



**University of
South Australia**

**Office of the Student Ombud Report
2024**

1. Executive Summary

The Student Ombud (the Ombud) received a total of 111 Service Requests (SRs) in 2024 (compared with 141 in 2023). Service Requests include student complaints (*responsive*) and requests for education, training, advice on managing matters (*proactive*). There was a 30% decrease in student complaints made to the Ombud and a 2% increase in the number of *proactive* requests received from staff as compared to the previous year. While the number of individual complaints has continued to fall over the last four years, key themes raised by students who approached the Ombud largely remain the same. These often include fear and apprehension in formalising a complaint, particularly when they are raising concerns about staff performance, communications or conduct, dissatisfaction with administrative decisions and reasons provided, problems experienced whilst on placements, and some confusion and complexity over which external review options are appropriate to escalate their complaints if necessary.

There continues to be a drop in formal complaints to the Ombud office. This correlates with the establishment of the Tell Us Team in 2022. Students can submit their complaint online to the Tell Us Team who will triage the complaint and redirect to the local area for resolution. Previously students were accessing the Student Ombud services before exhausting all local processes in the first instance.

Throughout 2024 the Student Ombud has provided recommendations and suggestions for improvement to Academic and Central Units across the University, including:

- For Higher Research degree candidates, recommendations regarding documentation and more regular communications to students if supervisory relationships break down.
- Ensuring the new Adelaide University maintains the ‘at arm’s length’ nature and ‘separateness’ of an Ombud service from day-to-day management decision making.
- The need to establish clarity regarding student feedback, appeals and complaints pathways and systems for the new Adelaide University.
- Recommendations to the National Student Ombudsman Office (NSO) advisory committee on both operational aspects and the approach to managing student complaints, including the need to check with Student Ombuds, at those universities that have one.

The establishment of a new National Student Ombudsman Office (NSO) is a significant development in the Australian Higher Education sector. Given UniSA has maintained a Student Ombud service, we are well positioned to establish effective communication and working protocols with the NSO and increase awareness of the benefits of utilising the internal Student Ombud service.

Throughout the year, the Ombud receives requests from staff for presentations, and advice or suggestions on handling more complex matters at the local Academic Unit level. There continues to be correlation between the increased demand for *proactive* services provided by the Ombud over the last 5 years and the decline in formalised student complaints particularly over the last three years. The Ombud is regularly invited to present education and training sessions to both the Australasian Complaint Handlers and Ombuds Network (AUCON) and European Network of Ombuds in Higher Education (ENOHE).

The Ombud ‘raises 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. Feedback from students and staff on the Student Ombud service continues to be positive. This is often despite the student not always being able to achieve their desired outcome and staff not necessarily being in agreement with a change in position. The role continues to rely on a fundamental principle of 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*.

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 spends 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 key recommendations made throughout the year.

3. Student Ombud 2024 Activities

There was a total of 111 Service Requests (SRs) raised through the Ombud in 2024 as compared with 141 for 2023. Of these, 71 were complaints received from students (*Responsive matters*), and 40 were requests from staff for advice, presentations, and training (*Proactive matters*).

(a) Total Service Requests

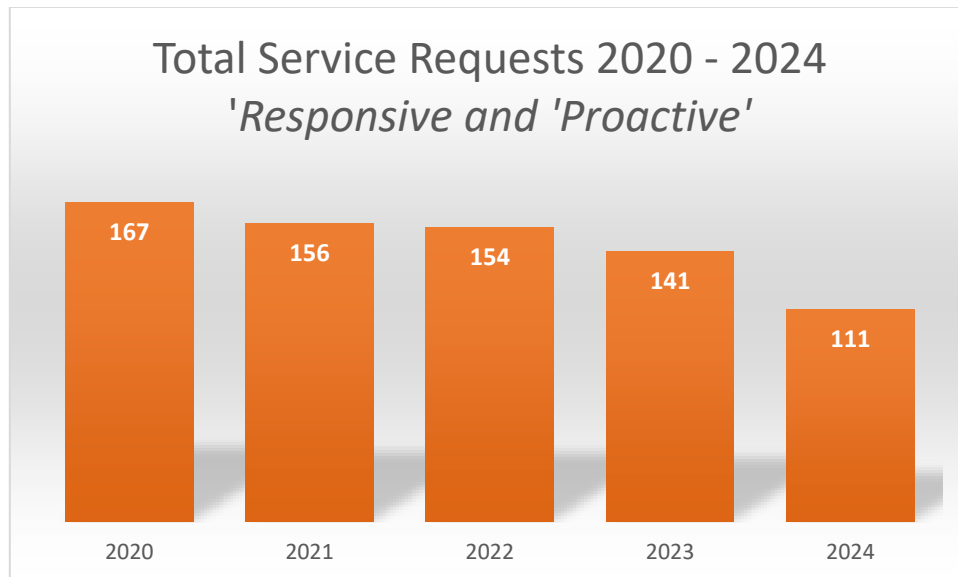


Figure 1: Total number Service Requests* (responsive and Proactive) since 2020

(b) Number of Student Complaints

A total of 71 complaints were raised through the Ombud's office in 2024. This represents a 30% decrease from the previous year and is in line with a decline in complaints over the last 5 years.

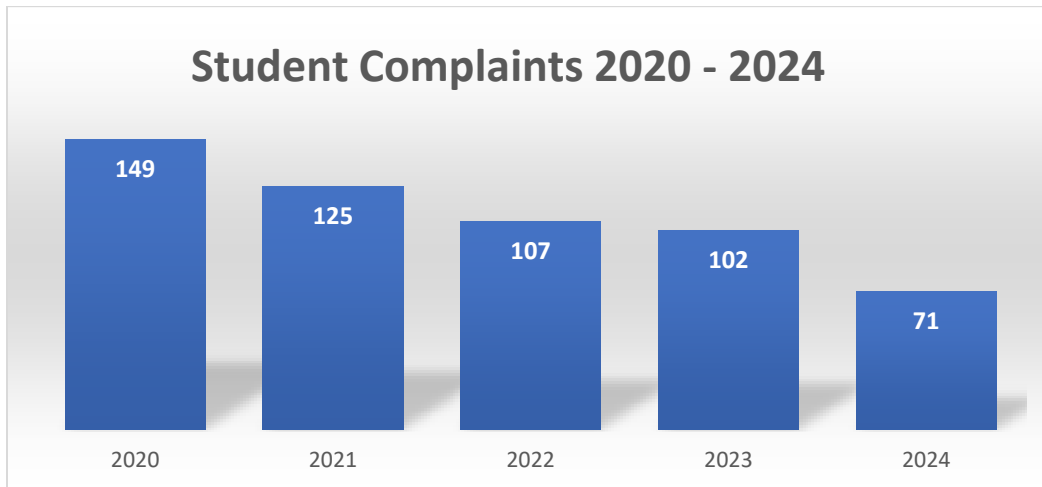


Figure 2: Number of student complaints to Student Ombud office since 2020 (the last 5 years)

(c) Number of Proactive Services Requests (SRs)

There was a total of 40 proactive SRs received during 2024 (39 in 2023). These include requests for advice from the Ombud on policy review, advice on handling matters and presentations or training workshops. A key theme in 2024 was the handling of problems and communications associated with managing higher research degree supervision issues.

