



National
Student
Ombudsman

National Student Ombudsman Annual Report 2024–25

Acknowledgement of Country

In the spirit of reconciliation, the Commonwealth Ombudsman acknowledges the Traditional Owners and Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land, sea, waters and community. We recognise the continuation of cultural, spiritual and educational practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We pay our respects to First Nations cultures and Elders past and present.

Artwork description

This artwork is a representation of the Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman by WA-based Whadjuk Nyungar Badimia Yamatji artist Kevin Bynder.

The centre of the artwork represents the colours of the Ombudsman. Outside of the central circle are semi-circles that represent the people that work and have worked, in the Ombudsman's Office. The coloured circles that surround the Ombudsman are the different sectors such as overseas students, VET Student Loans, Defence Force, private health insurance, postal industry and immigration. These sectors are overseen by the Ombudsman and in the artwork are all connected to the centre. The blue features between each sector are the waterways and the Derbal Yerrigin (Swan River) created by the Waagyl (rainbow serpent). The red circles represent the businesses and people of the community we serve.

Credits

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- Online at nso.gov.au
- By phone on **1300 395 775** (Note: this is not a toll-free number and calls from mobile phones may attract additional charges.)
- In writing to GPO Box 442, Canberra ACT 2601.

Services available to help you

First Nations people can contact us on our Indigenous line at **1800 060 789**.

If English is not your first language, you can use the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS). This is a free-of-charge service available on **131 450**.

If you are Deaf/deaf, hard of hearing, or have a speech difficulty, you can use the National Relay Service (NRS) to contact the National Student Ombudsman.

Visit the [NRS website](#) or phone **1800 555 727**.

Transmittal letter

23 September 2025

The Hon. Michelle Rowland MP
Attorney-General for Australia
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Attorney-General,

I am pleased to present the National Student Ombudsman (NSO) Annual Report for 2024–25. The report covers the NSO's first five months of operation, 1 February to 30 June 2025.

This report has been prepared for the purposes of s 21AX of the *Ombudsman Act 1976* (Ombudsman Act), which requires that I prepare and provide an annual report to you for presentation to the Australian Parliament.

As required by s 21AX, the report includes:

- Information about the number and nature of complaints made to the NSO
- Information about investigations conducted by the NSO
- Information about recommendations made by the NSO
- Information about the referral of complaints to higher education providers
- Information about the NSO's use of alternative dispute resolution and restorative engagement processes
- Information about the NSO's actions to promote best practice complaints handling; and
- Details of the NSO's observations about trends in complaints and improvements that could be made to complaints handling by higher education providers.

The report also details other matters relevant to the operations of the NSO, including how the NSO, as a new national service, built its operating model and exercised its powers and functions.

Yours faithfully,



Iain Anderson

National Student Ombudsman

About this report

This annual report:

- Outlines the NSO's origins, purpose and functions – **Part 1**
- Provides insights from complaints we received in 2024–25 – **Part 2**
- Discusses our achievements and impact in 2024–25 – **Part 3**
- Provides our sector activity report under Part IIF, Division 5 of the *Ombudsman Act 1976* – **Part 4.**

As the NSO forms part of the Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman, performance reporting for the NSO under the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013* is included in the Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman Annual Report for 2024–25.

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The NSO's first five months

Service snapshot: February to June 2025



1,791

student contacts to the NSO



1,470

contacts classified as
complaints



164

enquiries received



157

contacts classified as
out of jurisdiction



33%

of complaints resolved



47

days average
resolution time



88%

of complaints related to universities



70%

of complaints were from current students



Of complaints from current students:

70% undergraduates
30% postgraduates



26%

of complaints were from former students



4%

of complaints were from prospective students



40%

of complaints were from international students

Key achievements



Designed and implemented a new national ombudsman service available to 1.6 million students across Australia's higher education sector

Conducted comprehensive workforce planning, recruitment and training to have the right staffing profile to deliver a trauma-informed national service from day one



Established a recognisable and vibrant brand and launched a new website and social media presence to promote the NSO

Demonstrated a culture of continuous improvement, achieving increases in the proportion of complaints closed against complaints received throughout the period.





Promoted our service and formed connections with students, staff and other stakeholders at O-week activities at 31 on-campus events around the country in February and March

Participated in around 250 external engagements to raise awareness of the NSO, learn about the sector's complaints-handling approach and priorities, and share early insights



Agreed letters of exchange with all state and territory ombudsman offices to facilitate coordination, cooperation and information sharing

Commenced using all legislative functions, including early resolution, investigations, conciliation and restorative engagement



Foreword from the National Student Ombudsman

I am pleased to present the inaugural annual report of the National Student Ombudsman (NSO), covering our first five months of operation from 1 February to 30 June 2025.

The NSO was a recommendation of the Australian Universities Accord Final Report (released in February 2024) and was established as part of the Action Plan Addressing Gender-based Violence in Higher Education, agreed to by Education Ministers in 2024.

The NSO's establishment following the passage of the Universities Accord (National Student Ombudsman) Bill 2024 in November 2024 represented a milestone in efforts to support higher education students' safety, wellbeing, and success. Through the NSO, more than 1.6 million higher education students across Australia have a free, independent, and impartial pathway to raise complaints about their higher education provider.

Significantly, the NSO has investigative powers similar to a Royal Commission across a broad remit of issues, including student safety and welfare, racism, course administration, and the effectiveness of student complaints processes.

The 1,470 complaints we received in our first five months show that the issues and challenges higher education students face are as diverse as the sector itself.

As outlined in this report, the most frequent complaint issue was course administration, followed by teaching and learning, and unmet academic requirement or misconduct matters. Collectively, these three issues constituted 71% of complaints we received in the reporting period. Fees and other financial issues, and discrimination, racism, or inadequate support were the fourth and fifth most common complaint issues.



Iain Anderson, National Student Ombudsman

It is clear from what students told us, and from our broader observations so far, that many higher education students face particularly challenging circumstances as they seek to balance the competing demands of study with those of work, family responsibilities, and the cost of living.

Against this complex background, I am proud of the NSO staff's achievements in establishing and embedding operations, providing a trauma-informed pathway for student complaints, and achieving both resolution of individual complaints whilst working towards systemic reform.

