



**University of  
South Australia**

**Office of the Student Ombud Report  
2023**

## 1. Executive Summary

The Student Ombud (the Ombud) received a total of 141 service requests (SRs) in 2023 (compared with 154 in 2022). SRs include both complaints received from students and requests for advice, assistance, education and training for staff. There was a 5% decrease in student complaints made to the Ombud and a 17% decrease in the number of *'proactive'* requests received from staff as compared to the previous year. While the number of individual complaints over the last three years has dropped to 102 (from 107 in 2022 and 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, 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.

Suggestions and recommendations for improvement were made by the Ombud throughout the year and are summarised in this report. These are usually raised following a complaint to the Ombud or initiated by the Ombud following complaints or enquiries received by students and/or staff. Examples include:

- An amendment to 'threshold criteria' for determining which matters proceed to the Student Appeals Committee.
- Review of Refund Causes contained in the Terms and Conditions of Payment and Refund of Fees for International Students.
- Review of communications to students who receive their initial Academic Integrity letter.
- Feedback on Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment (SASH) policies and procedures.

During 2023 the Ombud received a greater number of complaints from Higher Degree Research (HDR) students than previous years, and there were some consistent themes raised in these complaints. Concerns regarding documentation of candidature upon commencement, understanding of how supervision will take place, changes in supervisor panels and how this is communicated to students.

The Ombud also receives proactive service 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 and the decline in formalised student complaints over the last three years. The Ombud is also invited to present education and training sessions to both the Australasian Complaint Handlers and Ombuds (AUCON) Network and the European Network of Ombuds in Higher Education (ENOHE).

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 at UniSA.

Feedback from students and staff on the 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 in agreement with a change in position. These are issues for the University to consider as it embarks on a transition to form a new university. One thing remains clear however, and that is that the role requires

students and staff to trust 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 engages 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 and key themes noted throughout the year. Points and issues raised in the report are solely from the neutral perspective of the Ombud.

## 3. Student Ombud 2023 Activities

This section provides a summary of 2023 activities undertaken by the Ombud and includes some detail about the types of complaints or problems raised. There was a total of 141 Service Requests (SRs) raised through the Ombud in 2023 as compared with 154 SRs for 2022. 102 student complaints were received (*Responsive matters*), 39 requests for advice, presentations, training from staff (*Proactive matters*).

### (a) Total Service Requests

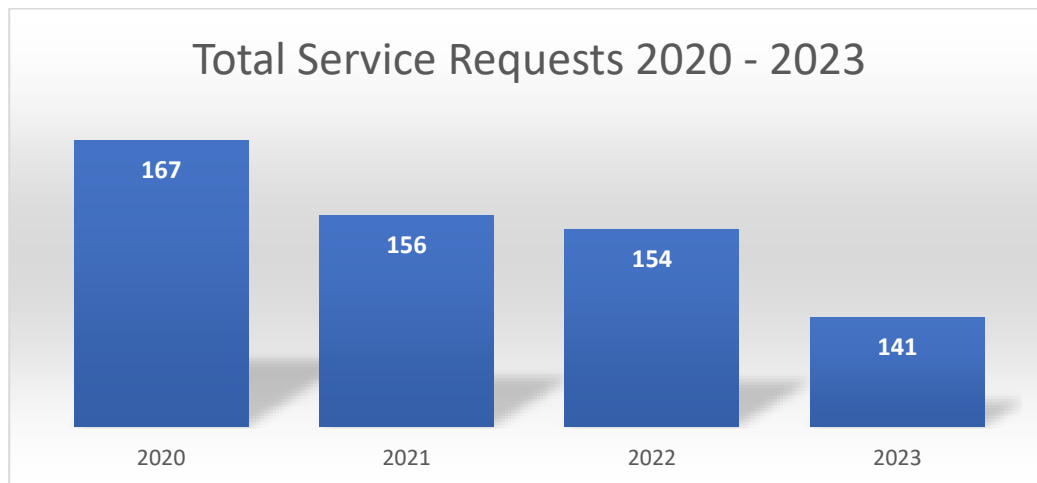
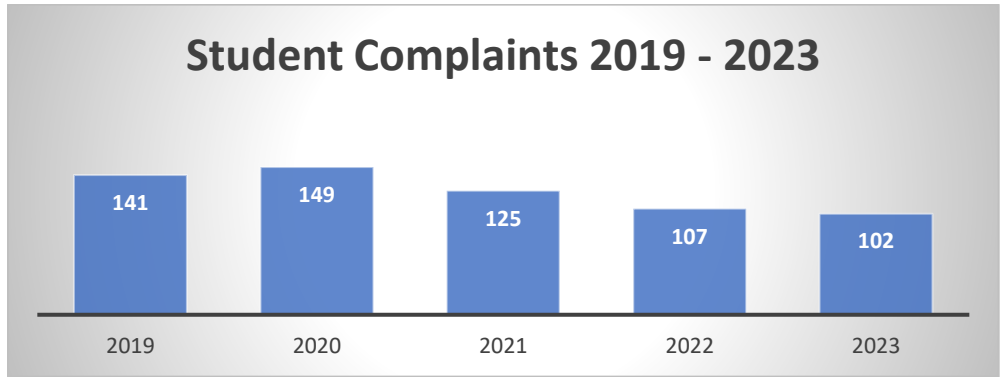


