

STUDENT OMBUD

ANNUAL REPORT

2002

Introduction

The Student Ombud service for students commenced in late August 2002 following a period of procedure and infrastructure development. However, a number of students (10) requested assistance from the Ombud Office in June and July. The Student Ombud, Roger Windle, commenced in the position on 29 April 2002 (0.5 time) and the Administrative Assistant (shared time with Chancellery Reception and Peter Cardwell) Sandra Ciaramella commenced on 11 June 2002.

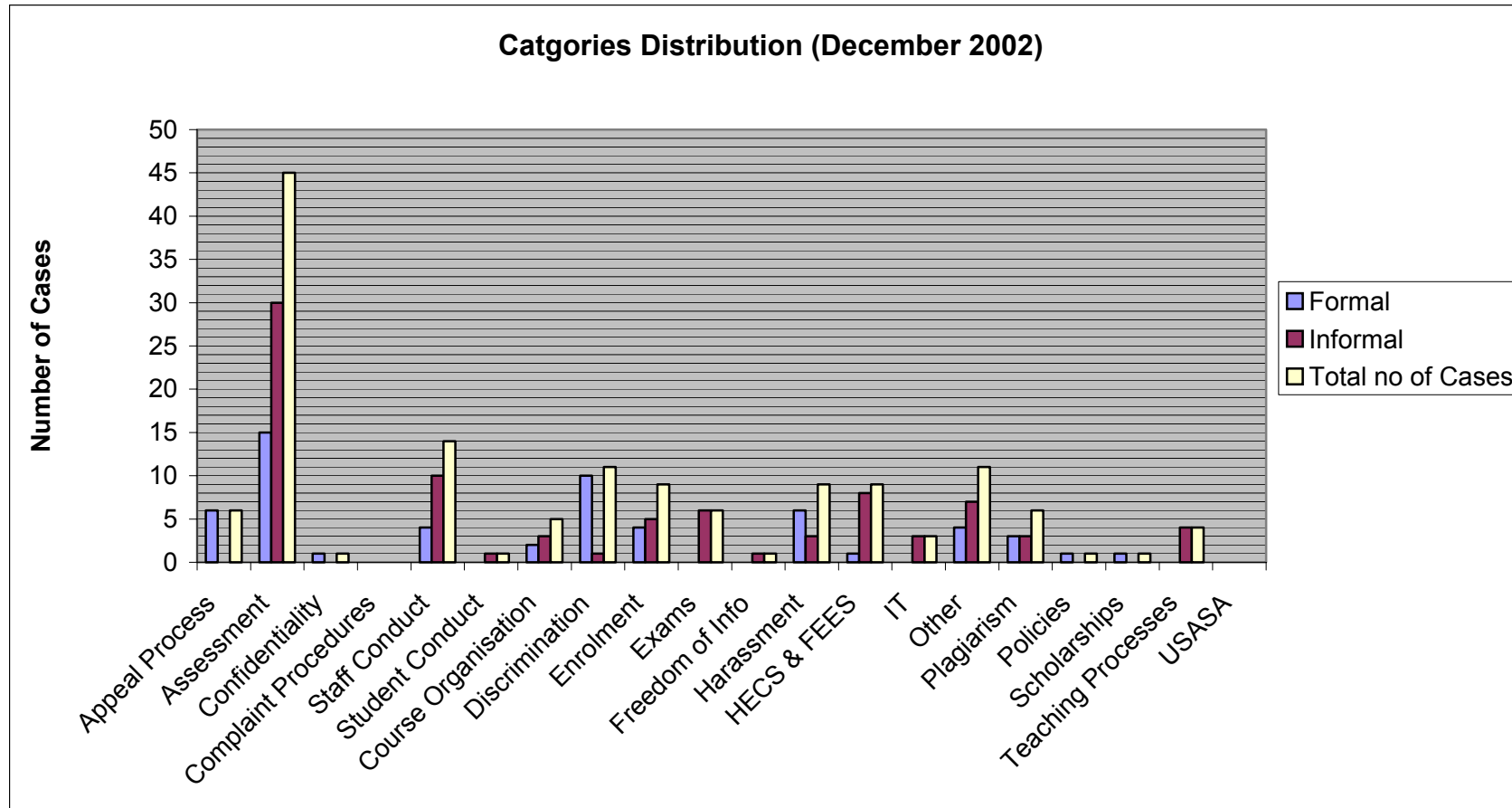
A review of all available websites of Australian Universities with established Ombudsman and/or Deans of Students together with visits to QUT and UTS informed the developmental process. An Ombud Advisory Group meets regularly and the membership and terms of reference are included as appendix 1. It was quickly recognised that to deal with potential conflicts of interest, gender issues and periods of recreation and sick leave that an appropriate academic staff member should be identified to stand in for the Student Ombud when necessary. Ronda Schloite from Education, Underdale has agreed to perform this role in an honorary capacity. The services of Ronda were not required in 2002.

