



Student Ombud Office

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Memorandum

To **Members of Council**
From **Anne Simpson**
 Student Ombud
Date **July 2004**
Subject **2004 Half yearly Student Ombud Report**

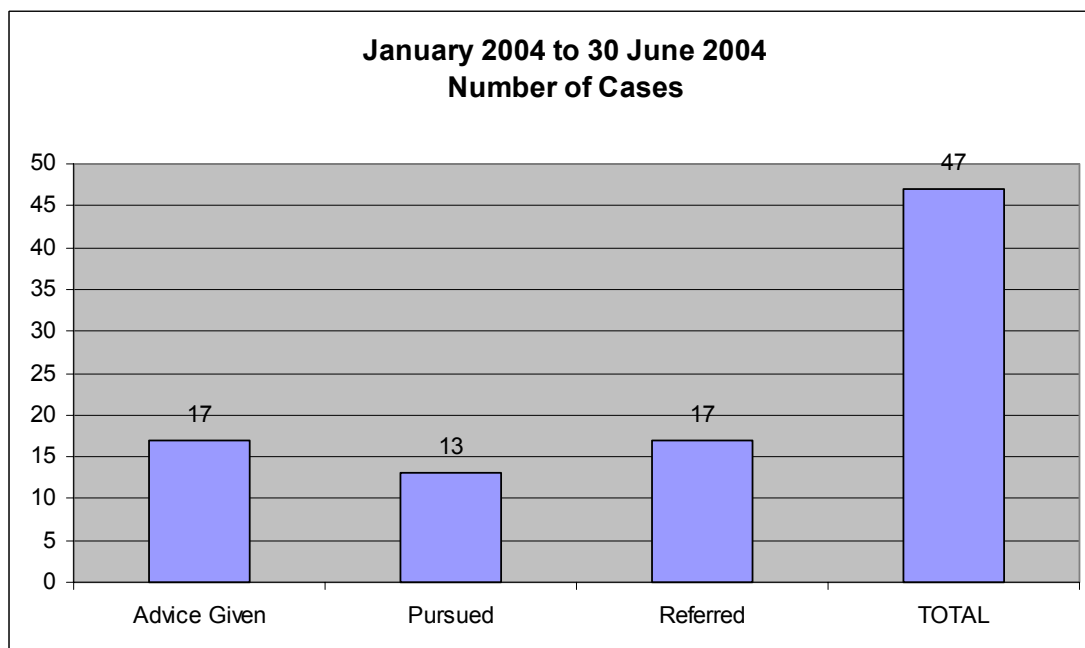
1 ENQUIRIES

1.1 Number of enquiries

A total of 47 students have approached the Office for assistance since January 2004.

Table 1 illustrates the distribution of enquires which are categorised in terms of whether the Office offers *advice* to the student, *refers* the student on to the person or unit which can deal with their problem, or whether the complaint is *pursued* on behalf of the student. In 13 instances it was felt that the student had a grievance which warranted further investigation.

Table 1



1.2 Comparison with 2003

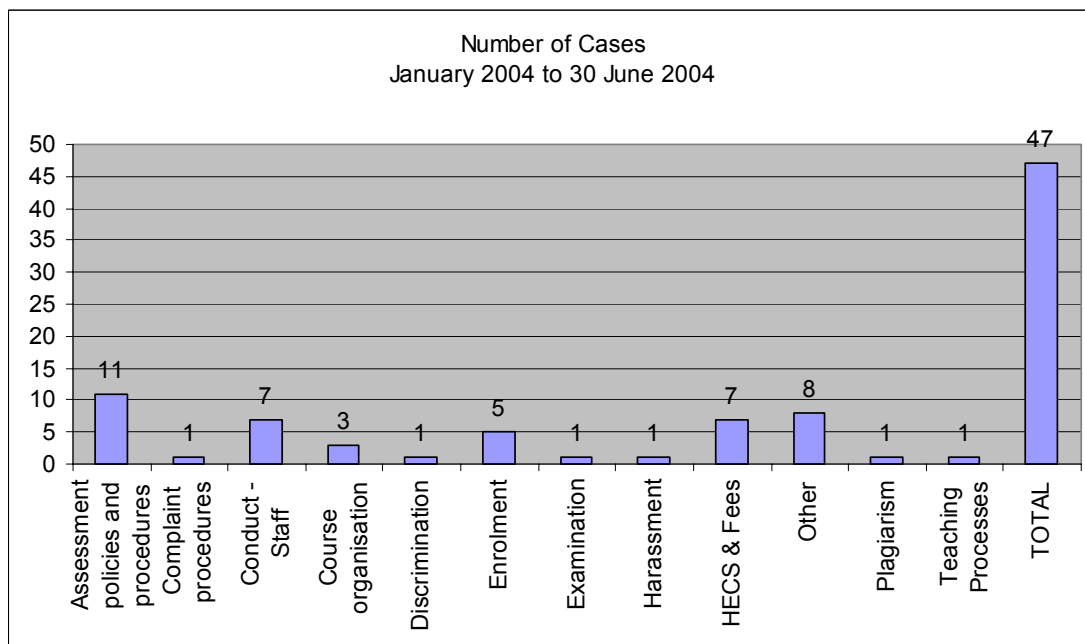
For this period last year 78 students approached the office for assistance, and 29 complaints were investigated as opposed to 13 this year. The Student Advisory Officers (SAOs) from the Student Association have reported a similar decline in the number of students approaching them for help. This has been in spite of continuing publicity directed to students (distribution of brochures, emails, advertisement in student newspaper). Possible reasons for this decline are:

- growing familiarity of staff and students with the grievance procedures
- the effectiveness of the procedures
- an increasing awareness that if matters are not satisfactorily resolved at the local level, that students may turn to the Ombud.