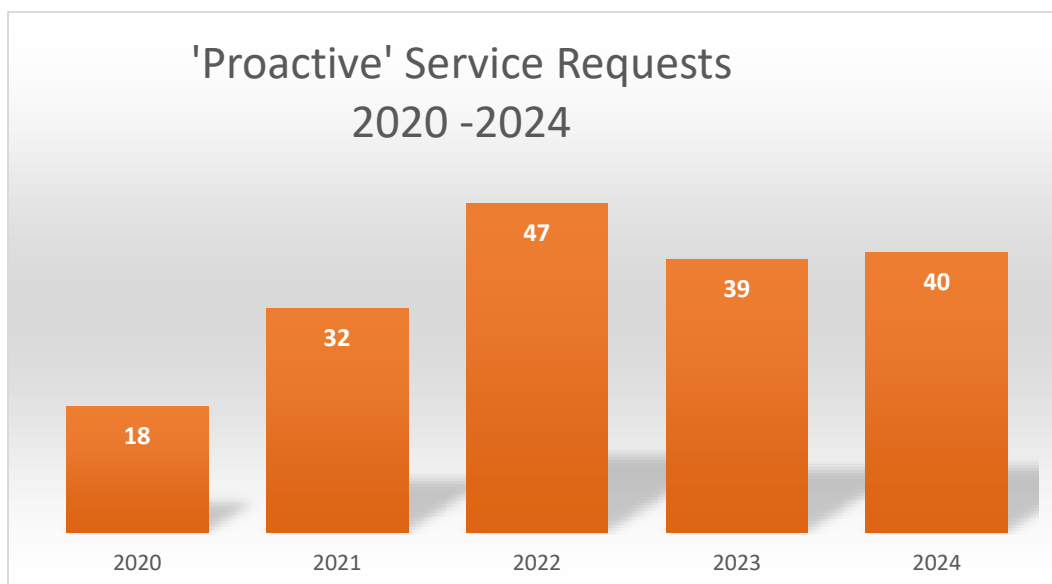


Figure 3: Proactive Service Requests 2020 -2024

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

The time taken to resolve and close 111 SRs varied and is dependent on the complexity of matters raised and the number of stakeholders involved.

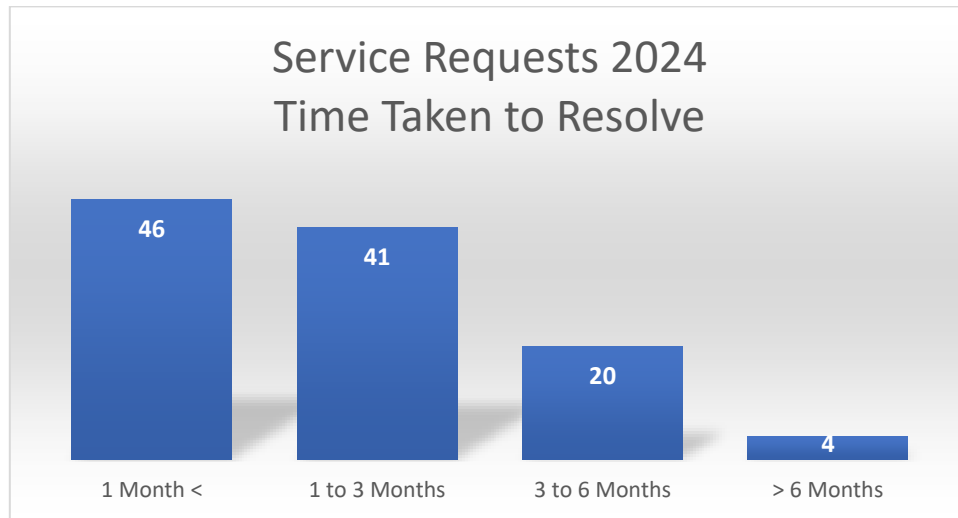


Figure 4: Time taken to resolve all SRs raised in 2024

Of the 111 SR's, 41% (n=46) of issues were resolved in less than 30 days; 37% (n=41) within 31-90 days; 18% (n=20) took between 90 and 180 days; 4% (n=4) took longer than 6 months.

(e) **Student Complaints – Domestic / International, and Program Type / Category**

During 2024 student complaints were categorised as follows:

- 73% of complaints were raised by domestic students (62% in 2023) and 27% came from international students (40% in 2023).
- 80% of complaints came from undergraduate students, 8% from Higher Degree Research (HDR) students, 7% from Postgraduate (Masters) students and 5% of complaints were 'unclassified'. The 'unclassified' means the student was not enrolled in 2024 courses but was raising complaint/s from previous study periods at UniSA. In 2023, 64% of complaints came from undergraduate, 17% Postgraduate (Masters), 7% HDR and 12% 'Other' (SAIBT, OUA Short/ Foundations Studies). As a general observation, the types of complaints received from HDR students are difficult to resolve and are usually associated with difficulties experienced with the supervisory relationship, either finding a new one, keeping one and/or disagreements over feedback and assessment.

