

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
Legislation Committee

Inquiry into the provisions of the Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005

Submitter: Mr Justin Lee, 2005 President

Organisation: University of South Australia Students' Association

Address: GPO Box 2471,
Adelaide, South Australia, 5001

Phone: (08) 8302 2882

Fax: (08) 8302 2888

Email: justin.lee@unisa.edu.au

UniSA Students Association

Submission to the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Committee on the activities of Student Advisory Officers employed by the UniSA Students Association

Presented by Justin Lee, 2005 Association President

Prepared by Kate Jessen, Acting Student Advisory Officer Coordinator & Dr. Mary Rieger, Policy & Research Officer

with the assistance of Leanne Steele, City East Student Advisory Officer & Tristana Sidoryn, External Student Advisory Officer

17th June 2005



TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. BACKGROUND	4
2. INTRODUCTION.....	4
3 STATISTICS	4
3.1 GENERAL.....	4
3.2 DIVISIONS AND SCHOOL	5
3.3 SPECIFIC STUDENT GROUPS	5
3.3.1 <i>International Students</i>	5
3.3.2 <i>Postgraduate Students</i>	6
3.3.3 <i>External Students</i>	6
4 COLLABORATION WITH UNISA	6
5 REAL LIFE SCENARIOS	7
5 CONCLUSION.....	11
6. TABLES AND FIGURES.....	12

1. Background

The UniSA Students' Association seeks to improve the quality of student life by providing services and facilities, promoting diverse student activities and representing student interests to the university and the broader community. The Association's turnover for the financial year ending 2004 was in excess of \$12 million dollars, with only \$4.3 million directly contributed by way of the Student Amenities Fee. With approximately 145 democratically elected available student representative positions and approximately 150 dedicated staff, this organisation achieved a trading surplus of over \$250,000 in 2004, saved members \$76,000 by offering a 10% discount in all our café/bars and assisted over 1,500 students with academic issues.

This report attempts to give the committee an overview of the work conducted by the Association's Student Advisory Officers. Student Advisory Officers' role within the Association is to provide support, advocacy and representations to any UniSA student, who seeks their assistance regarding academic issues. When dealing with student's academic issues these individuals act as case managers to make certain all aspects of a student's situation are addressed and ensure that the whole situation is rectified. These individuals are also in the unique position of having an overview of the university system, and therefore have the ability to identify ways around issues that might not be covered by policy, or which may not be obvious to individual Divisions and Schools.

2. Introduction

There is currently six staff (5.2 full time equivalents) employed by the Association to deal with student's academic issues. The Acting Student Advisory Officer Coordinator, City West, Magill and the External Student Advisory Officer are employed on a full time basis, while the City East and Mawson Lakes positions are currently at three days per week. In addition, academic issues at Whyalla are dealt with as the need arises. The total number of issues dealt with by all Student Advisory Officers has been increasing over the last three years, with over 1000 issues in 2002, 1632 in 2003 and a slightly decline in 2004. Student Advisory Officers only deal with academic issues, such as problems with a student's course, or program, a student seeking an opportunity to remark or resubmit an assignment and representing students when the individual is accused of academic misconduct or up for preclusion. This role does not encompass personal counselling or welfare issues, although Student Advisory Officers refer students to appropriate services if counselling or welfare needs are identified.

This report seeks to demonstrate to the committee the vital role the Student Advisory Officers perform within the university community by closely examining recent statistics and offering scenarios, to illustrate how these dedicated individuals have assisted students.

3 Statistics

3.1 General

In 2004, the Student Advisory Officer's dealt with 1515 issues presented by students. This was down minimally from 2003, when 1632 issues were presented. A total of 15 different categories of issues were presented to Student Advisory Officers with course (24.5%) and program (20.5%) problems ranking highly, and examinations (9.8%) final grade appeals (9.4%), and academic misconduct (6.5%) making up the rest of the top five (Table 1, page 11). If the 2004 figures are compared with 2003, the top two issues are the same however, the number of student seeking advice on these issues has increased and the increase in serious issues such as problems associated with examinations and academic misconduct is evident.

If the percentage difference between the top five issues in 2004 is examined, large changes over the last 12 months begin to appear (Table 2, page 12). Table 2 clearly indicates that there has

been a large increase in the level of serious complaints being dealt with by Student Advisory Officers. Final grade appeals, examination issues and academic misconduct are serious and often create very stressful situations for students, these issues have increased by 23.5%, 38% and 34.2% respectively in the last 12 months. There could be a number of explanations for this increase, including a greater awareness of the Association's student advisory service, however whatever the explanations these issues are having a significant impact on students lives.