I look forward to the NSO building on these early achievements in 2025–26 and continuing to play its part in supporting a safe, productive, and positive experience for higher education students and an equitable and inclusive higher education sector.

Message from the First Assistant Ombudsman

Australia's higher education sector is critically important. It has the power to transform people's lives through education and research. Every year, hundreds of thousands of students – both domestic and international – choose to invest in their futures here.

Having had the opportunity to talk to many students and sector representatives in the NSO's first five months, I've learnt that the essential ingredient for a successful higher education provider is prioritising the delivery of high quality and safe student services. Effective and fair complaints handling is central to this goal. When students see their concerns acknowledged and addressed, they are more likely to remain engaged in their studies and to feel connected to their institution.



Sarah Bendall, First Assistant Ombudsman, NSO

As this report highlights, there is room for improvement in how higher education providers are approaching, resolving and continually improving services through complaints. In our first five months, we experienced strong demand for our new national service. We received our first complaint within 15 minutes of opening our doors, and nearly 1,800 students shared their views about where their provider's communications could be clearer, support services strengthened, or systems made fairer. The most common reflection students gave about their student experience was that they didn't feel that their provider had listened to them.

Almost half (46%) of the complaints to the NSO were about back of house student service issues. These seemingly small administrative issues are having a big impact on students' lives. For example, misinformation or miscommunication from providers about course requirements often result in delays to course completion and entry into the workforce, or cost students significant additional expense. Listening better to students and actioning service improvements from complaints can fix these issues and prevent future complaints.

While there is room for improvement, the NSO did see some terrific examples of providers holding themselves accountable for things that have gone wrong, apologising to students and taking the opportunity to improve their services. It's fantastic to see providers taking steps to simplify processes, improve communication, and train staff in approaches that emphasise empathy and respect for students.

For the NSO itself, it's been a significant and fast-paced period – one of rapid growth and adaptation. In addition to designing and implementing all NSO services, our focus has been to raise awareness of the NSO as much as possible, to listen deeply to students and the sector regarding their respective views and challenges and to establish strong and effective relationships with other higher education oversight entities, such as the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency.

I am exceptionally proud of the NSO team's effort to commence services across all our functions in this first year. It's a significant achievement to design and then make full use of all the resolution methods available to us, including early resolution, investigations, restorative engagement and conciliation functions. I am very grateful to NSO staff for giving so generously their time, energy and expertise to ensure such a strong start to our services to students and the sector.

To the students who have come forward so far, thank you for your trust in our new service and your contribution to positive change. While our complaint numbers are small relative to the 1.6 million higher education students in Australia, we know that not all students can complain or feel comfortable doing so. We know that one complaint can often represent the views of many. So, know that your experiences have been fundamental to the NSO building our understanding of what matters to students, shining a light on areas of concern and contributing to systemic reform.

To the many higher education providers, independent and public, large and small, we have engaged with across the country, thank you for the professional and welcoming reception you've given the NSO. It's clearly a complex time for the higher education sector, amid significant change. I am grateful for your goodwill as we work towards our collective goal of a more inclusive and equitable higher education sector, in line with the vision set out in the Australian Universities Accord.

1. Our origins and purpose

The National Student Ombudsman was created in response to concerns about student safety and wellbeing in university settings, and in particular, concerns over a number of years without meaningful action to address the prevalence of gender-based violence.

In 2017, the Australian Human Rights Commission's *Change the course* report noted that 'universities need to do more to prevent such abuse from occurring in the first place, to build a culture of respect, and to respond appropriately by supporting victims of abuse and sanctioning perpetrators'.

The 2021 National Student Safety Survey (NSSS) showed that 1 in 20 students had been sexually assaulted since they started university, and 1 in 6 had been sexually harassed. The survey also found that there had been little improvement in student awareness of how to report such incidents to, or seek support from, their university. More than half of the respondents said they had little or no knowledge of how to report, and over 40% said they had little or no knowledge of how to seek support.

The Australian Universities Accord Panel's interim report in 2023 named sexual assault and sexual harassment among the systemic issues persisting across the higher education sector. It highlighted concerns about complex, slow, and confusing complaints options:

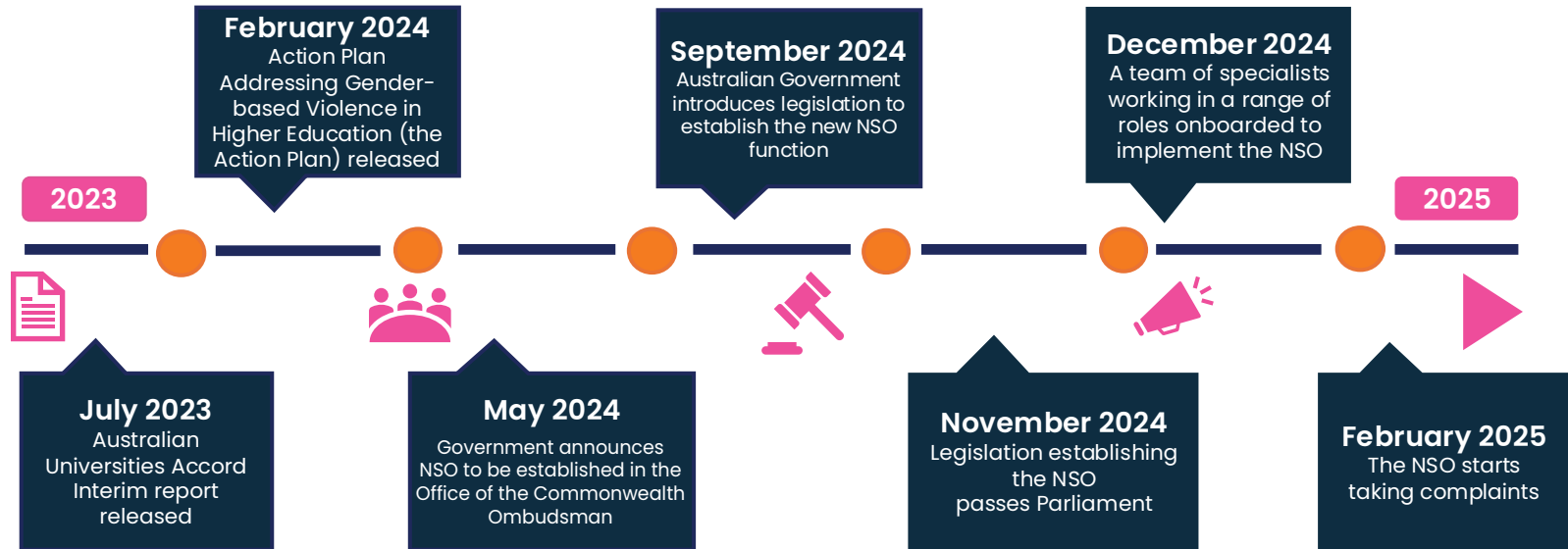
'The Review heard that existing approaches to reduce the incidence of sexual harassment and sexual assault on university campuses are inadequate, with some stakeholders advocating for increased transparency, monitoring and accountability mechanisms.'