1.3 Category of Enquiry

Table 2 below indicates the broad nature of the issues of concern to students.

Table 2



Of the 13 complaints which were investigated by the Student Ombud, seven were resolved in a manner which resulted in the student's situation being improved. Two complaints were not substantiated and four are still in the process of resolution.

1.4 External Bodies

As was the case last year, there is no evidence to suggest that any of the complaints investigated have been taken up by any external body such as The State Ombudsman or the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. This again suggests that the students who have approached the office for assistance in the resolution of their grievances have been satisfied with the outcome achieved. There was one case which had been with the State Ombudsman for around two years and for which a report has been received. The report found that the University had behaved properly and that the student had not been disadvantaged in any way.

1.5 Alleged Unlawful Discrimination and Sexual Harassment cases

All cases of alleged unlawful discrimination and sexual harassment were investigated.

Unlawful Discrimination

There was one complaint of alleged unlawful discrimination which was investigated and found to be without substance.

Sexual Harassment

There was one case of alleged sexual harassment. This was from a transnational student studying in Singapore against a lecturer who was on contract with UniSA. It appeared that there was some substance to the complaint, however the lecturer apologized and the student withdrew the complaint.

2 ISSUES ARISING FROM INVESTIGATIONS

There have been a number of complaints which, in the process of investigation, have revealed implications for other students, or were indicative of broader issues which needed to be addressed. In such instances recommendations have been made to relevant staff members in Schools, Divisions or Units.

Examples where a student complaint and subsequent investigation have indicated a problem which needed to be addressed to avoid possible future problems have included :

- The wording of letters which go to students informing them that the academic review process has identified them as making unsatisfactory progress. Students need to be made aware that the review panel will look at their entire academic record, not just the previous semester.
- The need for Student and Academic Services to alert students to re-check their final grades before re-enrolling in case the grades have been amended.
- The importance of ensuring that procedures for moderating results from different markers in a course are in fact working.

The case of the student in Singapore referred to above has raised a number of issues which are being pursued by the Student Ombud. These include:

- The nature of the responsibility the Ombud has for transnational students

- How this role and responsibility is communicated to such students
- What information about UniSA's policies and procedures are given to contract staff overseas
- The availability of these policies and procedures in other languages for transnational staff and students
- The nature of the agreement between UniSA and partner institutions with regard policies and grievance procedures, and how and by whom procedures are implemented offshore.

3 PROCEDURES FOR THE RESOLUTION OF UNLAWFUL DISCRIMINATION AND HARASSMENT GRIEVANCES (STUDENTS)

These procedures were approved by Council in May and are now available through the University web site. All student grievance policies now include reference to the Student Ombud. The procedures may also be accessed through the Ombud Home page where there are also flowcharts providing a simplified overview.

4 STUDENT OMBUD ADVISORY GROUP

The group has met three times this year, including one meeting to which staff members from the wider University were invited. The purpose of such a meeting was to provide a forum whereby staff could raise issues relating to the role of Student Ombud which might be of concern. In the event only 2 staff who were not official members of the Group attended. The only issue which was raised was one by the Student Advisory Officer (SAO) who wanted clarification about the procedure for students approaching the Ombud. The Ombud advised that students should make direct contact with her, but that an SAO was welcome to attend and advise.

It might be assumed from the lack of response to the invitation that staff in general are satisfied with how the Office is operating. The Ombud has also met with key groups and is reaching most staff through attendance at School Board meetings (see below).

Another such open meeting will be held in the second half of the year.

5 COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

5.1 Academic Staff

The Ombud has a schedule to address all School Boards to meet as many staff as possible to talk through the role of the position, to familiarize them with the various grievance procedures, and to alert staff to their responsibilities with regard providing a safe and harassment free environment for students. So far she has met with approximately a third of the Schools, and should have attended all School Board meetings by the end of 2004.

5.2 Induction

The Student Ombud has also met with relevant staff to ensure that the role of the Ombud is embedded in all induction materials for new staff, contract and sessional staff, and staff teaching overseas.

5.3 Students

A pamphlet encouraging students to 'Speak out' against discrimination and sexual harassment was included in new students' orientation packages. Twelve thousand Student Ombud information brochures were distributed to onshore domestic students with HECS notices in June.

An email to all students was sent in June reminding them about the Ombud service, and an advertisement has been placed in the Entropy.

5.4 Equity Contacts

On July 9, in conjunction with Justene Knight from the Human Resources Unit, a workshop for Equity Contacts was held to review the updated grievance procedures.

5.5 Conference for University Ombuds

UniSA hosted the bi-annual conference of University Ombuds and Deans of Students in April 2004. There were 28 delegates from 20 universities throughout Australia and New Zealand. Issues discussed included resourcing the Office, terms of reference, record keeping, professional development and work load. In all these areas UniSA appeared to be in a leading position. Other topics of interest related to plagiarism, mental illness, freedom of information, and conflict of interest.

5.6 Outside Bodies

The Ombud continues to maintain communication with the Equal Opportunity Commission and with the staff in the State Ombudsman's Office.

RECOMMENDATION

That Council note the half yearly 2004 Student Ombud Report

Anne Simpson
Student Ombud