



**University of
South Australia**

**Office of the Student Ombud Report
2020**

1. Introduction

The year 2020 will always be remembered as the year COVID 19 disrupted studies for many students and of course imposed significant challenges for the University and its staff. This report captures some of the COVID 19 related student complaints, as well as those not related to COVID, some outcomes and associated recommendations made by the Student Ombud office throughout the year. Overall, there was a slight (5%) increase in student complaints made to the Student Ombud office, the majority of which were received in the second half of the year, as the impact of COVID 19 continued.

By way of reminder, the Student Ombud office provides students with an opportunity to raise concerns or make a formal complaint if they are dissatisfied with the processes or services of the University. The Student Ombud is effectively the *last internal resort* for students to approach when all other avenues available to resolve a problem have been exhausted.

The Student Ombud acts as the *Advocate for Fairness*, not for the individual student nor for the University. In that regard, the role has both a *responsive* and *proactive/educative* component. That is, to respond to and manage enquiries and complaints received, while also identifying key trends, with a view to reporting on any systemic barriers that negatively impact upon its students and making recommendations for improvements to the University. The Student Ombud service contributes to the overall quality of the student experience, particularly for those encountering difficulties whilst they study at UniSA. The consistent message from students is that they value an independent person who is available to listen and talk through their concerns and canvass options while maintaining confidentiality.

As the designated, neutral, dispute resolution specialist, the Student Ombud aims to resolve complaints where possible while ensuring University processes are followed fairly and improved where necessary. The Student Ombud provides students with an independent and confidential avenue to pursue their complaints when they have been unable to receive a satisfactory explanation for a decision and/or resolution of their issue. The Student Ombud advises students on how, and with whom to pursue their concerns or complaints in accordance with University policies. The Student Ombud has the authority to investigate complaints where either proper procedure has not been adhered to, or where despite following established procedures, the student is still dissatisfied with the outcome. The Student Ombud can also play an important role in addressing these matters at an early stage and where possible, refer these cases to local areas before they escalate.

Importantly, the Student Ombud is also available for staff to discuss their intended approaches to managing student concerns and complaints and/or difficult situations.

In addition to the *responsive* aspect of the role, the *proactive/educative* component of the role were a key focus for the 2020 year. Accordingly, and where appropriate, recommendations around practice improvements and/or policy and procedural changes continued to be raised by the Student Ombud. During 2020, the Student Ombud was a member of the Student Complaints Resolution Policy Review, steering and working groups, and made recommendations on several COVID related matters, Credit assessments for Recognition of Prior Learning and continued discussions regarding the processes used to assess Post Census Amendment to Enrolment and Fees applications. A new Client Records Management (CRM) system was also implemented during 2020 and an explanation of the terminology used is contained within the report.

Feedback on the Student Ombud service from both students and staff continues to be very positive. This is often despite the student not always being able to achieve the desired outcome from their complaint. This report provides an annual activity update to University Council, as required under the Student Ombud's protocol.

2. Student Ombud 2020 Activities

New Client Records Management (CRM) system

During 2020 the Student Ombud's client records management system (CRM) moved across to the University's Oracle Engagement Cloud. However, given the neutral and impartial nature of the service, the Student Ombud's records are maintained confidentially and separately from other areas of the University. Previous annual reports have referred to student contacts/complaints. This year's report refers to Service Requests (SRs) and include SRs from students (complaints) and SRs from staff (requests for advice on managing a student related matter, or policy interpretation). In short, the new CRM allows the Student Ombud office to record and track the proactive nature of the work i.e. requests from staff on student related matters and policy review more accurately.

This section provides a summary of 2020 activities undertaken by the Student Ombud Office and includes some detail about the number of student contacts and the types of complaints or problems raised. A total of 167 Service Requests (SRs) were raised through the Student Ombud Office in 2020: 149 Responsive matters (student complaints) and 18 Proactive matters (requests for advice, presentations, training).

(a) Number of Complaint Service Requests (SRs) from students and time taken to resolve

A total of 149 students raised complaints through the Student Ombud Office in 2020.