If the largest changes in percentage difference between 2003 and 2004 are examined (Table 3, page 12), some interesting trends can be observed. Over the last 12 months the amount of formal counselling conducted by the Student Advisory team has reduced significantly, this is demonstrated by a -72.3% decline in this area. The reason for this is most likely a change in the policy of UniSA with regards to academic review. In the past if students was not performing academically, for whatever reason, they were able to appeal at any stage of the academic review process. As a result of this policy change student are now only able to appeal at the final stage of the academic review process, which is preclusion. Consequently, the number of students contacting Student Advisory Officers regarding formal counselling has decreased, as the appeal process, which students previously required support with, no longer exists. Preclusions are another area related to academic review, which has declined. This would appear paradoxical considering this is now the only area where students can appeal in this process. However, with the implementation of the new policy, many existing preclusions were waived with students going back one step in the review process. It is expected as the new policy takes full effect that the levels of preclusions may increase, and subsequently the number of appeals Student Advisory Officers assist with will also increase. Supervision and resourcing are two areas, which have also seen a decrease in complaints. These areas have reduced by -46.1 and -39.7 % respectively. The likely explanation for this decline is that firstly the university has implemented better policies to cover the relationship between student and supervisor; in consultation with the Association and that more emphasis has been placed by the university on resourcing the library, and information technology facilities.

3.2 *Divisions and School*

Figure 1 (page 12) shows the percentage of academic issues per student population for each Division of the UniSA. Viewing the figures in this way allows for more accurate comparison between the Divisions when the number of students in each Division varies. This figure clearly shows that the Division of Health Sciences has the greatest percentage of issues per student population. The other Divisions listed hovered around the 4% mark, while the Division of Health Sciences is above 6%.

Figure 2 (page 13) shows the percentage of issues per student population for each School in each Division. The figure clearly demonstrates that some Schools have a higher percentage of issues per student population. In particular, percentages were high for Psychology (HS4, 11.9%), Nursing & Midwifery (HS2, 9%) and Computer & Information Science (ITEE3, 8%). Whyalla has the highest percentage at 20.5%. Initially, the explanation was thought to be related to the small number of students at Whyalla (293), however comparably sized Schools (e.g. International Studies (EASS4; 357, Mathematics and Statistics ITEE5; 193) do not exhibit such a high percentage.

3.3 *Specific student groups*

3.3.1 *International Students*

The following Schools had the highest percentage of issues presented by international students per international student population within the School.

- Health Sciences (HS1)– 28 issues for population of 127 international students (22.2%)
- Nursing & Midwifery (HS2) – 4 issues for population of 38 international students (10%)

- Mathematics & Statistics (ITEE5)– 1 issue for population of 11 international students (9%)
- Pharmacy & Medical Sciences (HS3)– 19 issues for population of 236 international students (8.1%)

3.3.2 Postgraduate Students

The following Schools had the highest percentage of issues presented by postgraduate students per postgraduate student population within the School.

- The Unaipon School (EASS1)– 6 issues for population of 48 postgraduate students (12.5%)
- Computer & Information Science (ITEE3)– 22 issues for population of 272 postgraduate students (8.1%)
- Psychology (HS4)– 30 issues for population of 430 postgraduate students (7%)

3.3.3 External Students

The following Schools had the highest percentage of issues presented by external students per external student population within the School.

- The Unaipon School (EASS1)– 15 issues for population of 115 external students (13%)
- Nursing & Midwifery (HS2)– 76 issues for population of 653 external students (11.6%)
- Whyalla – 28 issues for population of 311 external students (9%)

In the above statistics it should be noted that the high percentage for some Schools can be partially explained by the low numbers of international, postgraduate and/or external students in the particular School. However taking this into consideration, it should also be noted that several Schools in the Health Sciences Division consistently reoccur in the above statistics. This may be an explanation for the larger number of complaints overall for this Division. These statistics provide the student advisory team with the information needed to approach either individual Schools or Division to rectify specific problems encountered consistently by these student groups. An important but overlooked role of an Association advocacy service is the ability to change policies and procedure from within the system. Voluntary student unionism not only threatens the visible advocacy service provided to UniSA students but the invisible services, which exist to ensure that university policies are fair and equitable for all student groups. Some of these invisible achievements are listed in the section below.