The NSO forms part of the Action Plan Addressing Gender-based Violence in Higher Education, released by Education Ministers in February 2024. The NSO was also a recommendation of the Universities Accord Final Report, also released in February 2024.

The graphic on the following page depicts some of the key elements of the NSO's origins and establishment.

Figure 1: Origins of the National Student Ombudsman

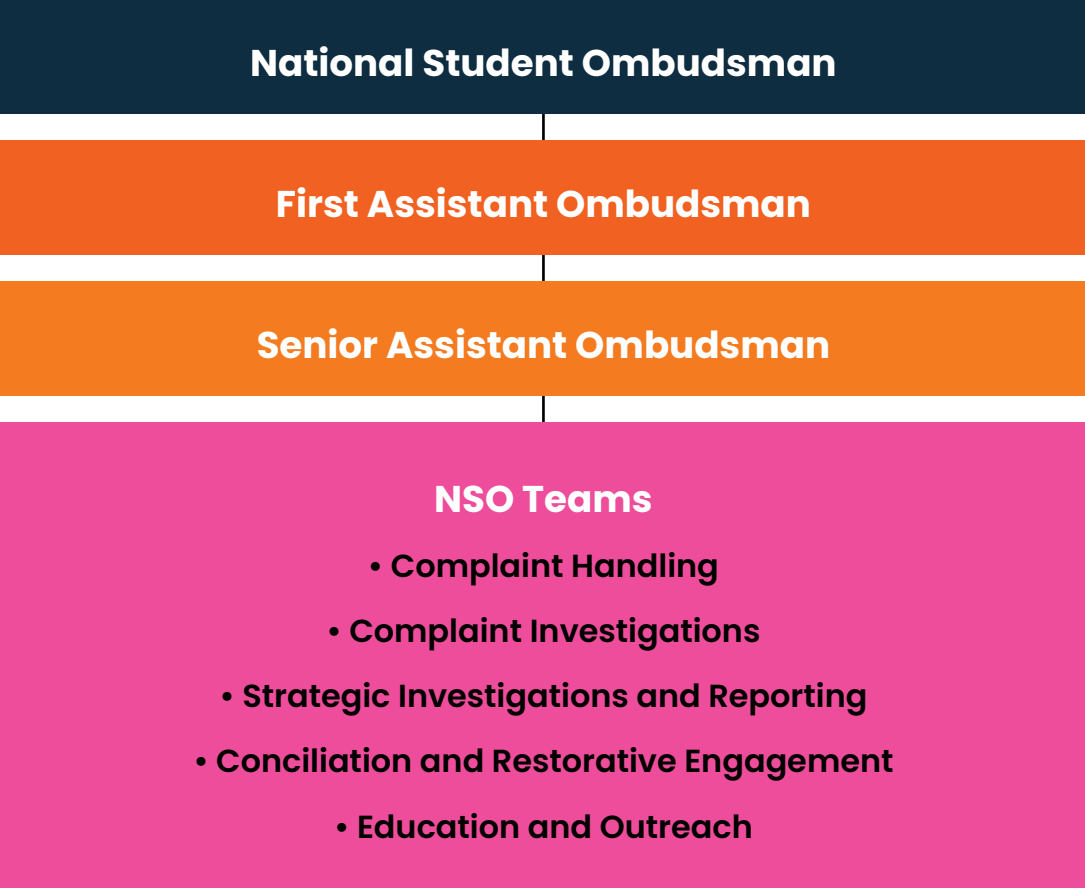
Origins of the National Student Ombudsman



Our structure and people

The NSO is part of the Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman. The NSO's structure is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: The National Student Ombudsman structure



Leaders

The Commonwealth Ombudsman, Iain Anderson, also serves as the National Student Ombudsman. The First Assistant Ombudsman, Sarah Bendall, leads the NSO's day-to-day functions. See Box 1 for profiles of the Ombudsman and First Assistant Ombudsman.

Box 1: Leaders

Iain Anderson, National Student Ombudsman

Iain Anderson was appointed as the Commonwealth Ombudsman from 1 August 2022 for a five-year term.

As the Commonwealth Ombudsman, Iain is also the National Student Ombudsman and the ombudsman for the ACT, the Defence Force, immigration, law enforcement, private health insurance, overseas students, VET Student Loans and the postal industry.

As a senior public servant with over 32 years of service before his appointment, he developed and implemented transformational change across a wide range of legal and social policy areas, including the Commonwealth civil justice and criminal justice systems, family law, native title, Royal Commissions, and Australia's territories.

Iain has worked in seven different Commonwealth departments and agencies, including acting as Secretary of the Attorney-General's Department for an extended period.

He is a director and board member of the Australasia and Pacific Region of the International Ombudsman Institute.

Iain holds a Bachelor of Economics and a Bachelor of Laws from the University of Sydney.

Sarah Bendall, First Assistant Ombudsman, National Student Ombudsman

Sarah Bendall joined the OCO as First Assistant Ombudsman of the National Student Ombudsman in September 2024.

Sarah has worked in external oversight agencies for over 25 years. She is a qualified lawyer and company secretary with a passion for supporting individuals to resolve disputes and helping organisations to continually improve their systems and services. In roles responsible for complaints handling, she has led teams to resolve countless disputes through conciliation, mediation, investigation, and restorative engagement in areas ranging from discrimination and sexual harassment to employment, domestic building, small civil claims, legal services, consumer law, public housing, and child protection services.