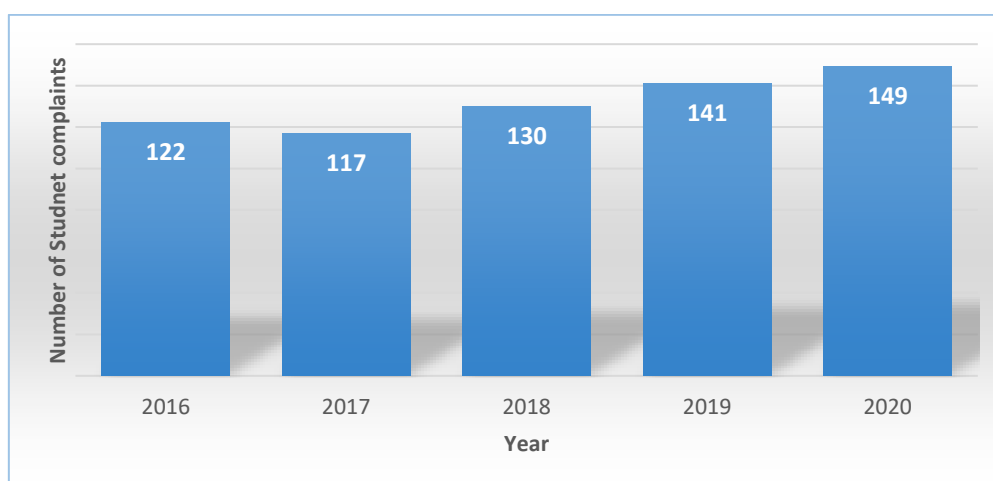


Figure 1: Number of student complaints to Student Ombud office since 2016 (the last 5 years)

A total of 149 students raised complaints through the Student Ombud's office in 2020. This represents a slight (5%) increase from the previous year. Students who approach the Student Ombud are, from their perspective, raising a complaint about a decision, action, process or alleged inappropriate behaviour, conduct or performance of staff. However, one part of the Student Ombud's role is to assist students understand whether they have legitimate appeals mechanisms still available to them and what the next procedural steps involve for the matter at hand.

(b) Number of proactive Services Requests (SRs)

There was a total of 18 'proactive' SRs received during 2020. These included either specific staff requests for advice from the Student Ombud office on policy review, requests for presentations and/or training workshops.

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

The time taken to resolve and close the total 167 SRs varied, based on the complexity and number of stakeholders involved.

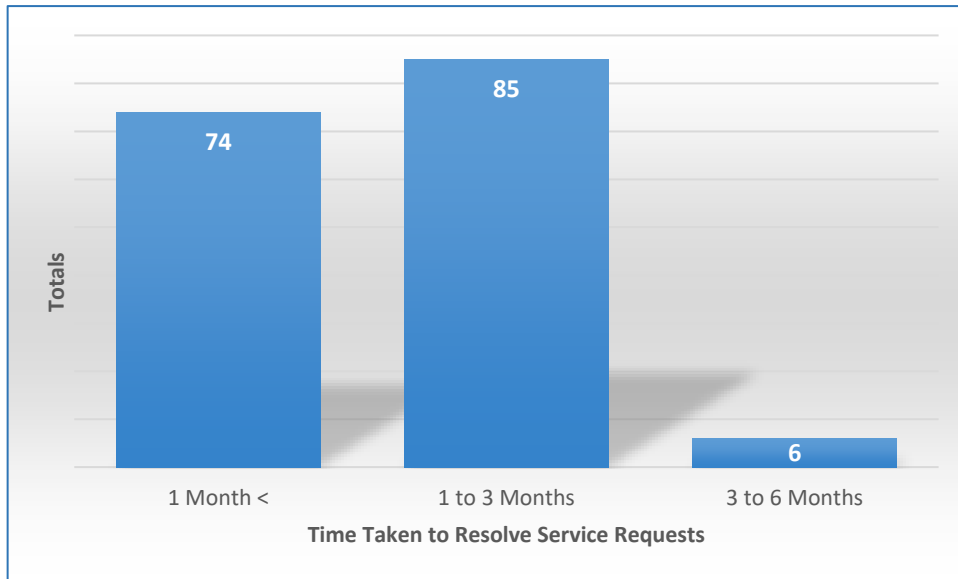


Figure 2: Time taken to resolve all SRs raised 2020

Out of the 167 SR's, 44% (n=74) of issues were resolved in less than 30 days; 51% (n=85) within 31-90 days; 6% (n=6) took between 90 and 180 days; and 1% (n=2) were still 'Open' as at 31 December 2020.

(d) Type of students contacting the office

The demographic details of the students were as follows:

- 104 domestic and 41 international students. Four of the 149 total student SRs were from the same student
- 84% of SRs were from undergraduate students and 16% from postgraduate students.