The Student Ombud with the assistance of the Ombud Advisory Group has completed a draft 'Policy and Procedures for the Student Ombud' which is included as appendix 2.

To the end of December, 131 students requested services from the Student Ombud Office. Of these 80 were classified as informal and 51 as formal*. The majority of contact (80) are managed by Sandra who provides advice and performs a filtering process. If issues cannot be resolved at the local level they are passed to the Ombud who will have a conversation with the student (face to face, telephone or email) and usually proceed to a formal process of resolution.

** Informal is defined as resolved without the intervention of the Student Ombud. Formal is defined as requiring Student Ombud involvement*

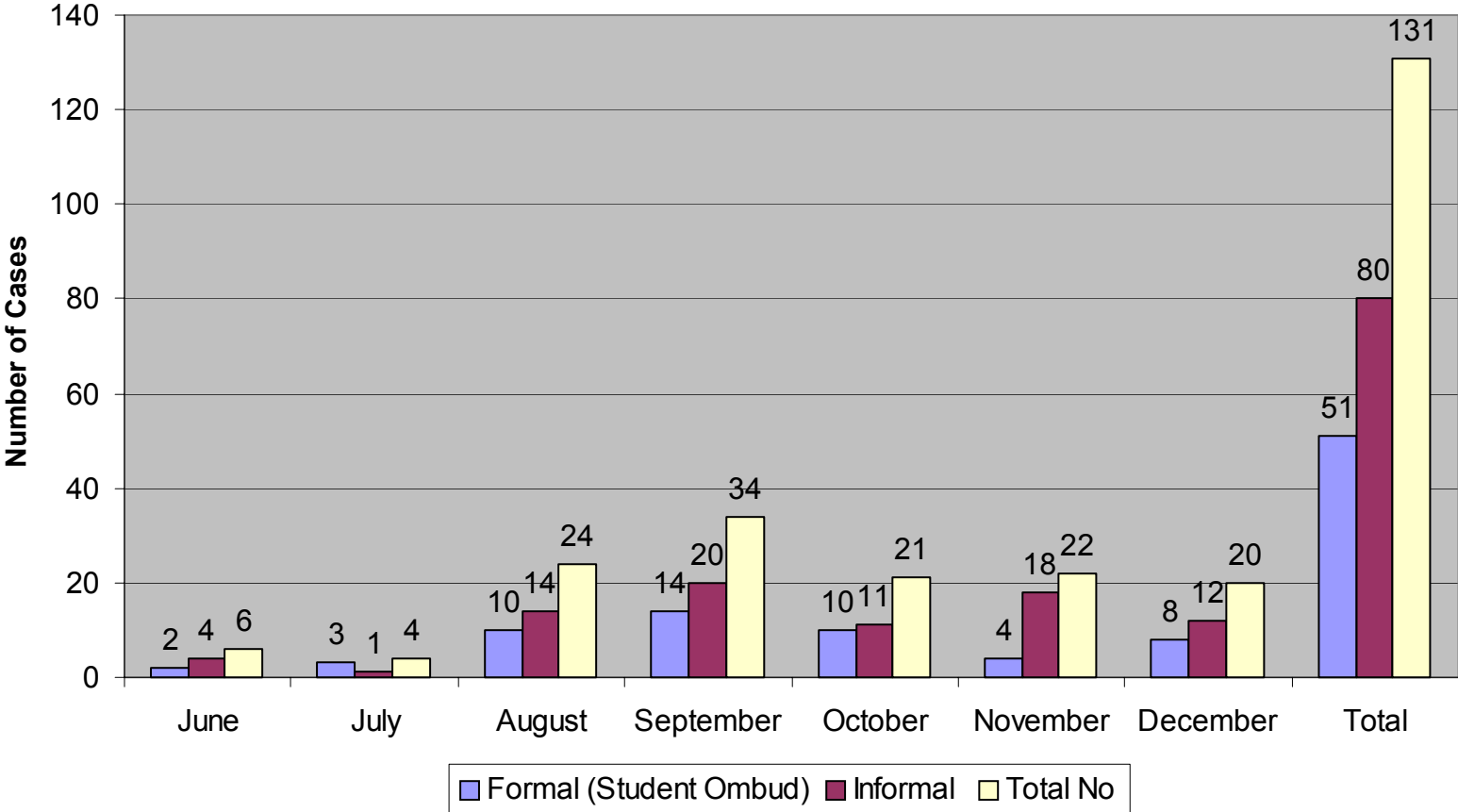
OMBUD STATISTICS



* categories developed on advice from other University Ombuds with local variations

OMBUD STATISTICS

Formal/Informal Cases



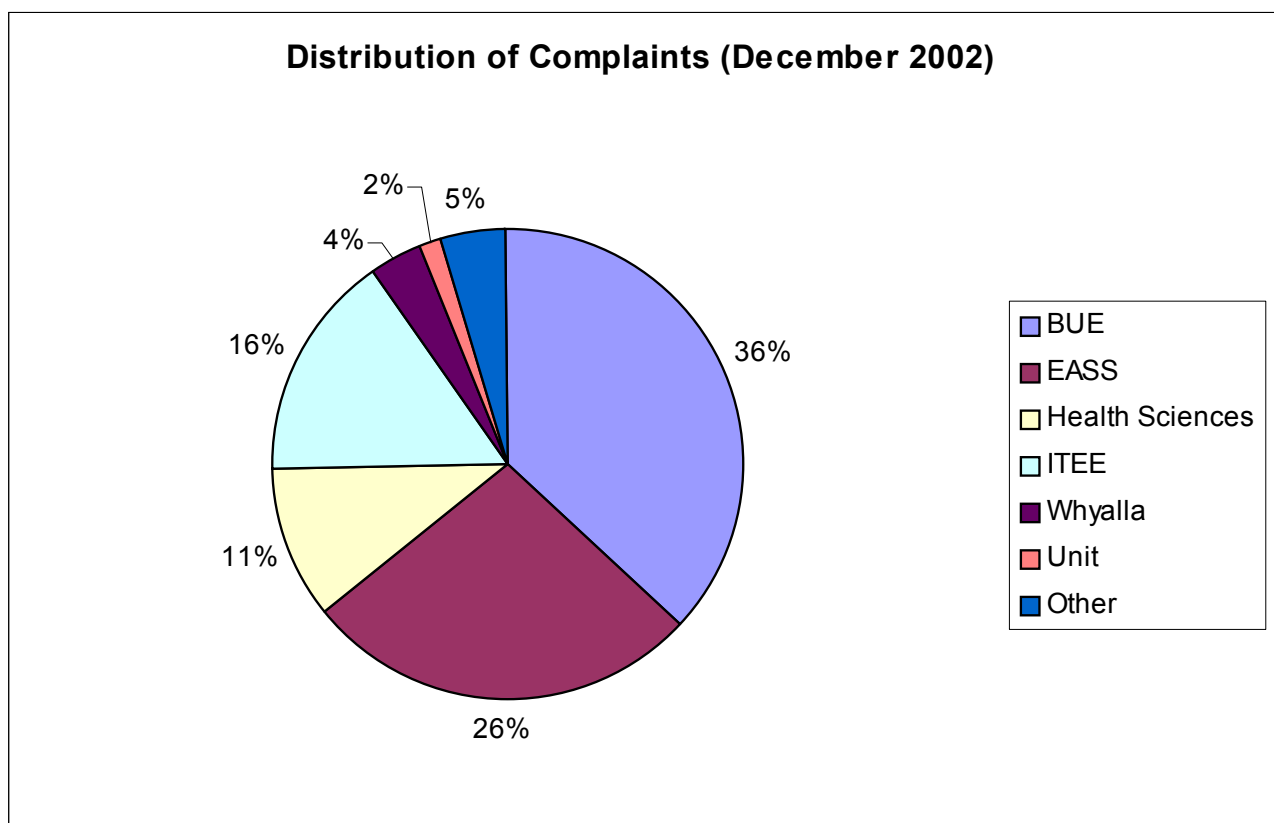
Not unexpectedly, assessment issues were the most common complaint. However many were resolved by directing the student to the local level according to the Assessment Policies and Procedures protocol. Of 54 cases, 35 were informal and therefore resolved without Ombud intervention.