Figure 1: Total number Service Requests\* (responsive and Proactive) since 2020

\*This data has only been able to be captured since 2020 following a review of the Ombud’s record management system. It includes both the complaint handling aspects and the request for presentations, advice to staff on how best to minimise or prevent matters from escalating.

**(b) Number of Student Complaints**

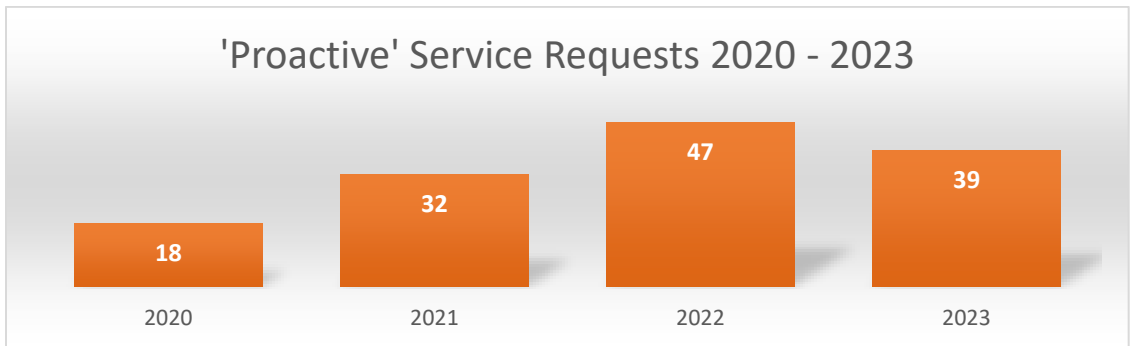


**Figure 2: Number of student complaints to Student Ombud office since 2019 (the last 5 years)**

A total of 102 complaints were raised through the Ombud’s office in 2023. This represents a 5% decrease from the previous year. Overall, the number of complaints made to the Ombud office has declined over the last 3 years.

**(c) Number of Proactive Services Requests (SRs)**

The Ombud received a total of 39 proactive SRs in 2023 (47 in 2022), representing a 17% decrease from the previous year. This includes requests for advice on policy review, handling matters, and presentations or training workshops. A key theme in 2023 was the handling of problems and communications associated with managing higher research degree supervision issues. These issues included difficulties experienced with the supervisory relationship itself, time taken to find alternative supervisors and disagreements on assessments and feedback received. The aim of proactive SR is in most cases to assist staff in either diffusing a situation or preventing one from escalating to a formal complaint.



**Figure 3: Proactive Service Requests 2020 -2023**

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

The time taken to resolve and close the 141 service requests varied, as this can depend on the complexity of matters raised and the number of stakeholders involved.



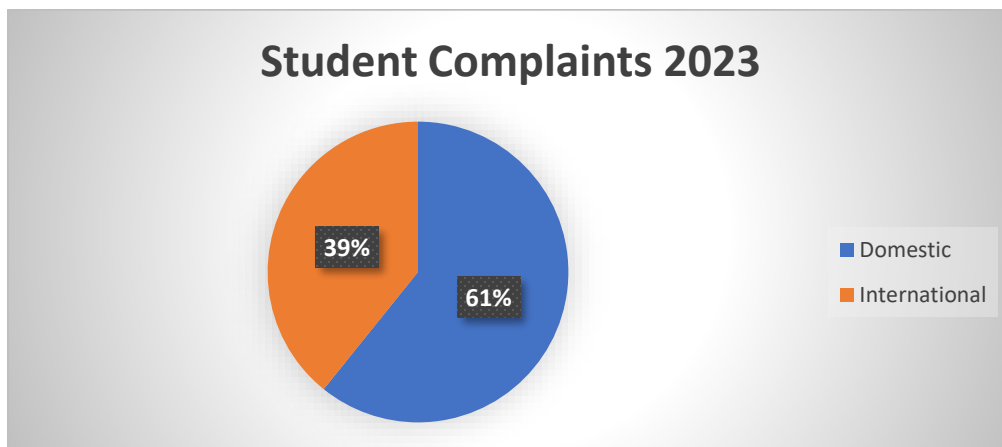
**Figure 4: Time taken to resolve all SRs raised 2023**

Of the 141 SR's, 48% (n=67) of issues were resolved in less than 30 days; 44% (n=63) within 31-90 days; 7% (n=10) took between 90 and 180 days; 1% (n=1) took longer than 6 months.