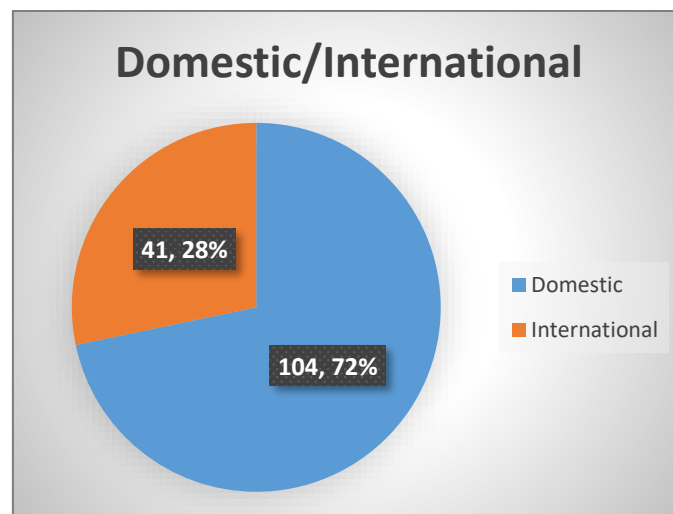


Figure 3: Number of student complaints by residency 2020

(d) Categories of complaints and primary issues

- **APPM Processes and Appeals:** includes specific complaints about the University's assessment policies and procedures manual. This is a new category added to the new CRM to enable these types of matters to be tracked more easily in future.

- **Academic Administration:** a previous category used to include matters that relate to credit, supplementary exam considerations, timetabling, practicum allocations, decisions made by professional staff, School based decisions.
- **Academic, Teaching and Learning:** includes matters such as decisions made by academic staff, assessments, remarks, grades, exams, supervision, extensions, problems experienced on practicum/placements and associated administrative arrangements surrounding these.
- **Bullying and Harassment:** includes matters where a student is specifically alleging bullying or harassment from a staff member 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 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.

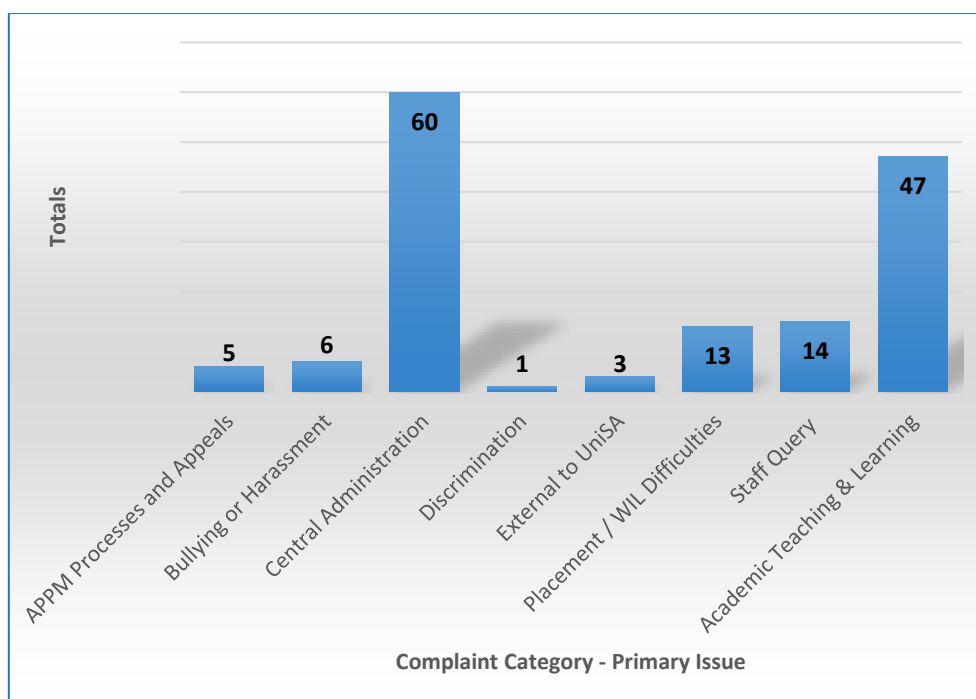


Figure 4: Category of complaints and primary issues raised 2020 (excluding proactive SRs)

During 2020, the move to the new CRM has provided an opportunity to review previous complaint categories and highlight issues that were being raised by students but previously not clearly tracked or easily identified. It is for this reason that ‘new’ categories such as APPM process and appeals, Placements/WIL, Discrimination, Bullying and Harassment have been separated out in this year’s report.

(e) Outcomes

The outcome categories were reviewed in 2018. During 2019 and 2020 the key categories were refined further and are summarised in **Figure 5** below and include the following:

- **Conciliated – change in University 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).