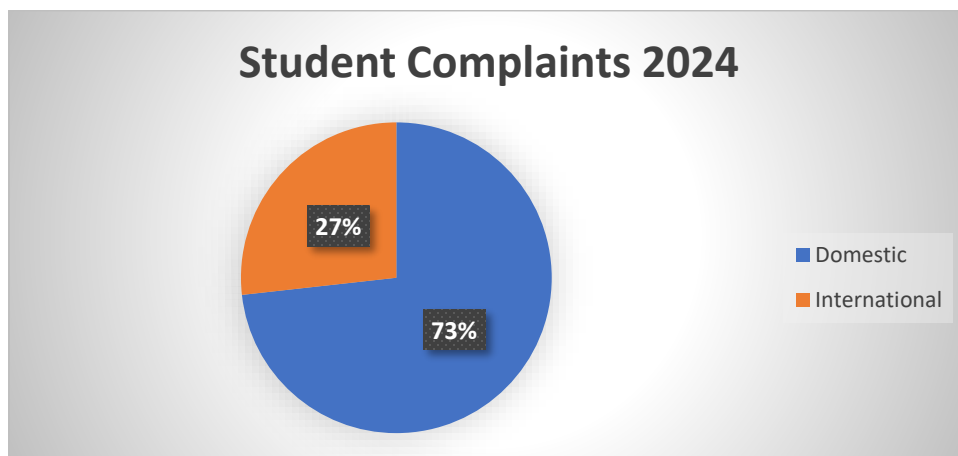


Figure 5: Percentage of student complaints Domestic / International 2024

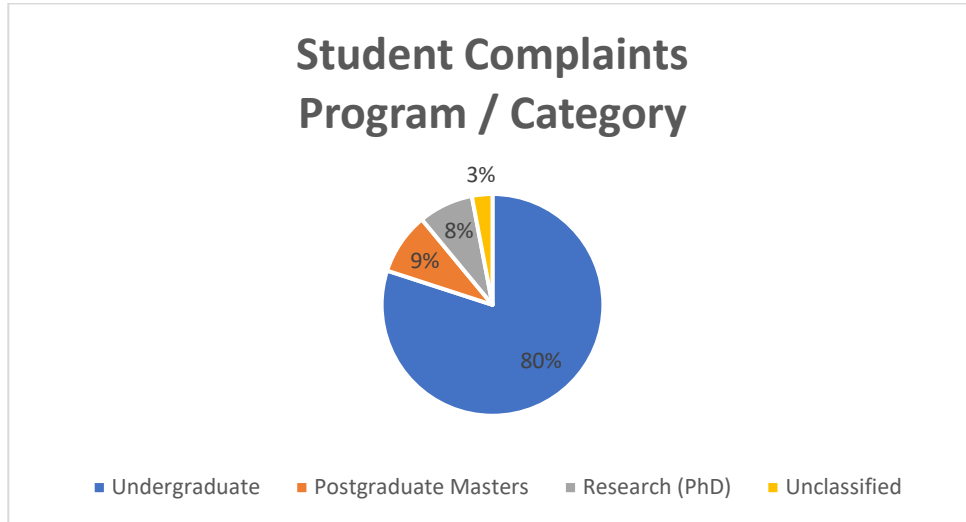


Figure 6: Category of student complaints by program / course type 2024

(e) 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, Academic Unit based decisions.
- **Appeals Processes** includes specific complaints about why a student’s appeal has not been allowed to proceed to forums such as Student Appeals Committee (SAC) and in particular request for reasoning as to why threshold criteria have not been met.
- **Discrimination Harassment or Bullying:** specifically referring to discrimination on one of the anti-discrimination specified grounds, i.e. race, sex, sexuality, disability etc. or 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.
- **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 i.e. time taken to find placements, alleged supervisor problems,
- **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.

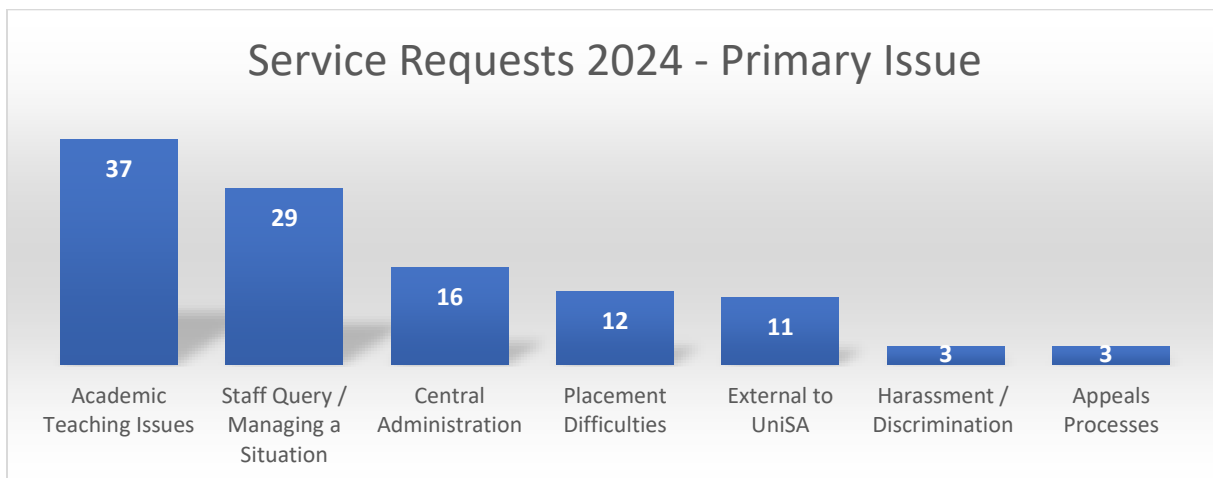


Figure 7: Category of complaints by primary issue 2024

(f) **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).