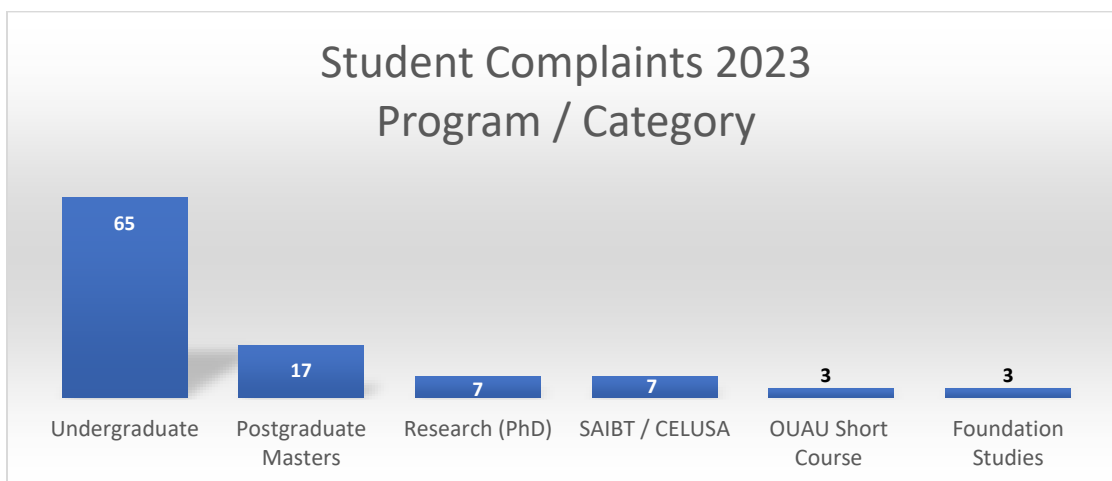
**(e) Type of students contacting the office – Domestic v International, and by Program Type Category**

The demographics of students making complaints were as follows:

- 62 domestic (77 in 2022) and 40 international (32 in 2022) students.
- 76% of complaints were from undergraduate and other (SAIBT, online etc) students (79% in 2022) and 24% from HDR (Masters and Research PhD students (21% in 2022)). Generally, the nature and types of complaints received from HDR students are quite difficult to resolve and usually relate to difficulties experienced with the supervisory relationship, such as finding and/or keeping a supervisor, and disagreements over feedback and assessment.



**Figure 5: Percentage of student complaints Domestic / International 2023**



**Figure 6: Category of student complaints by program / course type 2023**

**(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, decisions made by professional staff, 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 requests for better reasoning as to why threshold criteria has not been met.
- **Discrimination Harassment or Bullying:** where a student is 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 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 7: Category of service requests and primary issues and raised 2023**

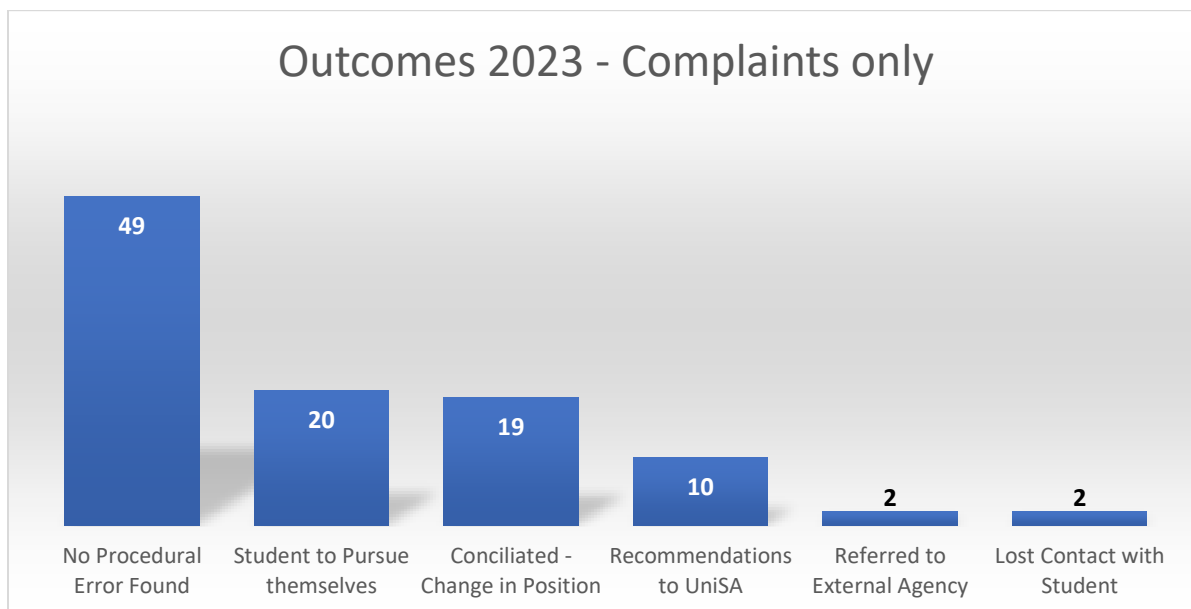
Service Requests refers to both complaints for students and requests for assistance from staff. For students making a complaint, 'Primary Issue' refers to the 'presenting problem' and the primary reason for making a complaint. For staff who request a service the primary issue usually refers to seeking advice on a managing a situation or interpreting a university policy.