Before her appointment as First Assistant Ombudsman for the NSO, Sarah was Victoria's Chief Dispute Resolution Officer, a statutory position responsible for leading state-wide dispute resolution services for domestic building, consumer and community disputes. She has worked as General Counsel at Victoria Legal Aid, Head of Legal and Dispute Resolution at the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, Director of Conduct and Complaints at the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services, and Legal Counsel at the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman Office.

NSO staff

The NSO scaled up from 41 staff on 1 February to 48 staff on 30 June 2025. We will continue to recruit in line with operational requirements, with the aim of reaching 58 staff in 2025–26.

NSO staff have a range of professional and cultural backgrounds, as befits our national remit. Staff expertise includes complaints handling and dispute resolution, conciliation, restorative engagement, trauma-informed practice, strategic communications, legal skills, education, stakeholder management, investigations, and data analysis and reporting.

Our role, purpose, and functions

The NSO handles complaints from, or on behalf of former, current or prospective higher education students about the actions of their higher education provider.

Our purpose is to:

- Provide a free, independent, and impartial service for students to raise concerns about higher education providers
- Bring to light aspects of the student experience that are causing concern or harm
- Highlight and support better practice and contribute to systemic reform.

Students can contact us directly with a specific complaint or for information and advice, including to help decide whether or not to make a complaint.

The NSO works with the higher education sector to improve the student experience and support systemic change, including by providing advice and training to providers about better practice complaints handling.

We are committed to:

- Providing higher education students with an effective escalated complaints mechanism that is independent, impartial, and trauma informed
- Contributing to greater oversight and accountability of providers in support of positive student experiences.

Complaints handling

The NSO can consider complaints from any current, past, or prospective higher education student studying with an Australian provider. This includes both domestic and international students and those studying from outside Australia.

Our approach when we receive a complaint is to understand the student's situation and to identify the most effective pathway to resolution. In some cases, it may be more efficient or effective to refer the student to their provider's complaints process or to another service that is better placed to help them.

One of the ways we can support students is by coaching them in communication and conflict resolution skills. This may empower them to approach the provider directly and work towards a solution without needing further support from the NSO.

Our methods for handling complaints are designed to minimise touchpoints for the students who contact us. Wherever possible, we will reduce the need for students to retell the circumstances of their complaint through strategies such as warm transfers between the NSO teams.

Informed consent is central to all our work with students. We do not take any step on a student's behalf or share any identifiable information about them without it. This means first explaining exactly what we propose to do and what effects it might have. We seek the student's consent to proceed only when we are confident they are fully informed.

Our teams operate with confidentiality. Any exception will only be made with the student's explicit and informed consent and for the purpose of resolving their complaint in the way they want us to.

Engagement with higher education providers

We focus on early, informal resolution wherever possible as achieving quick and appropriate outcomes can provide the best opportunity for a student to continue with their higher education.

Many complaints, particularly those related to administrative matters, can be resolved early through a facilitated resolution between an NSO complaints officer and a provider.

We recognise that early resolution methods may not be effective in every situation. In some cases, we may use our power to make inquiries to seek additional information from a provider to better understand the circumstances of a complaint. The additional information will help us determine whether taking further action is necessary.

Where we think a matter should be further investigated by a provider, we can require a provider investigate a complaint and report their proposed resolution back to us. When we have reviewed the outcome of the provider's investigation, we may decide not to take no further action, or instead, decide to make recommendations or suggestions for how the provider can improve their processes and procedures. Alternatively, we can decide to commence our own investigation or recommend an alternative dispute resolution process.

Where a complaint is not investigated but still includes important information for a higher education provider to consider, the NSO writes observation letters to draw attention to provider practice or an action that should be considered and potentially changed.

Box 2 explains what kinds of complaints the NSO can consider.

Box 2: Kinds of complaints the NSO can consider

The NSO can consider a wide range of complaints about the actions of a higher education provider. For example, students can complain to us about:

- A provider's complaint and appeal processes
- Applications for special consideration and reasonable adjustments
- Student safety and wellbeing, including gender-based violence, discrimination, racism, Antisemitism and Islamophobia.

Some things we can't consider complaints about are:

- A VET course
- Academic judgement, such as grades awarded to students
- A person's employment with a higher education provider
- The appointment of a person to an office of a higher education provider.

Conciliation and restorative engagement

The NSO conducts trauma-informed conciliation and restorative engagement processes between students and higher education providers. We consider each individual complaint and what function is likely to result in the best outcome – this means the most timely, meaningful, and achievable one. We work with the student and provider to determine this.

Conciliation

The NSO uses conciliation as its alternative dispute resolution function. The conciliation process is conducted safely and fairly through constructive communication between the student and the provider.

In assessing whether and how to use conciliation, we consider timelines, desired outcomes, student needs, student expectations, the history of the complaint, provider responses and expectations, and anything else relevant. We ensure students are informed and consent to the process. Our assessments are ongoing as the matter progresses.

As a neutral third party, we bring the student and the provider together to find a resolution that works for both of them. We facilitate communication, provide guidance, and suggest options. We work with the student and the provider to resolve the issue throughout the process of arranging a conciliation conference, and resolution may occur before or as a result of the conference.

Conciliation conferences are facilitated by NSO staff who are accredited conciliators and conferences held in person or virtually, depending on what is best for the parties. Resolution terms for a conciliation are documented in a formal record of agreement, signed by the parties. The outcome of a conciliation conference is detailed in a confidential record of agreement.

Restorative engagement

A restorative engagement conference is an opportunity for a student to share their personal account of harm they have experienced and to have this heard and acknowledged by a senior staff member of the provider. As well as providing the opportunity for a student to share their experience, this can also help the university to consider how it can prevent future harm to other students.

Our approach to restorative engagement is based on the principle of 'do no further harm', and we only take this path if both the student and the provider are willing.

Our restorative engagement function was established in consultation with industry experts and draws on best practice, including the function design features of the Restorative Engagement Framework developed by the Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman as Defence Force Ombudsman. It has been tailored to meet the needs of students and the priorities, processes, and remit of the National Student Ombudsman and the higher education sector.