4 Collaboration with UniSA

The student advisory team contributed to various initiatives and projects over the last 12 months and some significant team and individual achievements include:

- Continued participation on university and external committees including:
 - Student Ombud Advisory Committee
 - Divisional Teaching and Learning Committee
 - Advisory Group for Students with Disabilities
 - Student Academic Policies Working Party
- Participation in the development and preparation of various submissions including:
 - Review of the University’s Assessment Policies and Procedures Manual
 - Review of End of Semester Processes
 - Review of Non-Academic Support Structures in Health Sciences
- Continued participation in the university’s and Students Associations’ orientation programs and events.
- The creation of wallet cards for student outlining important information on university policies and procedures.

5 Real life scenarios

To assist the committee to fully understand and appreciate the nature of the work conducted by Student Advisory Officers seven scenarios are outlined below, which attempts to demonstrate the scope, complexity and importance of the work conducted everyday by these individuals.

Scenario 1:

Kim is an international student from China studying a double degree – Bachelor of Science/Bachelor of Education. She comes to the Students' Association with a letter, as she does not understand what the letter says. She is clearly worried, and is referred to a Student Advisory Officer. The Student Advisory Officer explains to Kim that the letter is regarding an intention to preclude her from her program that means Kim has made unsatisfactory academic progress. The Student Advisory Officer asks Kim how her studies have been going, and Kim replied that she finds the education courses very interesting and she is getting good marks, but struggles greatly with the science courses – she has failed quite a few of these courses. Kim is now crying, and says that her family has mortgaged their farm so that she can come to Australia and study, and she feels very ashamed and worried that she will disappoint them. Kim is also worried that if she is precluded she will not be able to return to Australia to study in the future, as she will not be able to meet the visa requirements. As the Student Advisory Officer talks with Kim, she reveals that she is very interested in pursuing an education degree solely, but did not think this was possible.

Outcomes:

Kim and the Student Advisory Officer identified a number of issues to be addressed, and the Student Advisory Officer assisted Kim in looking at strategies to address these including

- Assisting Kim in writing an appeal letter against the intention to preclude, which identifies that Kim is successful in education, but struggles in science. The letter clearly outlining that in Kim's situation a preclusion could be more serious than for a domestic student, as Kim may not be able to return to Australia.
- Referring Kim to an International Advisor at the University's counseling service to talk about her feelings related to receiving the Academic Review letter.
- Involving the Association's International Student Liaison Officer for advice and information related to Kim's international student status.
- Liaising with the Program Directors of the double degree, and the individual responsible for the Bachelor of Education, to determine if a program transfer is possible.
- Liaising with the International Office to ensure Kim's visa requirements would still be met if she transfers to a straight Bachelor of Education.

Kim's appeal was upheld and she was able to transfer to a straight Bachelor of Education. She was given support in informing her family of the change in program. Kim feels confident and happy with her new program.

Scenario 2:

Tom is a second year postgraduate student. He sought out the Students' Association as his lecturer has informed him that she has found evidence of plagiarism in his most recent assignment. His lecturer has informed him that he will receive an automatic fail grade for the course, as he should have known better as a postgraduate student. Tom is referred to a Student Advisory Officer. Tom is very upset at the allegations, and states that he does not believe he plagiarised any part of his assignment. With Tom's permission, the Student Advisory Officer contacts the lecturer and obtains a copy of the assignment showing where the alleged plagiarism was found – the plagiarism consists of direct quotations that are not within quotation marks, but the remainder of the

referencing is correct. Tom says that he did not intend to infer that the work of other author's was his own, and also explains that he has always referenced this way in the past. He is devastated that he has failed the course. In the course of the discussion, Tom also informs the Student Advisory Officer that he has a learning disability, and finds it difficult to obtain information from the University's website. Tom says he is finding he misses out on vital information due to it only being available on the website.