**(f) Outcomes**

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

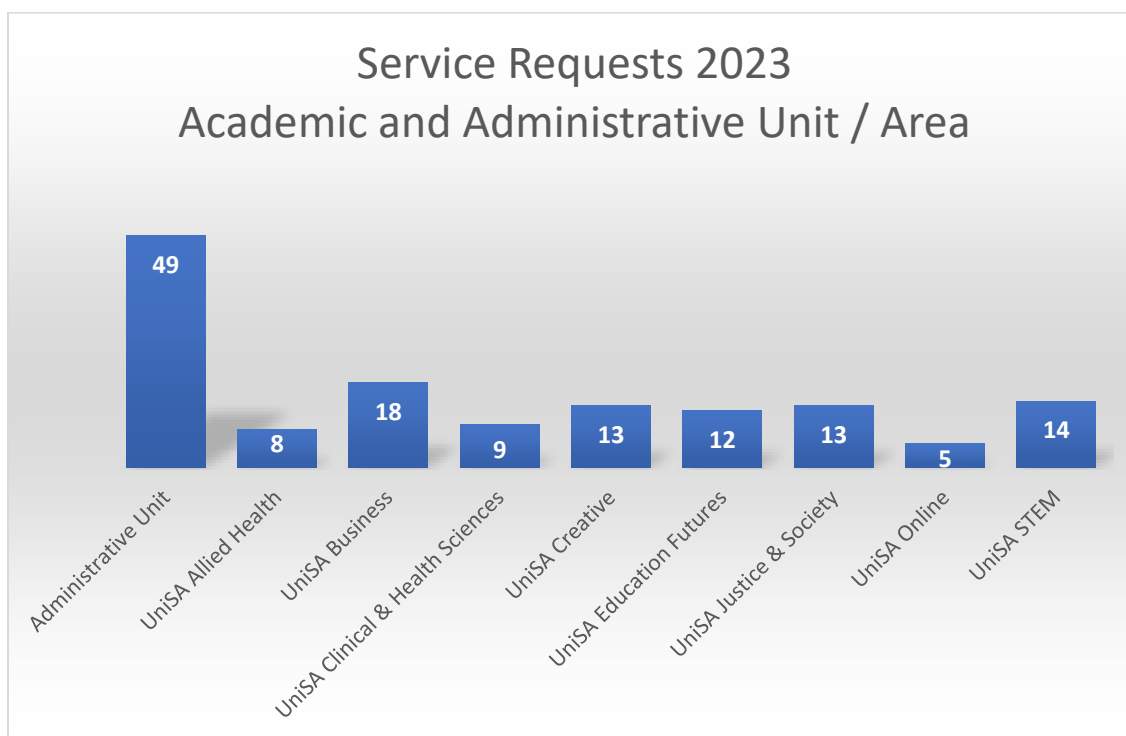
- **Conciliated - change in the University's position** (matters resolved through negotiation that have resulted in a change in the University's position)
- **Conciliated - with recommendations** (matters resolved through negotiation and accompanied with a specific recommendation made by the Student 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).

A total of 10 SRs resulted in specific recommendations and suggestions made by the Ombud for improvements to either local area practices, policy and/or procedures during 2023. Not all of these are from formal student complaints. Some are also generated after staff-initiated requests for advice and assistance.