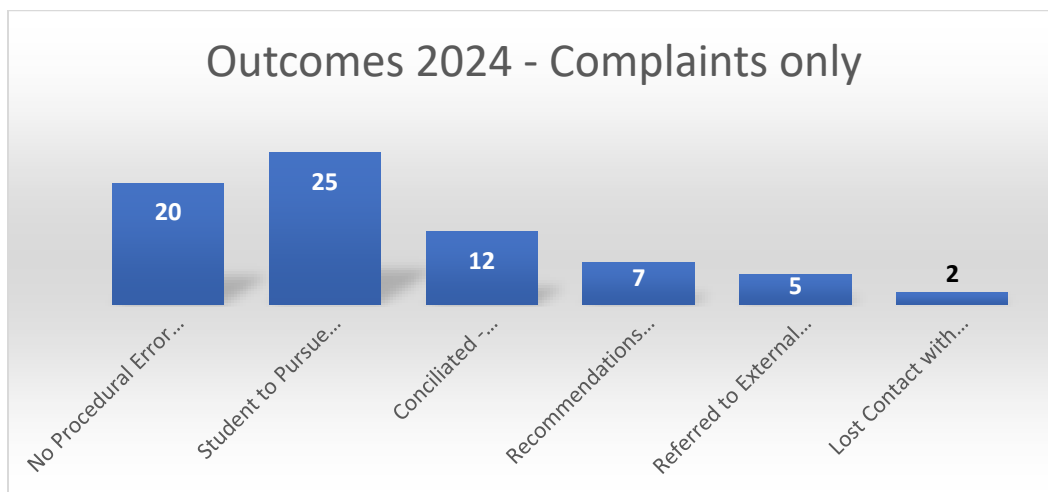


Figure 8: Outcome of complaints brought to Student Ombud in 2024

(g) **Service Requests Complaints only by Academic Unit / Area**

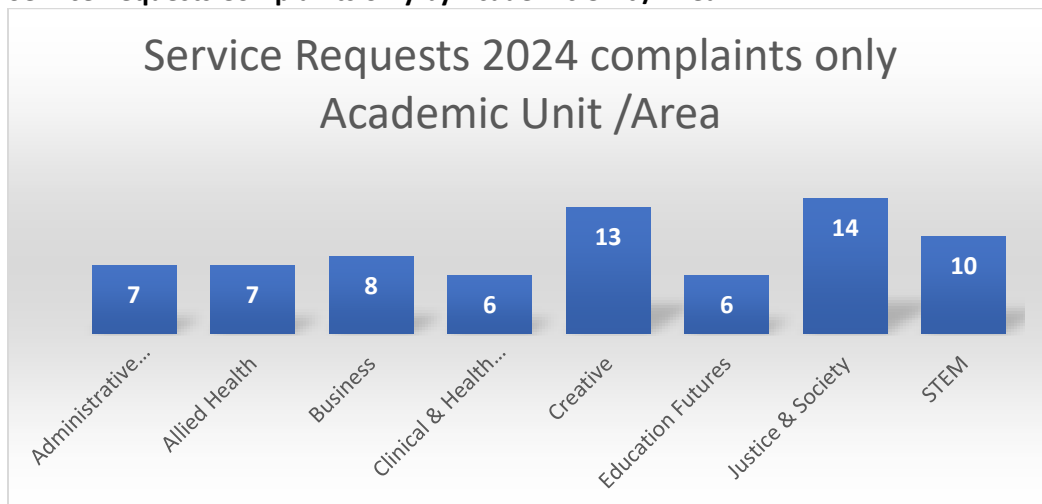


Figure 9: Service Requests student complaints only by Academic Unit / Area in 2024

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

The following points are based on the Ombud's reflections of key issues and themes that arose during 2024. These are based on complaints raised by students with the Ombud, anecdotal matters raised by students and staff (where neither students nor staff wish to have their details recorded), and recent communications with external review agencies on the future of student complaint handling and avenues of redress for students.

(a) Supervising Higher Degree Research Students

Complaints received from HDR students continue to be complex to manage. Some of these matters have raised questions about inconsistency in how requests for extensions from students are managed across different Academic Units. Some relate to understanding how supervision will take place including differences between 'minimum' number of supervisors and the 'ideal' number of supervisors that should be in place. Changes in supervisor panels and when, if and how this is communicated to students was also a theme that was raised throughout the year. Students who have progressed 'straight from' undergraduate to higher level studies appear to be more familiar with the expectations regarding supervision. Others new to the University or perhaps returning to higher degree level and research driven studies have found it difficult to understand how often and indeed how engaged and/or available their supervisor should be. A suggestion previously raised but still relevant is around 'better orientation and communication' for new students to the 'supervisory relationship' and training for supervisors on providing constructive feedback at this level.

To date, suggestions for improvements to managing and communicating HDR supervision changes have been raised with the University's relevant leaders. It is difficult to achieve uniformity or consistency across the university on this area as these are indeed complex matters to resolve. The practicalities associated with finding a suitable replacement supervisor who is familiar with the specific research field and is willing and able to take on a candidate can take a long time to resolve.

(b) Complexities associated with managing complaints about staff conduct and intersections with PTC

Where students raise complaints about staff conduct, these can be complex and challenging to manage. Based on regular discussions with colleagues in other Australian universities, this is a challenge across the sector. Often the local Academic Unit is best placed to assess these matters in the first instance. Sometimes it can be difficult to properly assess whether the issues raised are valid and/or relate to communication styles, performance itself or conduct. As a result, the Ombud has encouraged the Academic Unit to liaise with PTC on the appropriate approach. That said, it can raise concerns about the level of real or perceived bias or impartiality, level of skill required to manage complaints and who is responsible for keeping the students informed of progress, approach and of course outcomes.

(c) Adelaide University

The decision has been made to retain the Student Ombud role for Adelaide University. The Ombud has provided input into new policy and procedures for Adelaide University, and this work will continue in 2025.

(d) The proposed National Student Ombudsman office Canberra

The establishment of a new National Student Ombudsman Office (NSO) in 2025 is a significant change in the Australian Higher Education sector. It will become the most relevant external review body available for students to question and challenge universities internal handling of student related complaints and processes. The types of matters the NSO can consider include student safety and wellbeing, gender-based violence, discrimination, racism, antisemitism and Islamophobia, enrolment and exclusion, applications

for special considerations, providers changes to course structures, providers complaint and appeal procedures and providers failure to clearly explain their decisions.

The Ombud provided input to the University's written submission and feedback to the on-communication protocols and approach to handling new complaints escalated to them. The Ombud has also been in regular contact with the new NSO to ensure UniSA matters that may proceed to them in future, have exhausted all internal review mechanisms.

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

Throughout 2024 the Ombud raised suggestions and recommendations to relevant senior staff within Academic and Central Units. While recommendations and suggestions are considered by the University, not all are necessarily adopted. Suggestions and recommendations for 2024 largely centred on suggestions for the new Adelaide University and included:

- Recommendations regarding Higher Research Degree (HDR) policy and procedures and in particular communications to students when they experience a change in supervisors. **Under consideration.**
- Recommendation regarding consulting with People Talent and Culture staff (PTC) to seek assistance with investigations of complaints involving allegations of staff performance or conduct. **Accepted.**
- Recommendation to PTC on the need to maintain communications with students when matters have been referred to PTC as per Student Complaints Resolution Procedure. **Under consideration.**
- Recommendations regarding structure, approach to managing student feedback, appeals, and complaints systems and positioning of the Student Ombud role for Adelaide University. **Some accepted, others under consideration**

In addition to internal recommendations the Ombud provided input into the advisory and working committees regarding the establishment of a new National Student Ombudsman Office (NSO).