Outcomes:

Tom's situation is multi-faceted, and a number of strategies were put in place, which included the Student Advisory Officer

- Contacting the lecturer to explain that according to university policy, if the lecturer believes that academic misconduct has occurred, there must be an initial inquiry with the student to discuss this matter. The lecturer reviewed the policy and agreed that giving a fail grade straight away was inappropriate.
- Assisting Tom in preparing for the meeting with the lecturer, including collecting past assignments which indicated evidence of the consistent style of referencing.
- Attended the meeting with Tom and assisted in presenting Tom's case to the lecturer.
- Referring Tom to a Disability Advisor at the University's counseling service, which enabled him to register as a student with a disability. As a student with a disability he was given strategies for accessing information in alternative ways to the Internet. He was also offered other support with regards to his learning disability. Tom found that his grades overall have improved, as well as his confidence in his own abilities.
- Referring Tom to a university run workshop on correct referencing procedures.

Scenario 3:

Sue is a mature aged student studying externally. She contacts the Students' Association late in the afternoon and is referred to the External Student Advisory Officer for support and assistance. Sue is crying and in distress. She informs the Student Advisory Officer that she is not coping at the moment and has recently received an email from one of her lecturers informing her that she has failed her course. Sue stated that she emailed the lecturer back explaining that she had personal problems and requested an extension. The lecturer replied by return email and unsympathetically commented that everyone has personal problems and she should have got her act together sooner. After further discussion with the Student Advisory Officer, Sue informs her that she is currently living in a domestic violence situation with her young children and her husband is making it impossible for her to study. Sue adds that she is in the process of getting a restraining order and about to move out of the family home. Sue is determined to continue with her studies as this is very important to her but does not want her lecturers knowing the extent of her personal circumstances.

Outcomes:

After further discussions with the Student Advisory Officer (and Sue being able to contact the External Student Advisory Officer using the Students' Associations toll free phone number) a number of supports and strategies were put in place for Sue. The Student Advisory Officer:

- Arranging for the University's counselling service to contact Sue so that she could have a phone appointment, and a Councillor could then write a supporting letter to Sue's lecturers
- Liaising with Sue's Program Director to advise her that Sue has legitimate reasons for submitting course requirements late and extensions would be reasonable given her particular circumstances
- Negotiating with the lecturer that Sue receive an incomplete grade

- Offering the option to assist Sue with a HECS appeal if she did not wish to finish the course or was unable to complete the course requirements even with the extensions;
- Assisting Sue to take Leave of Absence for a semester to allow Sue to stabilise her family and living arrangements while preserving her place within the program.

Sue was granted future extensions for her assignments and given an incomplete grade for the original assignment. She was able to later finish her course requirements. Sue was able to get a restraining order against her husband and the Student Advisory Officer also assisted Sue with informing university security staff of the conditions of the order, should her husband try to contact her whilst she was on campus.

Scenario 4:

Pete applied for a Bachelor of Pharmacy program at UniSA, however was not accepted into the program due to his grade point average being below the cut-off score. He had previously been studying a Bachelor of Commerce program at UniSA, however in his second year his mother died and he had left university before undertaking the required exams. Pete contacted a Student Advisory Officer when he wasn't offered a place in the Pharmacy program. On further investigation, the Student Advisory Officer discovered that even though the student had let lecturers know about the death in his family, he hadn't formally withdrawn from four courses, and had subsequently received fail grades for the courses. This brought his grade point average to below the cut-off score for entry into Pharmacy.

Outcomes:

The Student Advisory Officer:

- Contacting the counsellor that the student had previously spoken to about his circumstances, and the counsellor prepared a supporting letter for the Pharmacy School.
- Forwarding the supporting letter to lecturers, and negotiated for the student to have his entire set of fail grades converted to withdraws. This meant that the student's grade point average was not affected by the fail grades.
- Two days before the HECS census date the student was offered a place in the Pharmacy program, and the Student Advisory Officer assisted with finalising the student's enrolment. The student was enrolled and able to start studying in the Bachelor of Pharmacy program.

Scenario 5:

Michael is a third year Bachelor of Commerce student, and while on Christmas holidays, he was contacted by a lecturer who stated that the wrong exam paper had been used in an accounting exam and that students would need to repeat the exam. Michael then contacted a Student Advisory Officer distressed that he had to study for an exam that he had successfully completed over a month ago. Michael also stated that he has discussed this issue with other students in the course who were also dissatisfied that due to a university error they would all be disadvantaged.

