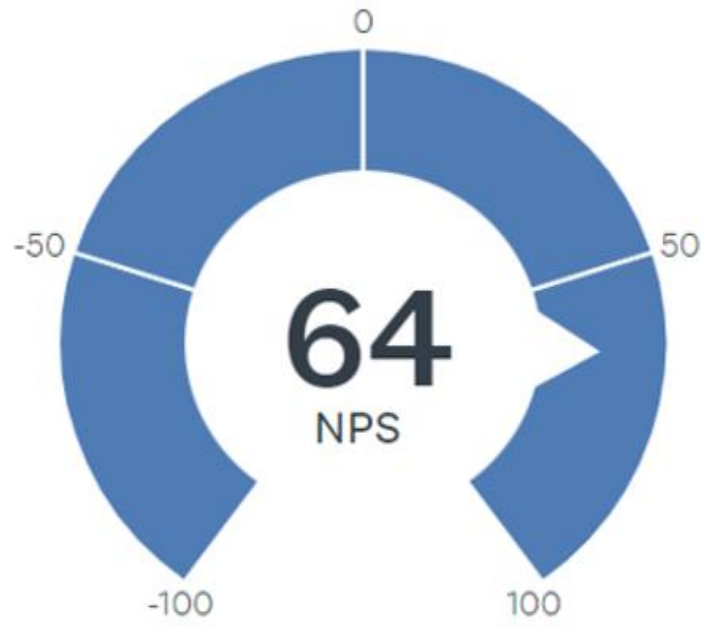
Q3. Overall, how well does the student Ombud meet your needs as a staff member, when responding to student concerns or complaints?



Q4. How would you rate the quality of the Student Ombud service?



Q5. How likely is it that you would recommend the Student Ombud service to a friend or colleague?



Q6. Do you have any comments about your experience with the Student Ombud office?

- Very helpful, approachable, and able to see both sides of any situation. The current Student Ombud is doing an excellent job!
- This was my first experience with the Ombud and I was very impressed with the professional, collegial and strategic approach to the management of student concerns. Very impressed!
- Nothing comes to mind
- I've rated Question 2 as slightly biased towards the student, but that is not a complaint, I think that's probably how the role of the Student Ombud should appear to a member of the university staff.