Investigate

Investigating individual complaints helps us to:

- Resolve a student or group of students' complaint
- Consider recommendations that can help improve the student experience of the higher education sector more generally.

Investigations of student complaints

The NSO does not formally investigate every complaint. We investigate when we believe that recommendations or suggestions arising from an investigation could improve the student experience across the higher education system.

Reasons why we might choose to investigate include:

- We have already tried to resolve the complaint another way, and we believe there is an outstanding issue that warrants closer examination.
- The provider's actions appear to be unlawful, unreasonable, or unfair.
- The complaint highlights issues that seriously affect one student or a group of students.

Own motion investigations

The NSO does not need to receive a complaint to commence an investigation and can choose to use our 'own motion' powers. An own motion investigation often considers a systemic issue that has been identified across multiple complaints received or through other sources, such as media or parliamentary inquiries, and can include a single provider or multiple higher education providers.

Building on the individual resolution of complaints through early resolution methods and through complaint investigations, own motion investigations play an important role for the NSO to highlight areas where broad reform is required within the higher education sector. These investigations also assist the NSO to identify trends, analyse information, develop strategic advice, assess systemic risks and issues, and provide best practice guidance.

How we investigate

We only investigate a complaint if we have the student's informed consent. We are required to formally notify the higher education provider when we start an investigation.

During an investigation, we typically ask for information from the provider to help us form a view about the issue we're investigating. We may obtain information in other ways, such as conducting questionnaires or surveys, or visiting the campus. We can require the provider to give us information. Providers, their staff and other people involved are authorised to answer our questions or give us information or documents we ask for. The Ombudsman Act protects them from legal liability for doing so.

When we end an investigation, we write to the student and the provider with what we found in the investigation, and explaining any decisions we might make.

Reporting

When we draft an investigation report that expresses opinions critical of a higher education provider or their staff, we will always invite the provider to make a written submission about the matter before we finalise our report.

The report may include recommendations for the provider to act on, if the Ombudsman is of the opinion that the provider has acted unlawfully, unjustly, unreasonably or otherwise wrongfully in the circumstances. We ask the provider to tell us whether they accept or do not accept our recommendations. We then monitor and report on whether the provider acts on the recommendations.

We can publish a report if we believe it is in the public interest to do so. In considering this, the matters the NSO will consider includes whether the NSO considers the report can influence improvement across the higher education sector and give useful examples of how practices can be improved or where we see opportunities for regulatory reform.

Other types of public reports

Investigation reports require a large investment of time and resources by the NSO to explore a specific issue or set of issues. Less formal public reporting including data overviews and analyses, Ombudsman Statements, Issue Papers, and Best Practice Guides play an important role in assisting the NSO to highlight key trends, emerging issues, observations and best practice guidance for the sector to consider. These reports are a useful alternative to commencing an investigation to efficiently flag an emerging trend, issue or practice that is relevant for all higher education providers to consider, and to provide advice on how to improve administrative practices or decision-making to support students. The information included can involve open-source research or an overview of previous NSO complaint-handling.

Improve complaints handling and the student experience

The NSO supports the higher education sector to promote best practice complaints handling and improve the student experience.

We engage with providers, students, peak bodies, advocacy organisations and government agencies, including the Commonwealth Department of Education and TEQSA, to build relationships, enable information sharing, promote best practice complaints handling and develop strategic and considered advice and training for providers.

We recognise that the sector is broad and diverse, ranging from large public universities to smaller regional ones and independent providers. We also recognise the diversity among higher education students. Listening to students' voices and elevating their views is at the centre of our work.

2. Complaints data and insights

This part of the report describes what the NSO heard from students, observed across the sector and learned from cases during 2024–25.

Students who contacted us

Elevating student voices and experiences and ensuring student-centric complaints handling and dispute resolution is a priority for the NSO.

We acknowledge and welcome the strong interest in our service, evidenced by the nearly 1,800 higher education students across Australia who contacted the NSO in our first five months of operation. It is not always easy to make a complaint, so we are very grateful to students for sharing their experiences with us. In contacting the NSO they not only took the initiative in seeking to resolve their own concerns but also helped us identify areas for improvement – on an individual level and systemically.

As we established our service, hearing directly from students – both through complaints and during our visits to campuses and other opportunities to engage with us – was invaluable in helping us understand what matters to them. We often heard from students who wanted to talk through an issue rather than lodge a complaint.

The comments throughout this chapter from students who contacted the NSO also provide insight into some of the issues students face and how we have helped. To protect individuals' privacy, pseudonyms have been used.

Data and insights

Data caveats

- Complaints and enquiries are collectively known as contacts.
- When a contact is classified as a complaint, it has an issue assigned to it, and an outcome is recorded against each issue when it is finalised. A complaint can have more than one issue or outcome.

- Figures are presented in this report as whole numbers for ease of reading, with rounding performed at the last stage of calculation for maximum accuracy. Values from x.00 to x.49 are rounded down, and values from x.50 to x.99 are rounded up. Therefore, in some instances, results may not total 100%.
- The demographic percentages are based on the total number of responses we received and indicative only. While the NSO attempts to collect this information on all contacts, it is not always provided to us.

Issues we heard about most

The NSO’s jurisdiction allows it to accept complaints on a wide variety of topics that impact students on their many-faceted journeys through the higher education system. After assessing each complaint, NSO officers record the complaint issue category and sub-issues. If the assessment reveals multiple issues, each will be recorded. For this reason, the number of issues we have reported exceeds the number of complaints we have received.

The NSO uses the issues to assist in determining whether a provider has fully considered a student’s complaint or provided an appropriate response. They also provide a valuable insight into the common issues impacting students.

Complaint issues related to course administration was the largest category in 2024–25, accounting for 33% of all issues reported. The two next most common complaints, each at 19% of all issues reported, were complaints about teaching and learning, and unmet academic requirement or misconduct matters.

Table 1 sets out the complaint issues we heard about most often from students, how many students raised them, and the percentage of the total they represent.