The Ombud handled the majority of discrimination and harassment issues including attending to 2 acute cases involving on campus harassment.

It is impossible to predict the time taken to resolve formal complaints and experience so far has required periods from 1 day to 3+ months. Discussions with the State Ombudsman's Office reveal that it is not unusual for the more complicated investigations to occur over a 12+ month period.

The 'other' category includes carparking (4), dial-up access (1) prizes and awards (1) correspondence (1) leave of absence (1) legal advice (1) and library (1).

An Ombud complaint database is included as Appendix 3.



No attempt has been made to correlate complaints per area with enrolled student numbers at this stage. Students accessing the service are from the entire spectrum of students, under and post graduate, research degrees, FPOS, internal, external (including Queensland and Poland) but no transnational students.

Ombud Independence

It is essential to maintain the reality and perception of the independence of the Student Ombud. This led to the recent decision of the November meeting of Academic Board that the Student Ombud cease to be a member of the Student Services Advisory Committee, in view of the possibility of a conflict of interest arising. When the role was originally proposed, the Pro Vice Chancellor: Access and Learning Support recommended that the Student Ombud sit on the following committees:

- APRC
- Student Services Advisory Committee
- TALC

as they deal with the development of policy and procedural matters on which the Student Ombud may be able to advise.

A review of Australian and international Ombud websites has revealed that only one Ombud (QUT) has specific committee responsibilities including :

- Academic Appeals Committee
- Admissions Appeals Committee
- Teaching and Learning Committee
- Student Support Management Network

The Ombud at QUT also has an advocacy role, which is unusual. No reference to committee responsibilities was found in other Australian websites. An overseas university (Ryerson University, Canada) comments that 'the Office of the Ombudsman shall be independent of all existing university and student administrative structure', therefore implying that the Ombud does not sit on any university committees.

Upon reflection, a case can be argued that non membership of committees will reinforce the reality and perception of independence – an essential attribute of an Ombud. However, being an advisor to any University committee as required seems to be entirely appropriate

Informing The University

The priority was to have the services of the Student Ombud Office available to students at the commencement of semester 2, 2002. The following informed students:

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| 16 August | Website published with a AA Disability Compliance rating. |
| 21 August | Email to all students, Posters and pamphlets to all Schools/Units, Bookmarks to Libraries and UniSA Student Association shops. |
| 31 August | Pamphlets to all students with audit notice mailout |
| | Article in UniNews and advertisement in Entrophy. |

A schedule of meetings with key staff groups is continuing and has included:

- Student Advisory Officers
- Equity Contacts
- Learning Connections – Student Counsellors
- UniSA Student Association Executive
- Whyalla Staff

Planned

- Heads of School group
- Learning Connection
- Division Managers
- Division Executives

In semester 1, 2003 a student survey is scheduled to determine the effectiveness of the promotion strategy.

Education Services For Overseas Student (ESOS) Act 2000

The Act requires the University to develop appropriate arrangements for independent grievance handling/disputes resolution, which are inexpensive and include a nominee of the student if the student so chooses. The procedures must allow for prompt resolution having regard to the duration of the overseas student stay in Australia on a student visa.

Following a review of potential private and public providers of appropriate services, Communication Mediation Services, a sub-service of the Southern Community Justice Centre, agreed to offer an independent grievance handling/dispute resolution to international students on a no cost basis. Normally the Student Ombud will refer the student to this service if an issue was unable to be resolved within the University.