Outcomes:

The Student Advisory Officer was able to assist Michael by:

- Arranging and attending a meeting with Michael, five other students in the same course and the lecturer, to negotiate if another option could be found.
- The meeting resulted in the lecturer arranging for students to be given the option of receiving a mark for the course based on the marks they had received for their assignments, which made up 60% of the course work, or they could choose to repeat the

exam, if they wished to lift their mark. Michael was satisfied with the credit marks that he had received for his assignments, and chose not to repeat the exam and thus received a credit mark for the course overall.

Scenario 6:

Margaret's child was experiencing significant health issues and she contacted her lecturer as she was having difficulty attending tutorials since she needed to care for her child. Through phone conversations with the lecturer it was arranged that Margaret would prepare a summary of the readings for the tutorials that she had missed. Margaret had missed five tutorials, and submitted required summaries to the lecturer at the end of the study period, as had been arranged. Margaret then received a fail grade for the course, and was advised by the lecturer that she received a fail grade for missing more than three tutorials. Margaret contacted a Student Advisory Officer she was adamant that in her phone conversation with the lecturer, the lecturer didn't specify the number of tutorials that she was unable to miss. The Student Advisory Officer also noticed that the course outline for the subject did not specifically state that students would fail if they missed more than three tutorials.

Outcome:

The Student Advisory Officer was able to assist Margaret by:

- Contacting the lecturer and outlined the student's position that no specific number of tutorials was specified. The lecturer agreed that the student shouldn't fail the whole course due to a miscommunication regarding the amount of tutorials that could be missed. The lecturer then arranged to mark the summaries that the student submitted after which the student passed the course.
- Noticing that the course information booklet contained incorrect information regarding university policies, specifically that students would receive an automatic fail grade if any form of plagiarism were discovered. The Student Advisory Officer discussed this information with the lecturer, and advised the correct university policy was to offer a range of penalties, which included an appeals process. The lecturer agreed to email students in the class to advise them of the correct university policy and to amend the information in the course information booklet for next year.

Scenario 7:

Paul is a final year social work student, who is registered as a student with a disability due to having Tourettes syndrome, which usually manifests in rapid and constant eye blinking, and grunting at times. Paul is able to speak and communicate very clearly but sometimes finds that students and staff treat him differently. Paul contacted a Student Advisory Officer in the final week of his 6-week placement. He explains to the Student Advisory Officer that his university placement facilitator has failed him on his placement stating that he had communication issues. Paul also adds that normally students are notified when they are at risk of failing and given strategies to assist improvement. Paul wasn't informed or provided with any strategies to assist him. In addition Paul was given no warning or indication that he was having any communication issues and had only received positive feedback from staff he interacted with during his placement. The Student Advisory Officer asked Paul how he was informed of the course failure and if the communication issues were explained to him. Paul indicated that the facilitator met with him and informed him that in her opinion he should consider an alternative career, as he would not get a job as a social worker because of the grunting noises he makes. Paul stated he found this offensive and discriminatory and wanted to know what could be done.

Outcomes:

The Student Advisory Officer assist Paul by

- Explaining the university's policy relating to placements
- Liaising with the School and facilitator to identify the reasons why Paul failed the placement
- Assisting Paul to write and present a letter of appeal with regards to his placement
- Highlighting to the School the facilitator's breach of university policy
- Helping Paul prepare to meet with the Head of School to discuss his appeal and attending this meeting with him
- Referring Paul to the Student Ombud in order to lodge a complaint about the facilitator's discriminatory comments.

As a result of the Student Advisory Officers involvement, the Head of School determined that the facilitator had acted inappropriately. Paul was offered the opportunity to finalise his placement component of the course by adding an additional week to his final placement in the following study period, which he successfully completed.

5 Conclusion

As previously indicated the aim of this submission is to give the committee an insight into the important role that the UniSA Students' Association team of dedicated Student Advisory Officers plays in the university community. The real life scenarios compliment the initial part of the submission, which gives the statistical facts for the last 12 months, giving a human face to those statistics. The reduction or cessation of this vital service would leave over 1,500 students with no advice, advocacy or representation. Without this service, Sue (scenario 3) may have been forced to withdraw from university, Tom (scenario 2) would have failed his course and Pete (scenario 4) wouldn't have been admitted into the program of his choice. None of these individuals had done anything "wrong" however their circumstances were outside the norm and if the Association's advisory service were not here to help, where would students turn?