Table 1: Most common complaint issues

Complaint issue category	Number of students	% of all complaints
Course administration	572	33%
Teaching and learning	321	19%
Unmet academic requirement or misconduct matter	320	19%
Fees and other financial issues	227	13%
Discrimination, racism or inadequate support	116	7%
Health and safety	88	5%
Provider administration	47	3%
Facilities and living arrangements	20	1%
Total	1711	100%

Table 2: Detailed breakdown of complaint issues

Issue categories with sub issues	Count of issue	% of total
Course administration	572	33%
Special consideration	127	7%
Enrolment, deferment and intermission	98	6%
Withdrawal	67	4%
Application and admission	57	3%
Course structure, design and availability	56	3%
Certification and graduation	55	3%
Inaccurate or misleading information	47	3%
Recognition of prior learning	42	2%
Transfer	23	1%
Teaching and learning	321	19%
Assessment	118	7%
Placement / Workplace Integrated Learning	75	4%
Quality of teaching or course content	44	3%
Academic support services	28	2%
Learning plan/adjustment plan	28	2%
Supervision	23	1%
Learning resources	5	0%
Unmet academic requirement or misconduct matter	320	19%
Academic performance	169	10%
Misconduct (academic)	86	5%
Misconduct (non-academic)	38	2%
Attendance	27	2%
Fees and other financial issues	227	13%
Fees	136	8%
Refunds	79	5%
Scholarships	12	1%
Discrimination, racism or inadequate support	116	7%
Discrimination	81	5%
Inadequate support	21	1%
Racism / vilification	14	1%
Health and safety	88	5%
Bullying and harassment	46	3%
Gender-based violence	28	2%
Abuse, threats and violence (not GBV)	11	1%
Retaliation	3	0%
Provider administration	47	3%
IT and digital services	21	1%
Support services (non-academic)	14	1%
Privacy / Personal Information	9	1%
Provider and student organisations	3	0%
Facilities and living arrangements	20	1%
Accommodation	17	1%
Buildings, grounds and facilities	3	0%
Grand total	1,711	100%

Analysis of the most common complaint issues

The four complaint issues we most frequently heard about – course administration, teaching and learning, unmet academic requirement / misconduct matters and fees and other financial issues – made up 84% of all complaints we received.

While these complaints covered a diversity of student experiences, several common themes were apparent, including:

- The disproportionate impact on students of seemingly minor administrative decisions.
- Miscommunication by providers as a very frequent feature of student complaints.
- Conversely, the value of clear and open communication to resolving student complaints – or preventing issues from becoming complaints in the first place.
- Concerns about confusing, lengthy and complex provider complaints processes.
- The importance of timeliness in decision-making for students, and the negative impact of delays.
- Students who contacted us often did not feel heard by providers, highlighting the value of genuinely listening to students and taking a student-centred approach.

The below provides an overview of concerns students raised with us across the four most common complaint issues.

1. Course administration

We received 572 complaints (33% of all complaints) about course administration, making it the issue we most often heard about. This category of complaints covers matters including course design or course availability, course transfers, withdrawals and special consideration.

Concerns from students about provider miscommunication was a common theme in these complaints, and we frequently heard that seemingly minor administrative decisions had a big impact on students. By contrast, we were able to resolve a number of these matters by facilitating communication between students and providers.

'I explained my reasons for dropping out and stated that if the school needed more documents, they could ask me. However, the school rejected me because I lacked evidence ... I expected the school to make a request to me after receiving my appeal, so I could better meet the school's requirements.'

– Yusuf, university student

Special consideration complaints made up 7% of total complaints (127 complaints in total). Students who raised special consideration matters told us that they felt their provider had not listened to their life circumstances when considering the discretion to grant special consideration. Some felt that the provider had applied the rules inconsistently or unfairly, or that there had been significant delays in making a decision.

2. Teaching and learning

For teaching and learning, 321 complaints were received, 19% of all complaints. This category of complaints covers matters including course quality, supervision, and work integrated learning and placements. Complaints in this category were typically about either:

- A concern raised about teaching methods or learning supports; or
- An issue with workplace integrated learning and placements.

Again, poor communication, delays and ensuing uncertainty were raised by students, including in relation to placements.

The NSO received 75 complaints relating to a placement or workplace integrated learning, representing 4% of all complaints. Concerns ranged from issues with arranging a placement, (such as last minute cancellations or inadequate placement accommodation or no placement being arranged at all), through to issues arising while students were on placement, including incidents of bullying, harassment or assault.

Students consistently raised the complexity caused by communicating across three involved parties (student, higher education provider and placement organisation) and the significant impact when there was an issue with a placement. Students also highlighted that while a placement issue remains unresolved, the ambiguity and uncertainty of what will happen next can cause a great deal of stress.

The NSO observed through placement complaints that students can be significantly impacted after a placement disruption occurs, including being unable to easily supplement placement hours or repeat a course due to being required to wait up to a year before the course is delivered again. At times, these delays can prevent students from graduating and from commencing work in their chosen discipline, further compounding the financial impact to them.

3. Unmet academic requirements or misconduct

The NSO heard from 320 students with a concern about a higher education provider process relating to an unmet academic requirement or misconduct, representing 19% of all complaints. Most complaints (53% within this category) were about suspension or removal processes from the provider due to academic performance. When raising a complaint about an unmet academic requirement, students often told the NSO that their ability to study had been affected by a significant event in their personal or family life.

These events included accidents, health challenges, economic impacts, the death of someone close to them, and unexpected carer responsibilities. When trying to navigate the discussion about why their grades were impacted with their provider, a common report was that their provider did not fully appreciate the extent of the impact to their ability to engage normally in education. These complaints raise an opportunity for providers to more carefully consider how they can be supportive and flexible to students encountering these challenges.

Many international students complained about processes relating to unmet academic performance. 61% of these matters were raised by international students. For international students the stress involved in these processes is more significant because the outcome of the process may result in the cancellation of their certificate of enrolment, and subsequently their visa. The NSO heard from many international students who were distressed and in a state of poor mental health as a result of these processes. Ensuring there are sufficient supports surrounding students participating in these processes is important.

4. Fees and other financial issues

Over 13% of complaints were about fees or other financial issues, with 227 complaints received. This included a wide variety of complaints, about HECS-HELP fees, prepaid tuition fees and other refund requests, and scholarships.

International students who made a complaint to the NSO often did so about fees or other financial issues. This includes 47% of fee or other financial issue complaints raised by an international student (compared to 40% of all NSO complaints raised by an international student).