- **UniSA processes followed reasonably** (Student Ombud’s assessment indicates University policies were followed reasonably and 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).

Seventeen matters resulted in specific recommendations made by the Student Ombud for improvements to either local area practices, policy and/or procedures during 2020.

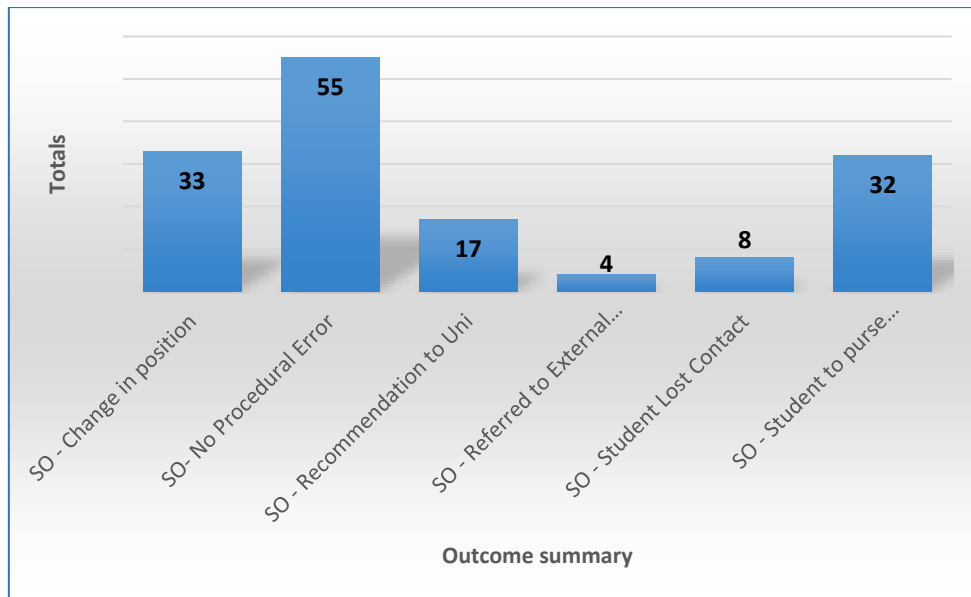


Figure 5: Outcome of student complaints in 2020

(f) **Complaints by Academic Unit**

Figure 6 below outlines complaints received by Academic Unit. The graph does not include proactive SRs.

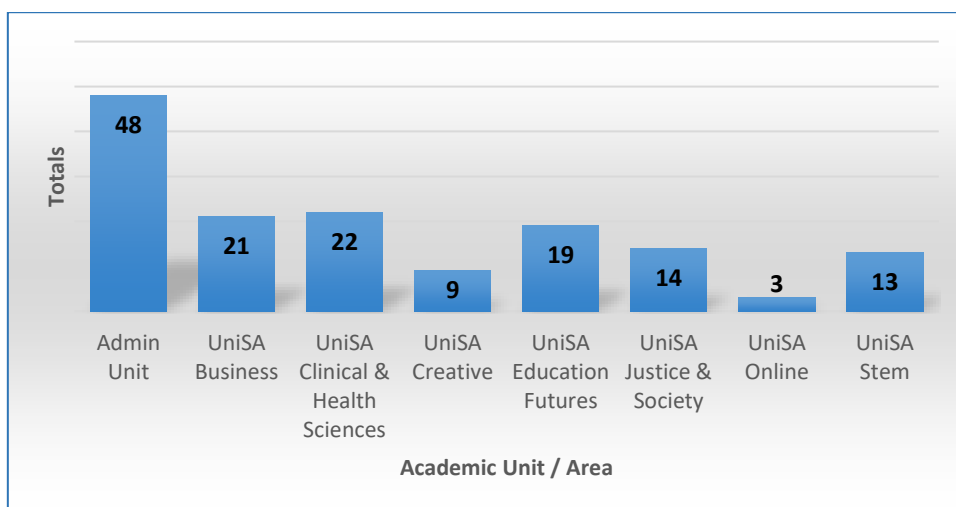


Figure 6: Student complaints by Academic Unit in 2020

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

The areas in which recommendations have been made and/or guidance notes provided throughout 2020 included the following:

- COVID 19 related interventions and recommendations:
 - Non graded pass options for students to negate impact on GPA
 - Opportunities to re-sit exams
 - 'W' Notation on student records
 - Delays experienced by students in obtaining Study Tour refunds
- Recommendations for improvements to a guide for staff on managing real or perceived conflicts of interest.
- LANTITE testing windows and negative impact on students in final years of study. Recommendation made to test as part of entrance requirements rather than pre-final placement.
- Recommendations for improvements on communications to students on Special Circumstances assessments as per Fees and Loans Policy.
- Recommendations for process improvements for assessment of applications for Credit in line with Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Policy A-13.
- Cancellation of Enrolment communications and processes and how to address ongoing problems with students not accessing emails or telephone call when enrolments are cancelled.
- Guidance notes on undertaking fair investigations.