The Association acknowledges that the university does provide limited support services for students, such as assistance for students with a disability and help with learning difficulties. However, the independent nature of the Association makes some of the Student Advisory Officers work possible, such as changing a course outline booklet (scenario 6), or bringing a breach of university policy to the correct individuals attention (scenario 7) or negotiating a transfer in program (scenario 1). Student on their own, with limited knowledge of university policies and procedures, would not be able to achieve these outcomes.

6. Tables and Figures

Table 1: The various categories of issues presented to Student Advisory Officers in 2004, with the raw count and percentage included.

Issues	Category	Counts (2003)	Percentage	Count (2004)	Category	Percentage
Course Miscellaneous	1	354	22.14	371	1	24.49
Program Miscellaneous	2	211	13.20	310	2	20.46
Other	3	192	12.01	149	6	9.83
Preclusion	4	167	10.44	142	5	9.37
Final Grade Appeal	5	115	7.19	98	8	6.47
Examination	6	108	6.75	81	4	5.35
Library/Resources/IT	7	78	4.88	73	3	4.82
Academic Misconduct	8	73	4.57	65	9	4.29
Finance	9	68	4.25	53	10	3.50
University	10	54	3.38	47	12	3.10
Formal Counselling	11	54	3.38	47	7	3.10
Remark/Resubmission	12	50	3.13	36	13	2.38
Conceded or Terminating Pass	13	36	2.25	21	14	1.39
Informal Counselling	14	26	1.63	15	11	0.99
Supervision	15	13	0.81	7	15	0.46
Total		1599		1515		

Table 2 Percentage difference between the counts of the top five issues in 2004, compared with counts from 2003.

Issues	Counts (2003)	Counts (2004)	Percentage difference (%)
Course Miscellaneous	354	371	4.8
Program Miscellaneous	211	310	47.0
Final Grade Appeal	115	142	23.5
Examination	108	149	38.0
Academic Misconduct	73	98	34.2

Table 3 The largest percentage difference changes between the count from 2003 and 2004.

Issues	Counts (2003)	Counts (2004)	Percentage difference (%)
Formal Counselling	54	15	-72.3
Other	192	73	-59.3
Preclusion	167	81	-51.5
Supervision	13	7	-46.1
Library/Resources/IT	78	47	-39.7

Figure 1: The percentage of academic issues per enrolled student in each division brought to the attention of Student Advisory Officers. Health refers to the Health Sciences Division, BUE refers to the Business and Enterprise Division, ITEE refers to the Information Technology, Environment and Engineering Division and EASS refers to the Education, Arts and Social Sciences Division.