6. Case Studies for 2024

Appendix 1. includes three 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.

7. Administrative Matters

The Ombud office again made some recommendations regarding systems improvements for the Oracle Cloud as its Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system for the new Adelaide University. The CRM 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 Ombud, confidentiality, and independence from the other University records.

8. Focus Areas for 2025

The following activities have been identified as key priorities for the Student Ombud in 2025.

- Build and maintain relationships with NSO to establish working protocols on individual matters and linking the NSO with relevant senior staff on other educational / promotional related initiatives.
- Participate in and contribute to the design of new student feedback, appeals and complaints policies and procedures for Adelaide University (AU).
- Ensure records management system is upgraded to prepare for AU.

CASE STUDY 1: University rescinds Preclusion decision following administrative error.

Case Study: A student complained they were precluded from the University unfairly and was refused the opportunity to proceed to appeal to the Student Appeals Committee (SAC). The student claimed the University had not met its own stipulated timelines for informing them by email of the decision to preclude them.

Steps taken: The Ombud contacted the administrative unit to discuss the administrative error. The University acknowledged the error was caused by a systems failure after the intended email 'bounced back' and the student did not receive it. While it would have made no difference to the assessment of the student's circumstances, the University agreed to provide the student with another opportunity to resubmit an appeal.

Outcome: The matter was conciliated after the University agreed to allow the student to resubmit an appeal, providing them the opportunity to 'be heard'.

CASE STUDY 2: University agrees to review program materials and exam results.

Case Study: A student approached the Ombud office after they were dissatisfied with both course and program materials, quality of teaching and insufficient time allowed to prepare for an exam. The student raised concerns on behalf of other students enrolled in the same course and asked for formal acknowledgment from the University on what they would do with the feedback.

Steps taken: The Ombud contacted the Executive Dean of the Academic Unit and outlined the benefits of providing a full and detailed response to the complaint and what, if anything, would be changed.

Outcome: The matter was reviewed by the Academic Unit and the student was provided with a comprehensive response to each of the points raised in their complaint. The Academic Unit agreed to review all exam results and students were provided with an explanation on what would be reviewed and changed. The student was satisfied that 90% of their requests were met by the University.

CASE STUDY 3: University agrees to review information on Fitness to Practice.

Case Study: A student enrolled in an Allied Health Program and subsequently experienced a deterioration in their physical health. As a result, the University informed the student that they could not meet the 'Fitness to Practice' and 'inherent requirements' of the chosen program. The student complained that general information about the program (prior to enrolling) did not provide sufficient specific information about the inherent requirements of the role. The student accepted they needed to change their program area but argued it was unfair that they had completed two courses which could not be credited towards the new program.

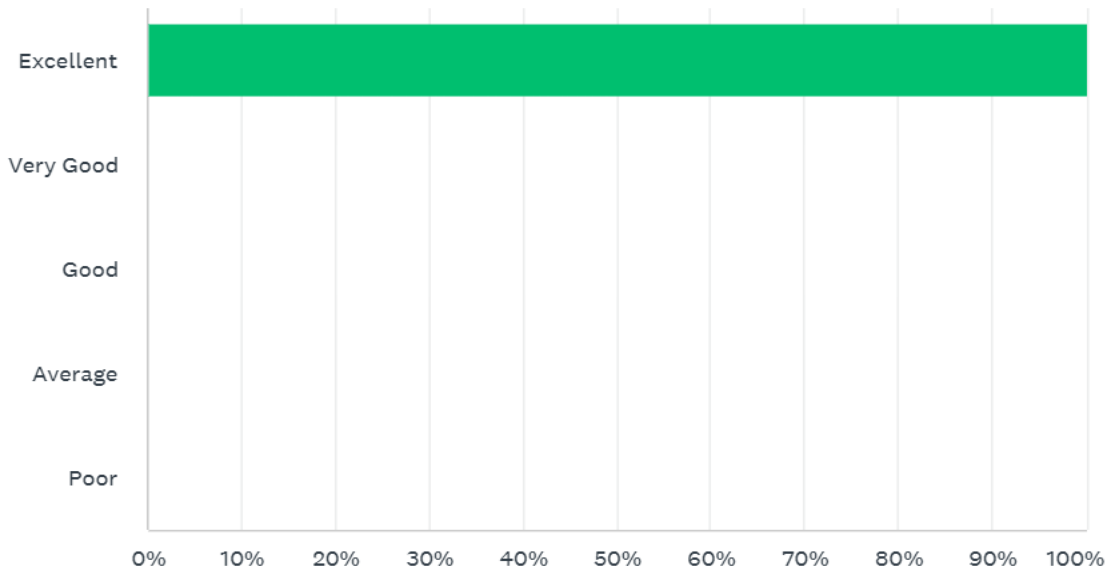
Steps taken: The Ombud outlined certain aspects of the student's rationale that was worthy of review and asked for a reconsideration on the part of the University, particularly with regards to information provided to prospective students about inherent requirements and 'Fitness to Practice'.

Outcome: The matter was conciliated after the University agreed to provide a refund for the two courses the student had previously completed but could not be credited towards their new program. The Academic Unit also reviewed the information provided to prospective students about 'Fitness to Practice' and Inherent requirements of the role. The student was satisfied with the outcome.

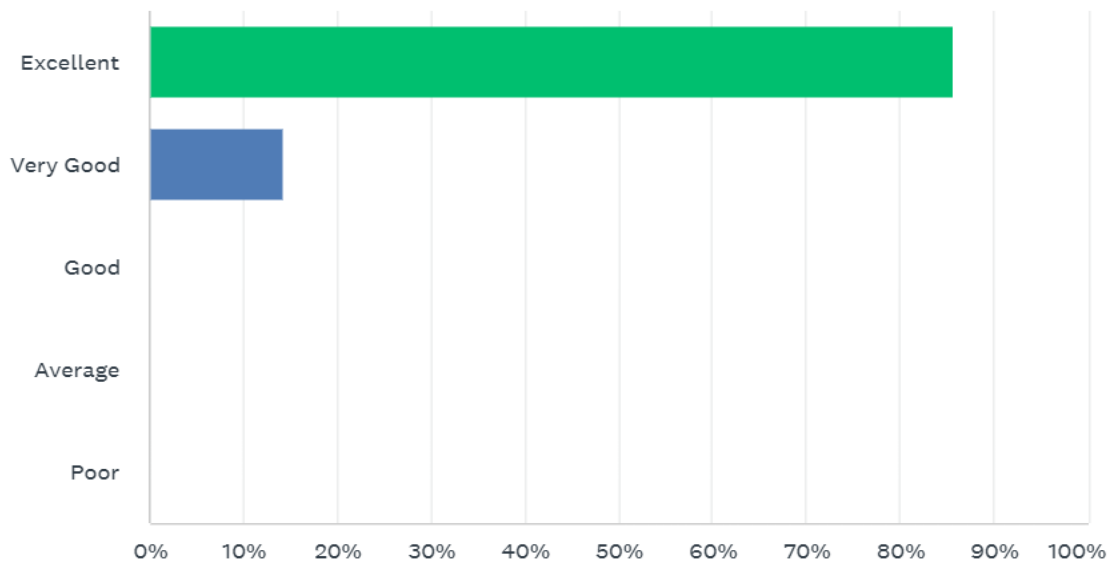
Summary Student Ombud Service Feedback Results - Students and Staff