**Figure 8: Outcome of service requests brought to Student Ombud in 2023**

**(g) Total Service Requests by Academic and Administrative Unit / Area**



**Figure 9: Service Requests and student complaints by Academic Unit / Area in 2023**

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

Throughout 2023 the Ombud raised suggestions and recommendations to appropriate senior staff members within relevant Academic and Central Administrative Units of the University. While recommendations and suggestions are considered by the University, not all are necessarily adopted. Suggestions and recommendations accepted in 2023 include:

- Review of wording included in ‘threshold test criteria’ for deciding which matters proceed to Student Appeals Committee appeal.
- Recommendation for Academic Unit to review communications and directions provided to students when preparing for LANTITE tests.
- Review of academic Integrity letters and communications to students to better inform them of alleged breaches and better prepare them for meetings.
- Review of ‘Refund’ causes for international students who have Enrolment cancelled due to Visa cancellation.

The following suggestions and recommendations are under consideration:

- Recommendation for Support for Students Policy – escalation of some aspects to higher level principles statements.
- Recommendation regarding consulting with People Talent and Culture staff (PTC) to seek assistance with investigations of complaints involving allegations of staff performance or conduct.



- Recommendations regarding Higher Research Degree policy and procedures, in particular communications to students when they experience a change in supervisors.
- Recommendations on SASH policy and procedures including more details to alleged responders and more rationale for conclusions reached.

During the reporting year the Ombud also provided input through written submission and/or feedback on various 'student focussed' government or agency policy, practice or proposed legislative review. These included:

- Recommendations on improved accessibility to students in rural and remote locations to the Australian Council for Educational Research ACER.
- Feedback via public and internal platforms (e.g., Your Say and Idea Place) regarding student complaint handling, in relation to the proposed Adelaide University Bill 2023, including:
  - Recommendation for Adelaide University Bill To consider inclusion of an independent review person/ body either by Statute or within the Act.
  - Suggestion that the new University ensure there is an 'Advocate for Fairness'.
  - That more academic and vocational English language assistance be provided for international students, particularly prior to placements.
- The Ombud also provided input into the Draft Action Plan for gender-based violence and the potential establishment of a National Student Ombudsman

## **5. 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 2023. The issues outlined below are based on both complaints raised by students with the Ombud and anecdotal matters raised by students and staff with the Ombud. On many occasions neither students nor staff wish to have their details recorded.

### **Higher Degree Research Students**

Complaints received from students undertaking postgraduate (Masters) and PhDs are particularly 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. One suggestion would be to consider 'better orientation' for new students to the 'supervisory relationship' and training for supervisors on providing constructive feedback at this level.

### **The proposed New Adelaide University**

The Ombud provided suggestions, submissions, and input via various forums (public and internal) on the proposed new University. The submissions have advocated for consideration being given to ensuring an independent, neutral 'Advocate for Fairness' / Ombud service is maintained for students and kept separate to any potential general 'complaint handling unit or area' of the university and the provision of more academic and vocational/industry specific language assistance for international students, particularly prior to commencing placements.

## 5. Case Studies

**Appendix 1.** includes three brief case studies as examples of the types of matters raised, the approach taken by the Student Ombud and the outcomes reached. Further case study examples can be provided upon request.

## 6. Administrative Matters

The Ombud office made some recommendations regarding systems improvements for the Oracle Cloud as its Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system. The platform retains the integrity of a separate record keeping system for the Ombud office to ensure security of information provided to the Office, confidentiality, and independence from 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 2024

The following activities have been identified as key priorities for the Student Ombud in 2024:

- Continue to 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.
- Maintain both student and staff 'Ombud service' 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 2023. While formal complaint numbers and requests for proactive assistance to the Ombud decreased slightly during 2023 the Feedback on the Ombud service remains very positive. The Ombud is happy to provide Council with further information if required.

**CASE STUDY 1: University provides Exit Award for a student who was unable to complete studies**

**Case Study:** An ex-UniSA student, who had one course remaining to finish their degree with the University when they undertook the program many years ago, approached the Ombud office after they tried to receive some recognition of prior learning to complete the degree. The individual last studied with the University well outside the '10 year' period for Credit consideration. Their only option was to return to study with no Credit being granted given the time gap and significant changes to program and industry requirements in their field. The University held firm in its decision not to grant Credit. The student believed it was unfair as they were only one course short of completing a degree when they fell upon significant hardship.

**Steps taken:** The Ombud contacted the Academic Unit outlining aspects of the student's situation and initiated discussions to explore options for either granting some Credit or exploring alternative options.

**Outcome:** The matter was conciliated after the University offered a 'lower level' Exit award to the student in acknowledgment of how close they were to finishing. The outcome did not compromise the integrity of the program or award as the award stipulated the years in which the student had studied, and it was something that had not been considered at the time.