4. Case Studies for 2020

Appendix 1. includes two 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.

5. Administrative Matters

The University's Customer Relationship Management (CRM) System (Sorella) was used until September 2020 to record details of student contacts and complaints to the Student Ombud office. The Student Ombud worked in conjunction with the University in exploring a new CRM platform, Oracle Cloud, purposely designed for the Student Ombud office. The new platform came into effect in September 2020 and is now used by the Student Ombud office for recording and reporting purposes. The new platform retains the integrity of the record keeping system for the Student Ombud office, namely, to ensure security of information provided, confidentiality, and independence from the University's records. The new CRM has enhanced the capacity to record and retrieve information for reporting purposes. One of the key improvements is the ability to log/register 'service requests' from staff for education/presentations and advice to more effectively map the proactive aspects of the service.

6. Focus Areas for 2021

The following activities have been identified as key priorities for the Student Ombud in 2021:

- Continue to assist with review and implementation and training for Student Complaints Resolution Policy and intended new student complaints portal.
- Continue to assist with University led training for academic staff on managing student complaints and management of student complaints system.

- Identify opportunities for further improvements to resolving problems for students experienced whilst on placements/Work Integrated Learning.
- Maintain both student and staff feedback systems.
- Resume visits to regional centres, Whyalla and Port Augusta to meet with students, COVID precautions permitting.
- Closer monitoring of recommendations accepted or otherwise by the University.
- Ensure changes to the University's new CRM system meets Student Ombud office needs.
- Continuing review of improvements to communications for students on the Amendment to Enrolment and Fees Applications process.

7. Summary

The previous two years have focused on achieving a greater balance between the **responsive** and **proactive** aspects of the role. The approach undertaken continues to be one which aims to respectfully 'raise what needs to be raised' in relation to both preventing and/or addressing problems when they arise. By formally raising recommendations for improvements to practice and/or policy the Student Ombud aims to contribute positively to the student experience within the University.

A small number of cases could not be pursued as they related to former students or graduates and 2 matters remained active as at the end of 2020.

CASE STUDIES

CASE STUDY 1: University agrees to remove enrolment record for student with historical HELP debt

Case Study: A student complained that they were made aware of an outstanding HELP debt from studies they commenced several years prior. The student had withdrawn from one of their courses and received a WF on their record. The student however had several courses that remained on their record, despite believing they would be removed as they commenced full time employment. The student accepted they did not withdraw prior to Census on time but maintained they had taken no part in any lectures, tutorials or attempted any work for the courses as they focused their attention on full time employment. The debt issue had resurfaced through the Australian Taxation Office (ATO) informing them of the debt.

Steps taken: The student outlined the reasons they believed they had withdrawn from courses at the time. The Student Ombud outlined his assessment of the situation to senior University management and sought a reconsideration.

Outcome: The matter was reviewed by the Director, Student Academic Services and the outcome resulted in the University agreeing to remove the enrollment record for those courses, based on there being no evidence of the student engaging in any of the courses at the time. This resulted in a significant reduction in the student's HELP debt and the student was satisfied with the outcome.

CASE STUDY 2: Impact of COVID 19 on Study Tours

Case Study: A group of students complained at the length of time taken for the University to refund monies paid for an international study tour which had to be cancelled as result of COVID 19. The students had made plans to attend the Study Tour and in anticipation had purchased materials, items that were related to the study tour. The students wrote to the relevant University staff, but the matter became entrenched in delays due to Insurance provider agreements with the students and with the University. The students became increasingly frustrated with the lengthy delays and asked the Student Ombud to intervene to assist.

Steps taken: The Student Ombud outlined his assessment of the situation to senior University management and sought their assistance with expediting the settlement and reimbursement for monies spent by the students. focusing on the student's honesty and good faith and asked for a reconsideration based on 'willingness to resolve' and 'no-blame' approach.

Outcome: The matter was reconsidered by the University and the students received their monies back. The University also agreed to cover additional out of pocket expenses that were directly related to the study tours purchases. The students were very pleased with the outcome.

Additional Case studies can be provided upon request.