Student Feedback: Note: 22% Response Rate

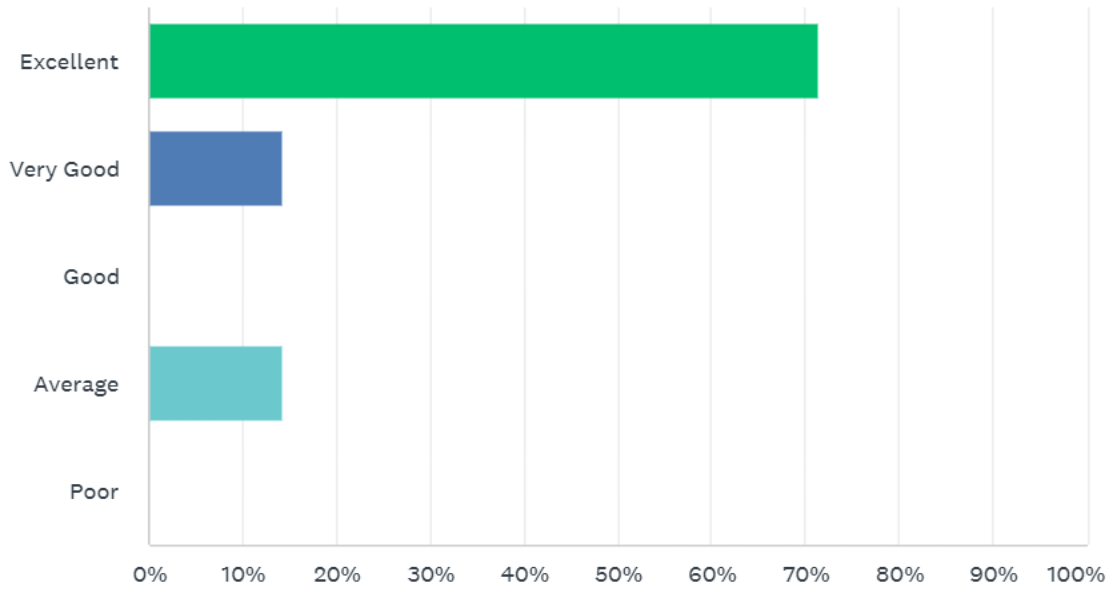
Q1. The Student Ombud tries to respond to your enquiry within 24 hours. How would you rate the response time from the Office with regards to your communications?



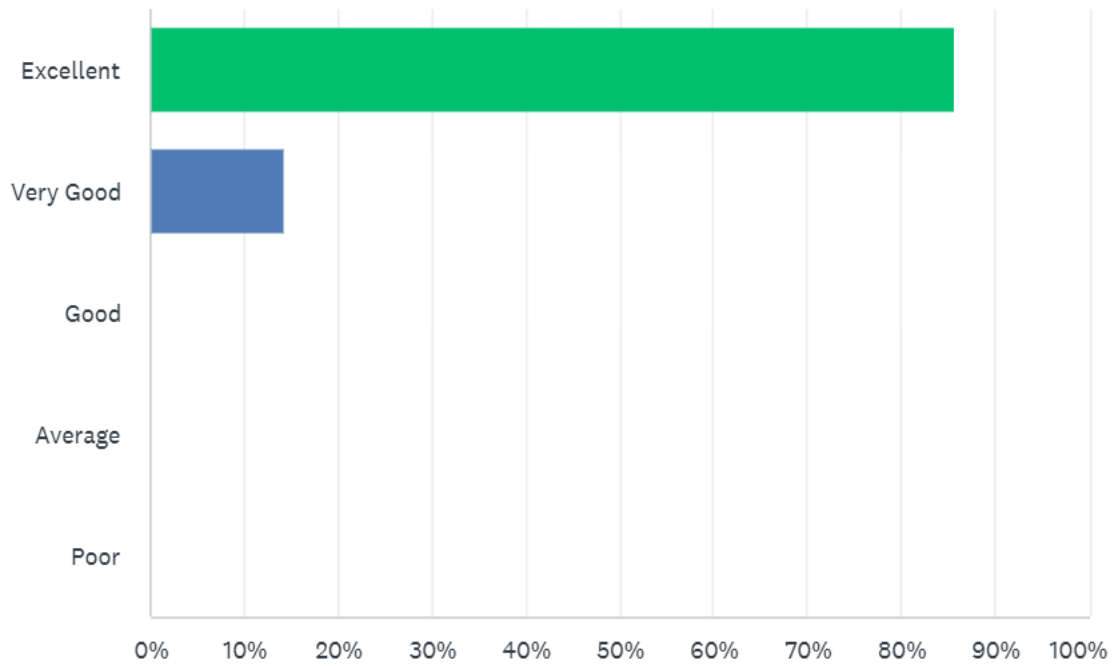
Q2. How clear was the Student Ombud’s explanation of their role and possible options available to you?



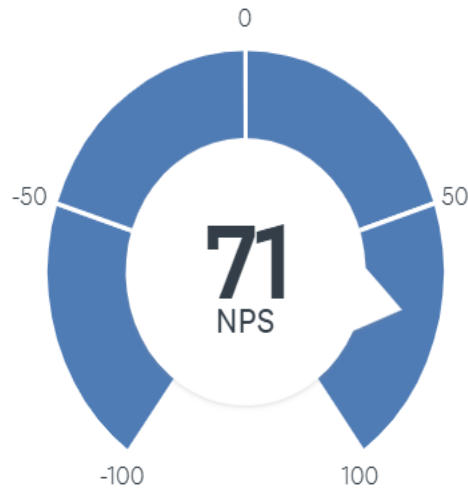
Q3. Whether you agreed or not with the outcome, how clear was the Student Ombud’s assessment of your matter?