**CASE STUDY 2: University offer of urgent an alternative IT solution for student in regional setting.**

**Case Study:** A student approached the Ombud office after they were experiencing problems with their computer software not being compatible with the Proctoring software for an upcoming exam. The student's local library was a 2-hour drive away. The student asked for some adjustments and alternatives to be provided but was told they needed to read the pre-information sheet advising them of computer and software requirements. The upcoming exam was in 3 days' time.

**Steps taken:** The Ombud contacted the Academic Unit and outlined the urgency of the matter and asked for some alternative options to be considered and for the University's position to be reconsidered.

**Outcome:** The matter was reviewed by the Academic and the student was allowed to sit the exam via Zoom at the same time as other students with an invigilator made available. During the exam the student was required to have their camera and microphone turned on to allow for a room scan beforehand. The student was satisfied that a solution could be found in time.

**CASE STUDY 3: University agrees on partial refund to international student following Visa cancellation.**

**Case Study:** An international student complained that they were refused any refund from the University after their visa was cancelled and they were refused entry to the country. The University maintained the decision was in line with its refund clauses as they believed this was a case of fraud as the student did not disclose previous Visa refusals to another country. The student maintained they disclosed this information to their agency and that the agency completed all the paperwork for them. The University maintained that in any case, it was the student's responsibility to sign and check the accuracy of their application.

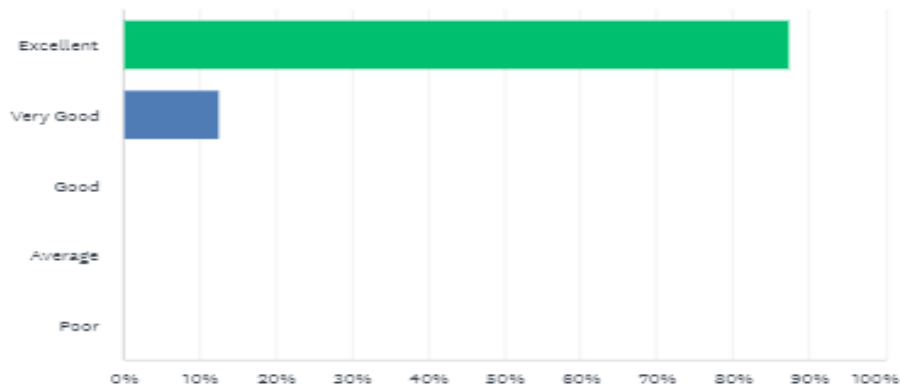
**Steps taken:** The Ombud outlined certain aspects of the administrative process that were of concern, specifically the role and relationships with international agencies in such matters, and whether existing refund clauses may risk being construed as penalty clauses and asked the University for a reconsideration.

**Outcome:** The matter was reviewed by the University, and the University agreed to refund half the monies to the student. Recommendations were also made for a review of the Refund clauses in the relevant Guideline document. The student was satisfied to at least have received some monies in return.

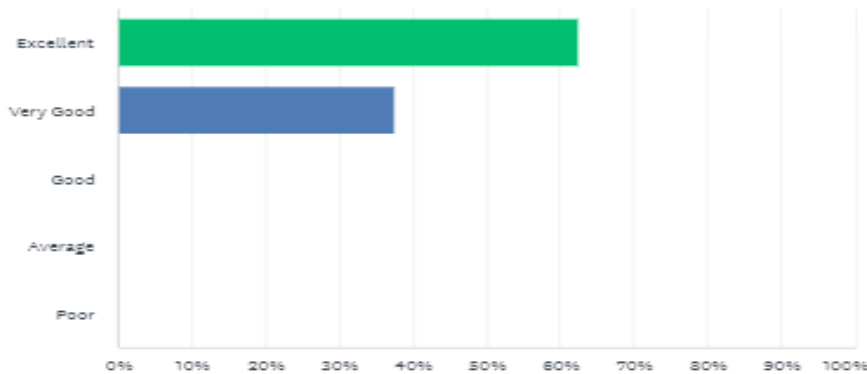
## Summary Student Ombud Service Feedback Results - Students and Staff

Student Feedback: Note: 37% Response Rate

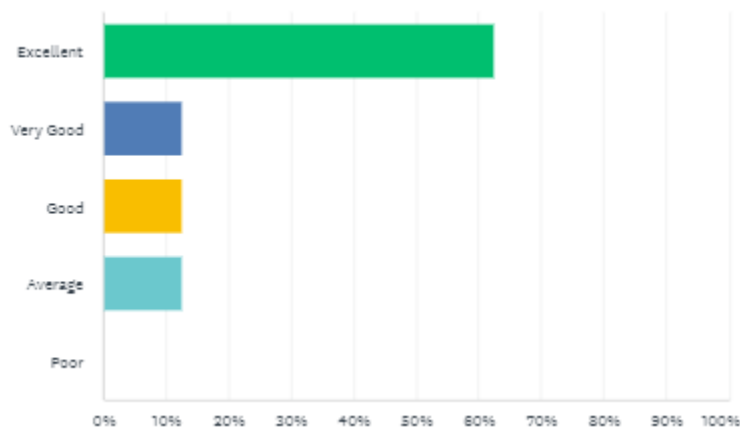
**Q1. The Student Ombud tries to respond to your enquiry within 24 hours. How would you rate the response time from the Office with regards to your communications?**