We also observed the broader implications for students of challenges relating to fees and other financial issues during a cost-of-living crisis. For example, delays in a provider issuing a fee refund, or difficulties for a student in securing a payment plan, can compound other matters in students' lives, such as housing costs and family commitments.

Insights about other key issues and student cohorts

Gender-based violence

The NSO received a small number of complaints (28 complaints, 2% of all NSO complaints received) about gender-based violence in our first five months of service. Most complaints were from current students, rather than about historical matters. While the number of matters was small, the complexity and seriousness of the issues raised were significant. Gender-based violence matters raised included serious cases of assault during placement and at student accommodation, as well as sexual harassment by higher education staff.

Concerns raised in gender-based violence complaints include a failure by some providers to make fair decisions in the circumstances, for example by taking a rigid approach to policies on withdrawal from subjects and special consideration requests.

We also observed a failure by some providers to adopt a trauma-informed approach to policies and procedures. This included investigations which were not trauma-informed because of multiple interviews and interviewers, use of third-party investigation firms and/or insensitive tone and framing of questions. We also heard about a disconnect between students and providers on reasonable timeframes for processes as well as inadequate support for student victim survivors, for example no assistance to connect into student counselling or advocacy services.

Discrimination and racial vilification

Discrimination and racial vilification complaints made up 6% of the complaints we received, with a total of 95 complaints received. Complaints about discrimination accounted for 5% of all complaints received and racial vilification complaints 1%.

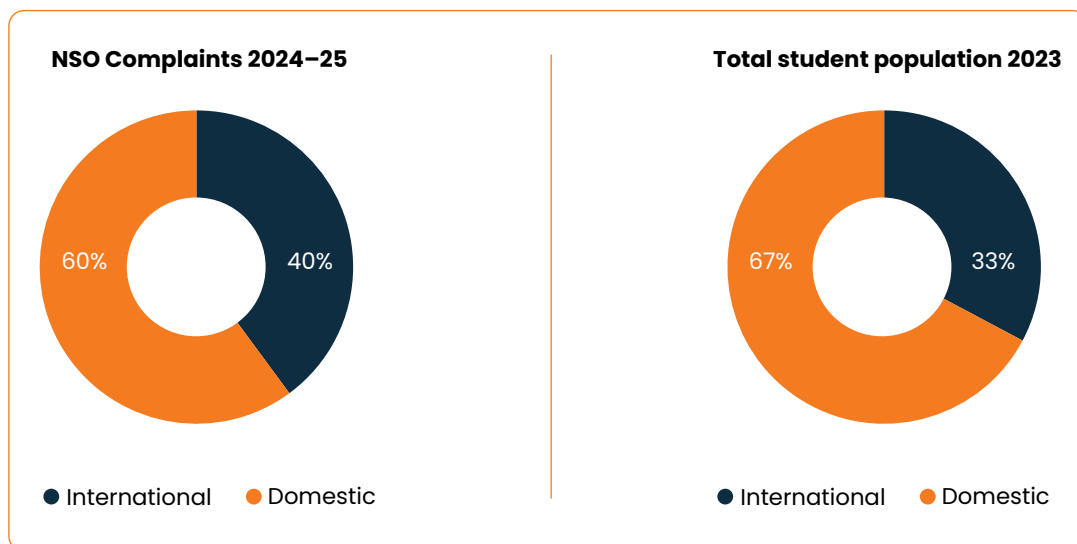
Discrimination concerns included complaints on the basis of disability/ableism (over half of all discrimination complaints), on the basis of age, religion, gender or sexual orientation.

Complaints about Antisemitism and Islamophobia were a significant part of both discrimination and racial vilification complaints. In relation to Antisemitism, five complaints were received about discrimination, and nine complaints about racism/racial vilification. In relation to Islamophobia, two complaints were received about discrimination and one complaint was received about racism/racial vilification. Combined, Antisemitism and Islamophobia made up 18% of all discrimination and racial vilification complaints received.

Students raising their experience with discrimination or racial vilification often told the NSO about how it affected an administrative request they had made to their provider, such as on special consideration to complete assessment or to appeal an exclusion process for poor attendance or academic performance. In these cases, students sought the support of their higher education provider to take into account their experience and exercise discretion to support their request for flexibility.

Complaints from international students

Figure 3: Proportion of international students: NSO complaints and total population



The NSO received 674 contacts from international students, accounting for 40% of all contacts for which this information was recorded. This is higher than the proportion of international students to the total student population.¹ Difficulties with transfers between providers, delays in refunds, refusals to grant special consideration, and handling of unmet academic requirements were common themes we heard about from international students.

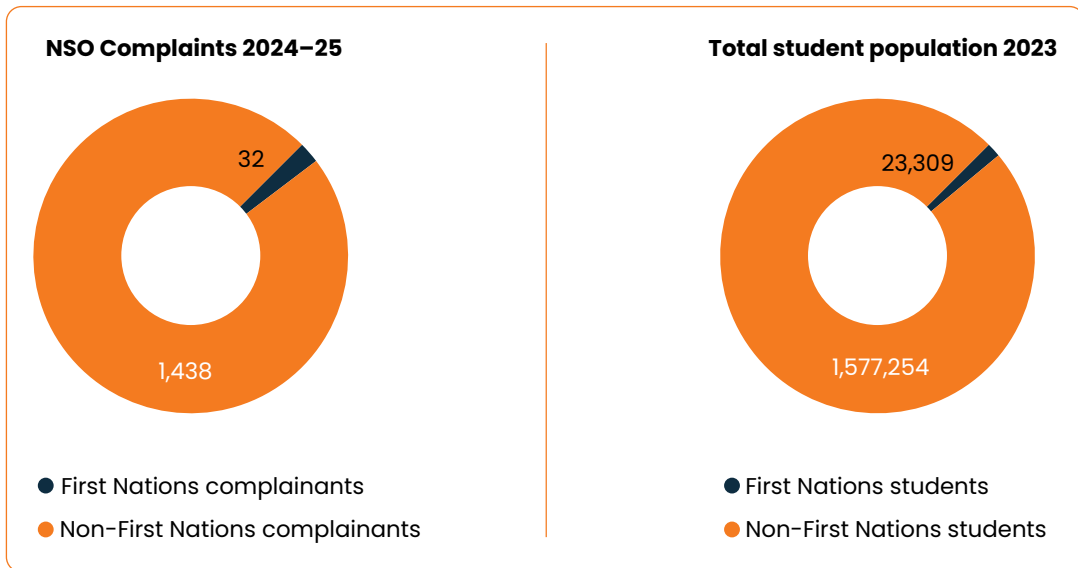
We heard from international students whose providers had cancelled their confirmation of enrolment before they could meet the requirements needed to transfer to another provider. In some cases this led to the student being unable to enrol with either provider and having to return home as they were in breach of their student visa conditions.