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?

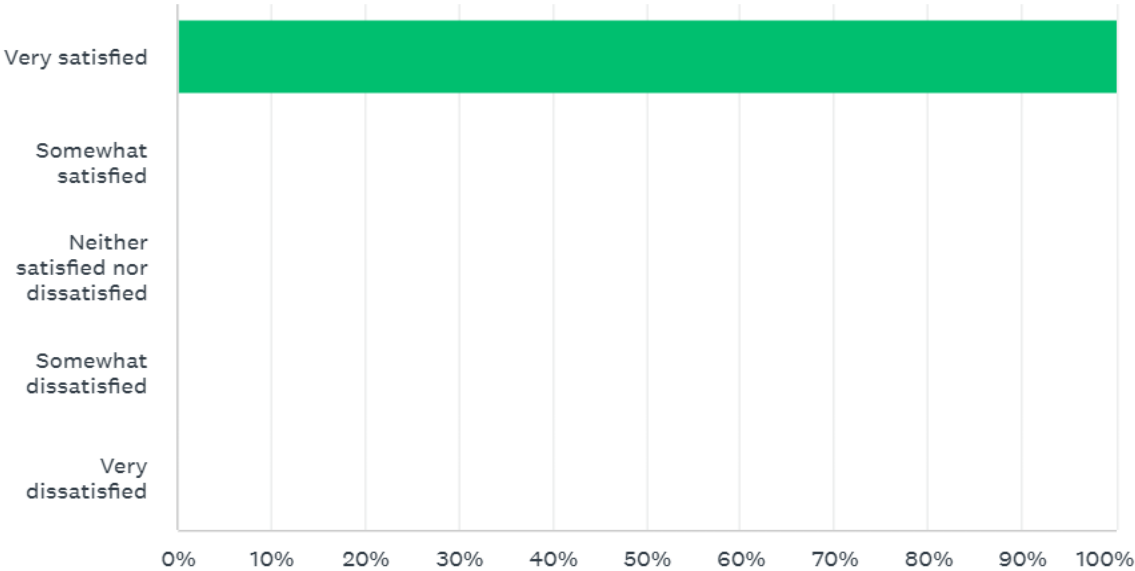


Q6. Do you have any other comments you would like to make about your experience with the Student Ombud office?

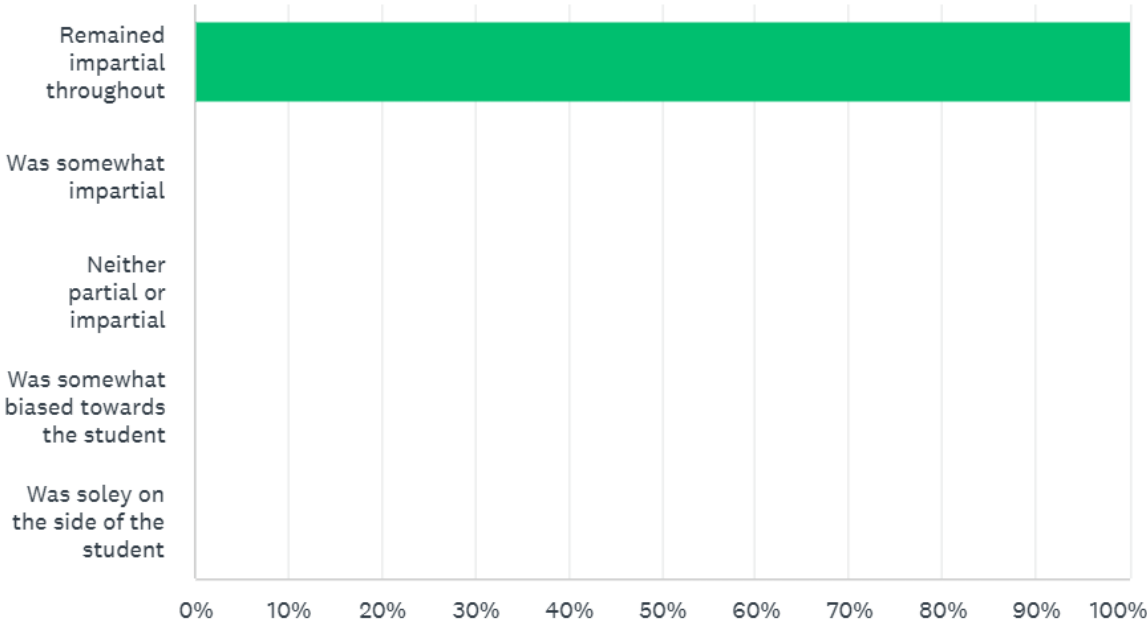
- Assessment of applications from Finance, take far too long, when a response within 28 days it is often only in the dying hours of the day 28 or beyond. Heaven knows what they do for the other 27 days, probably just place t in the too hard basket. Finance systems need an overhaul, the process is stressful enough without finance adding to their indecisive decisions. Thank you for your hard work during 2024, it is greatly appreciated,
- Thank you, Franco, for your support and guidance.
- My experience with the Student Ombudsman's Office was very positive, particularly in terms of communication and the support I received. I believe the Franco did his best and I genuinely appreciate the work and efforts he put into my case. I would recommend him to other students. However I did encounter some limitations regarding the scope of what the Ombudsman's Office could do in my situation. Unfortunately, there wasn't much they could do for my specific case. I hope that in future, the scope of their assistance can be expanded so that students in similar situations might receive more comprehensive support
- No
- Franco helped me out so much, he made my life situation a lot better and for that I am thankful for Franco
- Not only was the Student Ombudsman able to provide the assistance I needed, but his response time was remarkably quick. I am sincerely grateful for the prompt and effective support.