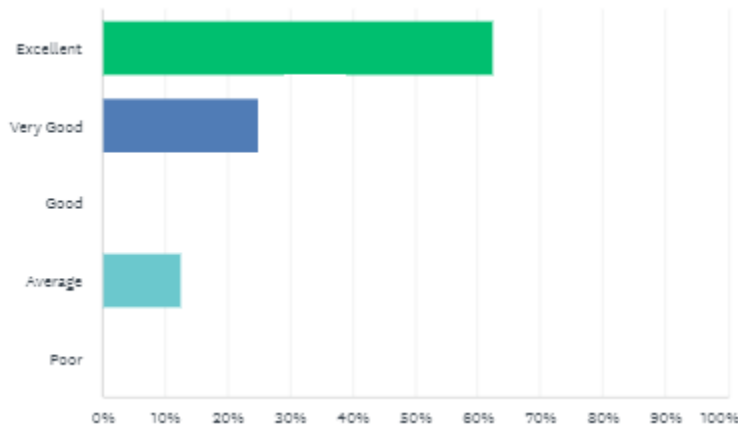
**Q2. How clear was the Student Ombud’s explanation of their role and possible options available to you?**



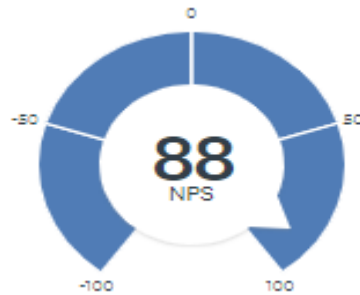
**Q3. Whether you agreed or not with the outcome, how clear was the Student Ombud’s assessment of your matter?**



**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?**

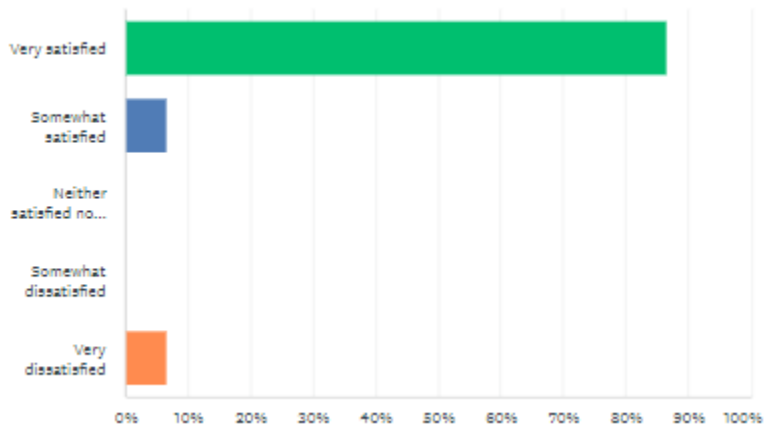


**Q6. Do you have any other comments you would like to make about your experience with the Student Ombud office?**

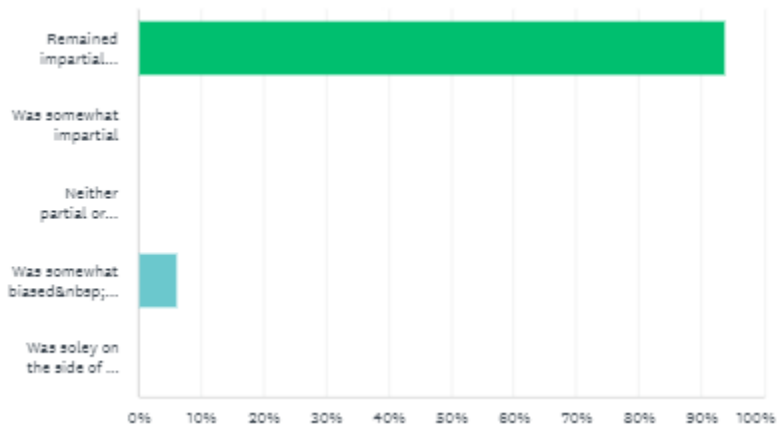
- Absolute pleasure to deal with and took my issue seriously and fairly.
- Respected officer thank you so much for helping me during this situation it means a lot to me thank u so much again.
- Straight forward, clear and understanding.
- It was so helpful to contact them. I was explained well regarding their role and received suggestions regarding the issue I was looking to get help. Furthermore, it was nice to see that they always get in touch with you, until the issue is resolved
- Professional assistance and effective responding.