Relationships With External Complaint Handling Organisations

Ombudsman South Australia : A good relationship is developing with this office which is keen to work collaboratively with the Student Ombud and to refer student complaints back to the University where appropriate.

A 'getting to know you' visit for all Student Ombud staff to meet personnel in the Ombudsman Office occurred in late 2002.

South Australian Equal Opportunity (EOC) : Comprehensive discussions with staff of EOC have assisted in developing and implementing complaint handling procedures relating to unlawful discrimination and harassment. Lines of communication are established and an effective relationship is developing. In 2003 EOC is providing a workshop 'Discrimination and Harassment: Responding to Student Enquiries' for key staff.

Equity

The Student Ombud met regularly with Shard Lorenzo, Director: Human Resources, to discuss current student issues and to clarify/develop the responsibilities of the Student Ombud pertaining to student equity. The aim of this ongoing engagement is to facilitate effective handling of complaints of unlawful discrimination and harassment involving students.

Systemic Issues

Identification of such issues and recommending change is an important part of the role. Examples include

- Negotiated Study Agreement procedures (some inconsistencies of application)
- Medici input data format
- Car Parking

The latter is an example of how the Ombud can influence systemic change. A small number of complaints within a short period of time and a subsequent recommendation by the Ombud acted as a catalyst to review the complaint procedures and for change to occur. Such has been the effectiveness of this process involving the Pro Vice Chancellor: Access and Learning Support and Neville Thiele, Manager: Services in relation to car-parking that complaints have ceased and this is no longer an ongoing issue.

This example reinforces that students should not have constraints placed on them when making complaints and acknowledging that there may be issues which may be less fundamental than others but nevertheless still need to be addressed.

Personal Reflections

No student complaints are identical and each bring their own challenge. As a University we can provide advice on procedures in print or electronic form but many students seem unable to access this information when a problem occurs. A Student Ombud Office provides a focus for students to not only complain but to seek advice. I am also somewhat surprised at the number of students who have apparent psychological issues which influence complaints (particularly about assessment).

The willingness of staff of the University to assist with the resolution of complaints has been of the highest order, particularly Learning Connection, SAS staff and the Student Association. A personal challenge is to convince academic staff that contact with the Ombud does not necessarily mean that something is 'wrong' but is usually just part of the information collection process. Surprisingly, there is often a great deal of anxiety if contacted by the Student Ombud. Further staff education of the role is planned.

Significant challenges and issues in the near future include :

- Embedding student discrimination and harassment complaint handling procedures across the University
- Awareness of the Ombud service for all University staff
- Providing clarity of complaint procedures for students with the production of simple easy to understand, step by step processes.
- Service to transnational students

Roger Windle

CASE STUDIES

- 1 Offensive email messages received by student.
Password shared
Outcome : Interview with respondent, warning that it is against Policy, password change, apology provided.
- 2 Female student alleges sexual harassment by peer in tutorial/practicals
Outcome : student provided with strategies to handle situation
- 3 FPOS precluded due to multiple failures.
Counsellor identified poor English skills and not of a standard required to successfully complete program. Investigation to determine any systemic issue.
Outcome : Student had 9 years of education in English medium – assumed appropriate to approve entry Yr 12 – TAFE – UniSA. Confirmed student had no grounds for appeal – process of entry and management of student appropriate.
- 4 FPOS unhappy with credit given. Confusion due to student completing a semester's courses in home country after applying to UniSA for entry.
Outcome : Situation verified with Program Director, advised to submit additional application.
- 5 Student appealed against preclusion to Director: Student Academic Services and denied, student believed that new evidence was provided.
Outcome : No new evidence, process was fair and according to University's policies and procedures.
- 6 FPOS concerned with credit awarded – appeared to be inconsistent with that given to other students.
Outcome : Inconsistent application of credit stipulated in the Division's credit transfer policy. Additional credit units awarded.
- 7 Student with a disability unable to resolve Incomplete grade due to an acute medical condition.
Outcome : With the approval of the Program Director "I" changed to "W" and student assisted with an Application for Remission of HECS debt in Special Circumstances.