Staff Feedback - Note: 25% Response Rate

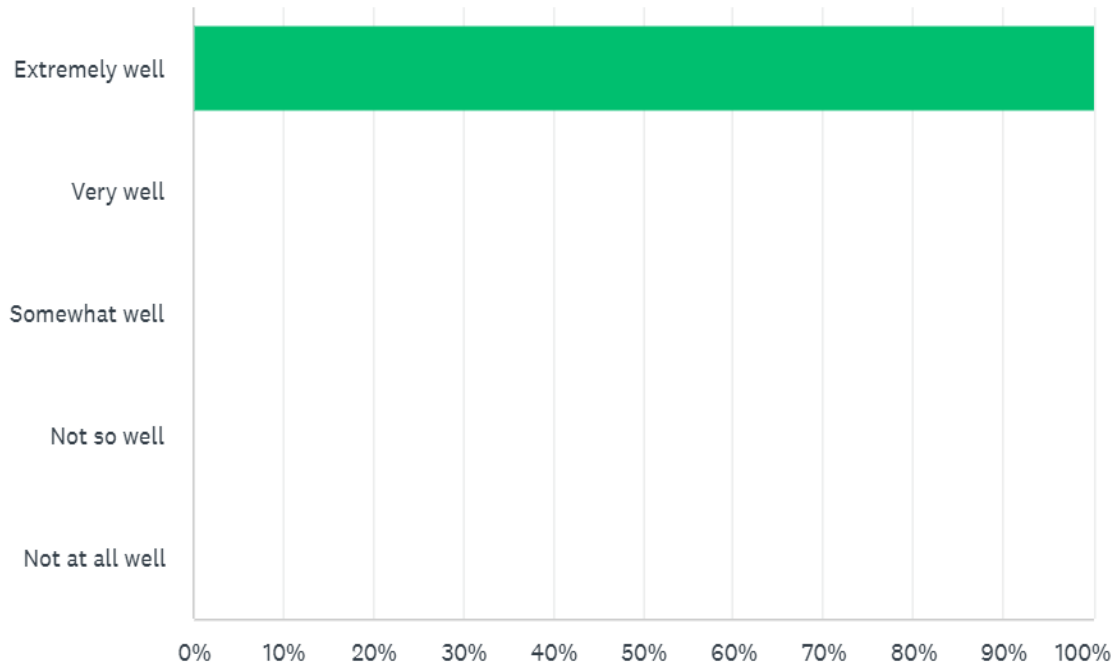
Q1. Overall, how satisfied, or dissatisfied are you with the approach undertaken to matters when the Student Ombud is involved?



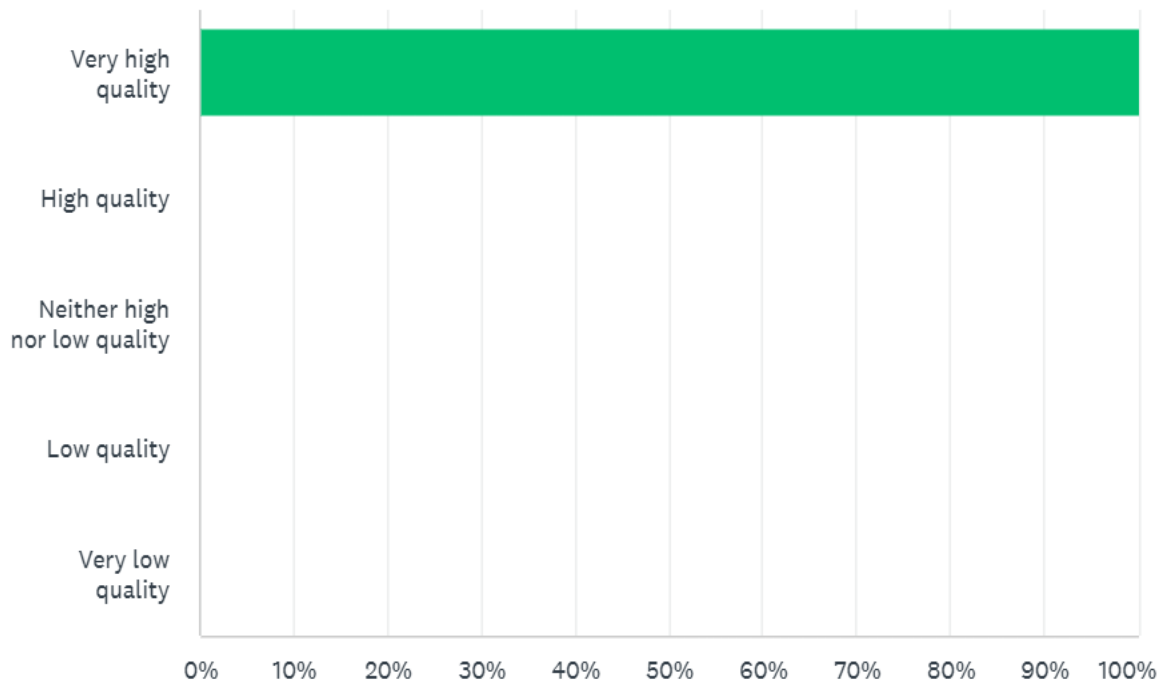
Q2. To what extent do you believe the Student Ombud maintained impartiality? Select the one that most applies



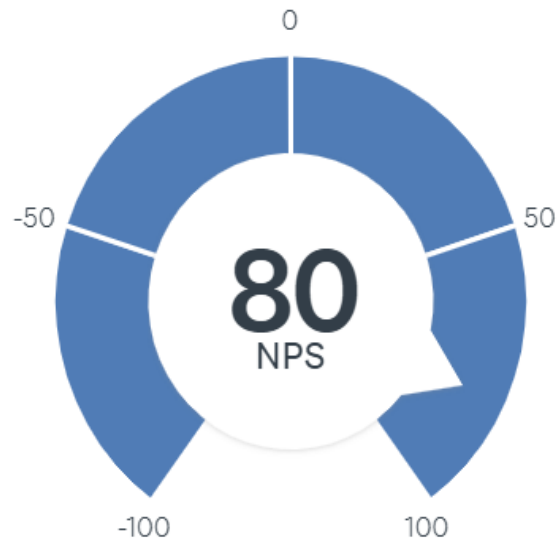
Q3. Overall, how well does the student Ombud meet your needs as a staff member, when responding to student concerns or complaints?



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?

- It is always a pleasure to work with Franco who provides timely and excellent support for students. We share deep commitment to our students, and I have appreciated the opportunity to talk through issues with him.
- The Student Ombud was extremely responsive and impeccably impartial.
- The Student Ombud is a great source of advice and guidance who always retains a position of neutrality, but equally works to deliver an outcome in the best interests of all parties.
- I selected 5 for referral as I wouldn't refer staff to the Ombud in the first instance and would recommend they first seek advice from the relevant service area. So, the rating wasn't a reflection on the level of service or quality.
- Franco is great to work with
- Grateful to have Franco to liaise with and get advice from for complex student matters