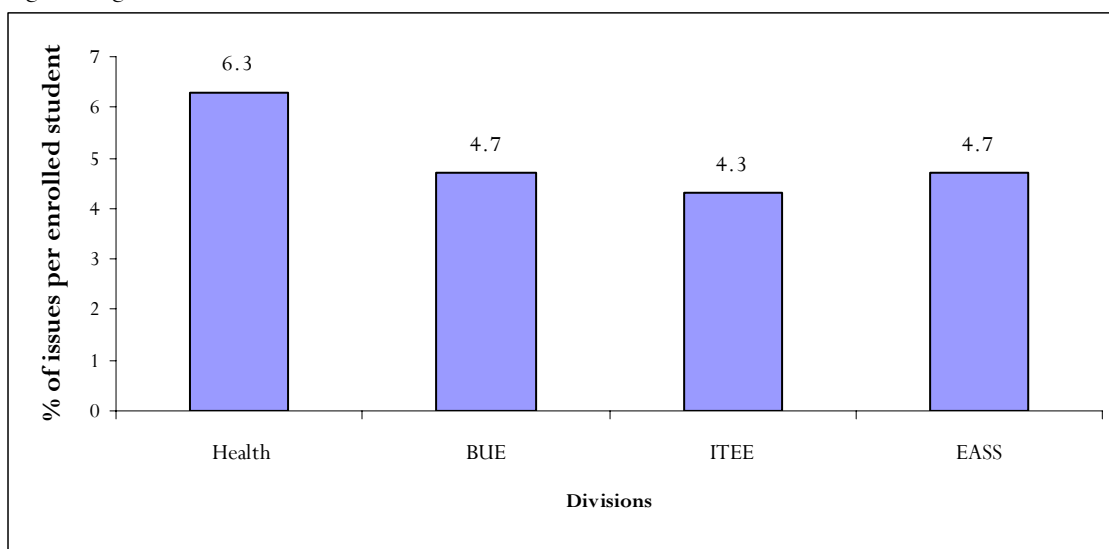
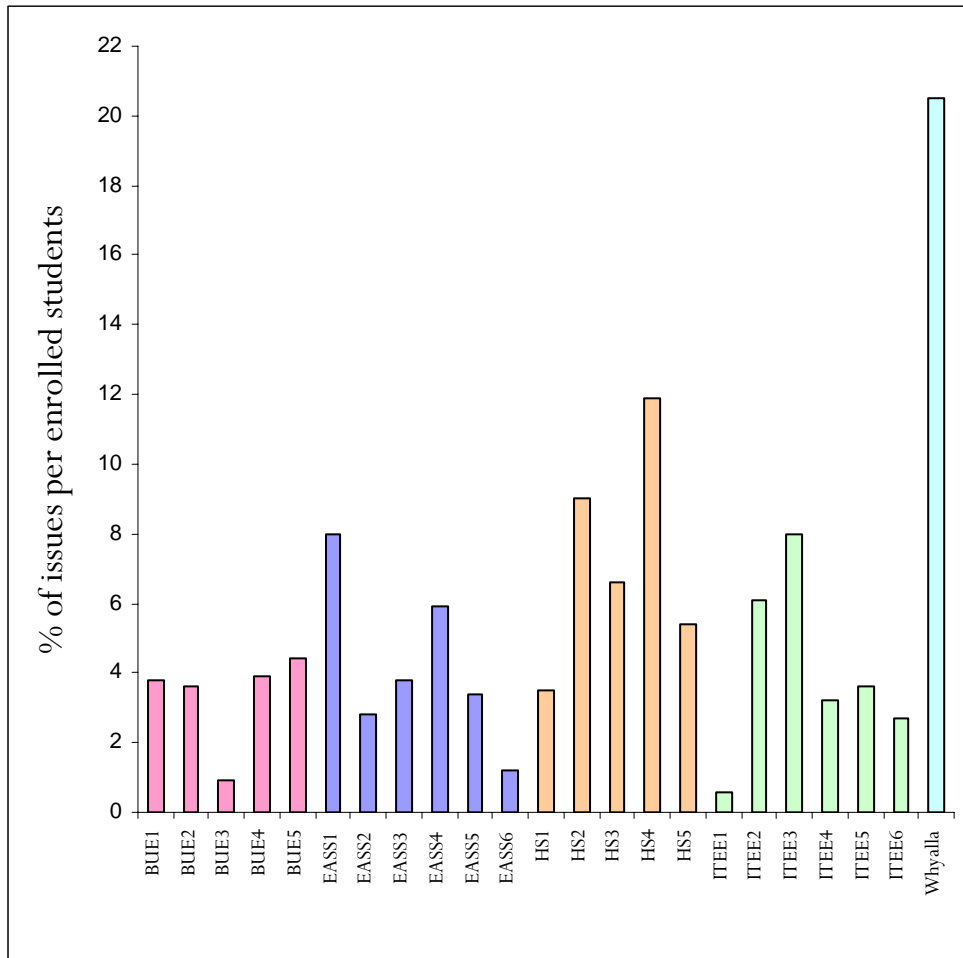


Figure 2: The percentage of academic issues per enrolled student in each School brought to the attention of Student Advisory Officers. HS refers to the Health Sciences Division, BUE refers to the Business and Enterprise Division, ITEE refers to the Information Technology, Environment and Engineering Division and EASS refers to the Education, Arts and Social Sciences Division. Each School is designated by the division, and then numbered.



BUE1: BUE Division Office, BUE2: International Business, BUE3: International Graduate School of Management, BUE4: Accounting & Information Systems, BUE5: Marketing, EASS1: The Unaipon School, EASS2: Communication, Information & New Media, EASS3: Education, EASS4: International Studies, EASS5: Louis Laybourne-Smith School of Architecture and Design, EASS6: South Australian School of Art, HS1: Health Sciences, HS2: Nursing & Midwifery, HS3: Pharmacy & Medical Sciences, HS4: Psychology, HS5: Social Work & Social Policy, ITEE1: Advanced Manufacturing and Mechanical Engineering, ITEE2: Institute for Telecommunications Research, ITEE3: Computer and Information Science, ITEE4: Electrical and Information Engineering, ITEE5: Mathematics and Statistics, ITEE6: Natural and Built Environments.