**Staff Feedback - Note: 38% Response Rate**

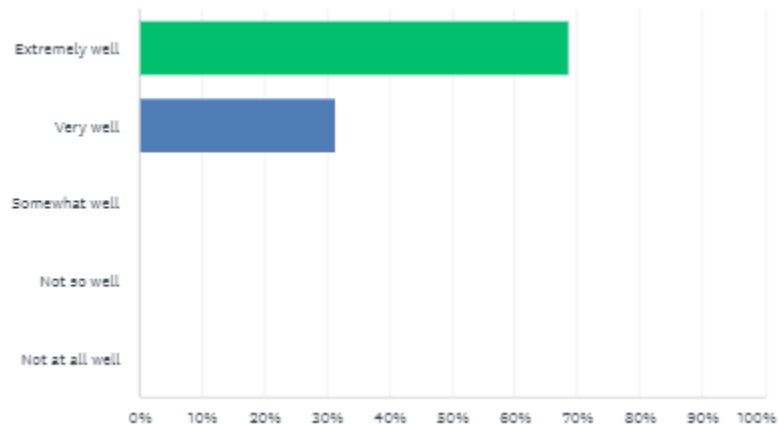
**Q1. Overall, how satisfied, or dissatisfied are you with the approach undertaken to matters when the Student Ombud is involved?**



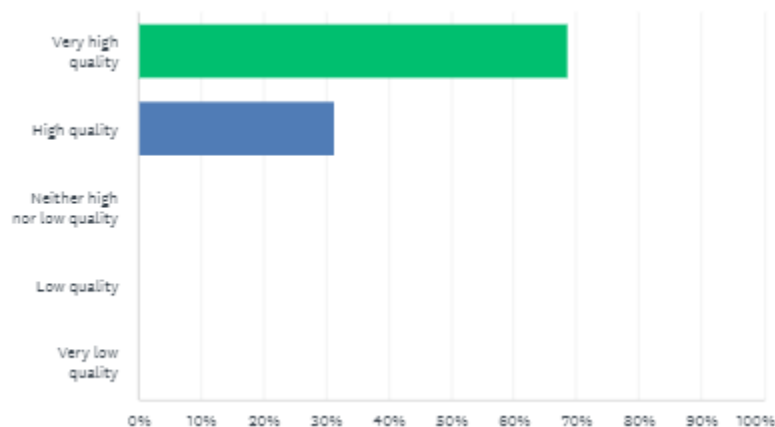
**Q2. To what extent do you believe the Student Ombud maintained impartiality? Select the one that most applies**



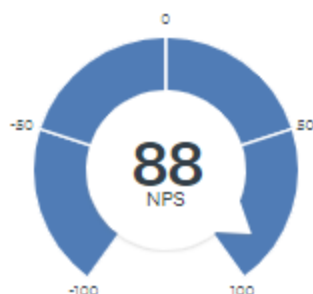
**Q3. Overall, how well does the student Ombud meet your needs as a staff member, when responding to student concerns or complaints?**



#### 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?

- Bravo and thank you Franco.
- Clear and timely communication. Pragmatic and impartial.
- I've had need to work with the Student Ombud on many occasions this year. He has always responded promptly, considerately and thoughtfully. He has provided me with useful guidance and always has the students' best interests and the need for them to be treated fairly at the forefront of his actions and advice. His genuine and deep concern for the students, along with knowledge and implementation of procedural fairness means that students who go to him are always given the best support possible. His capacity to represent these interests in engaging with staff is exemplary - always kind and respectful, and indicative of deep listening. The University is privileged to have such a compassionate and knowledgeable Ombud.
- As the interactions are always so respectful, I view the interactions as a learning opportunity and the service provided allows me to reflect and improve on my activities and interactions with students. I appreciate the work the Student Ombud undertakes and I thank them for their work.
- Very satisfied with our interactions and the impartial advice provided.
- I mostly recommend the ombudsman service to students who are seeking an outcome to a situation different from the one they've received within the unit.
- Franco is at all times professional and impartial, and is also a pleasure to work with.
- The matter was resolved (at our end) prior to the student contacting the ombud but it is a necessary service when dealing with bureaucracy within unisa.



- Franco's kind and professional demeanour is greatly appreciated to support staff and students to work towards the best possible outcomes, ensure that due diligence is applied, and communications are clear.