International students also told us about the significant consequences of delays in refunds. When suppliers did not issue refunds until after the census date, some students could not afford to progress with their studies. Miscommunication about assessment requirements was also a concern in complaints from international students.

1 2023 student data – Commonwealth Department of Education: <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/student-data/selected-higher-education-statistics-2023-student-data>.

Complaints from First Nations students

Figure 4: Proportion of First Nations students: NSO complaints and total population



The NSO recorded 32 students, equating to 2.22% of those who provided this information, identifying as a First Nations person. This is slightly higher than the 1.48% of higher education students in Australia who are First Nations students.²

Though the NSO received relatively few complaints from First Nations students, we observed a need for greater cultural sensitivity, understanding, and trauma-informed practice from some providers.

Other issues that First Nations students raised with us include financial problems, course content and teaching practices, failing to create safe learning environments, a lack of adherence to learning access plans and special consideration, and administrative processes that are challenging for students to navigate.

Some students with complex trauma backgrounds told us of the harm caused by unsafe learning environments. These environments were created through course content and the actions of staff members. We heard from students who had missed out on supports available to them due to providers expecting them to know and understand administrative processes.

² <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/student-data/selected-higher-education-statistics-2023-student-data>.

Complaints from students with disability

12% of students who contacted the NSO in 2024–25 identified as a person with a disability or an accessibility requirement, and just under 5% of all complaints received related to a disability discrimination issue (41 complaints), disability inadequate support issue (15 complaints) or disability learning access plan issue (28 complaints).

Students with disability told us about providers not accepting their medical documentation in support of accommodations, special consideration, and complaint and appeal procedures. Some students discussed inconsistencies in what documentation is needed and a lack of clarity from the provider as to why certain documents are considered unsuitable.

We heard from students who were experiencing mental illness struggling to communicate with their provider during times of crisis. This resulted in missed deadlines and rejections of applications for special consideration.

Lessons for the sector

In our first five months the NSO experienced a very positive reception and strong interest in our work across the higher education sector. Providers and students engaged actively with us from the outset.

Based on complaints from students and our broader engagement, we make the following high-level observations about the challenges and barriers students face and how providers could work harder to resolve them.



Good communication is paramount

‘A lot of students don’t even know they have the right to stand up and say “this isn’t right.”’

– Sam, university student

Providers need to promote their complaints services to students in the right way and at the right time. Many students who approach the NSO do not know they can complain to their provider.

Providers have an opportunity to communicate more effectively about what it means to make a formal complaint, and how to access the provider’s formal complaint process.

We heard a significant number of complaints about miscommunication of key course information.

Many complaints can be resolved quickly through open communication between the NSO and the provider. This is an important point because early and effective dispute resolution is a key to maintaining relationships.



Case study: Emma

Emma is a neurodivergent student who had an agreed Learning Access Plan (LAP) in place with her higher education provider. Before starting her new course, she contacted course staff to let them know about her LAP. During the course, she requested an additional extension for an assignment and provided a medical certificate to support her application. Emma became distressed when rather than considering her request the Professor recommended alternative options that discriminated against her as a neurodiverse person including that she withdraw from the course. Emma had also requested the Professor enable closed captions for course videos. The professor told Emma that the platform did not provide this function.

Suspecting this was not the case Emma raised the request through IT and student services. Closed captions was available in the platform and was enabled by IT. Emma submitted a formal complaint to her provider but was dissatisfied with the outcome. She then contacted the NSO and sought an acknowledgement of her experience, an apology for mistreatment and the distress the experience had caused, neurodivergence training for staff and students, and for future student support to be delivered in a neuro-affirming manner.

Emma's provider apologised to her after the NSO raised Emma's complaint. Her provider also advised that it:

- Had recently updated the Student Wellbeing Toolkit for Staff to include new content on neurodiversity,
- Conducted a systemic review of closed captioning within courses, and
- Implemented a new policy for the extension request system to commence in Semester 2 of 2025.

The provider also agreed that it would enhance staff awareness and training. Emma accepted the provider's apology and response to her complaint and was happy to hear that there would be a new extension request policy and neurodivergence training with staff.

Lesson for the sector

Students with a LAP report to the NSO that they face obstacles when trying to obtain the support that was promised. In this case the provider had begun investigating the issues however the student felt unheard. Through the NSO, the student was able to regain a voice, have her concerns addressed and receive an apology. Communicating with students along the way about the next steps and timeframes can make a big difference to student wellbeing.



Students find complaint processes challenging or confusing

“[The complaints process] was really complicated ... it’s not that everything is awful, but there is definitely a lot for the provider to reflect on and improve’.

– Min-ji, university student

Providers could improve the way they handle student complaints, appeals, misconduct and processes regarding the application of special consideration. Students told us that they find these processes long, overwhelming and full of barriers. Students reported that they did not feel heard by the provider or that the provider had not considered their unique circumstances before reaching a decision.

Lack of access to support services (such as counselling) is a concern for students involved in complaints processes, and culturally appropriate support services are also important.



Case study: Amit

Eager for an opportunity to study in Australia, Amit applied for a student visa and accepted a place with a higher education provider where they had no connections. They subsequently received a second-round offer at another provider in another State, where the course was more in line with their interests; they had an established network of family and friends, as well as teaching staff able to provide guidance and mentorship in their desired field.

Amit submitted a request to the initial provider be released from the place they had accepted, to enable them to enrol in their preferred course. The provider rejected the request as a 'change of mind'. Amit lodged an appeal against this decision, citing in their case that the other institution offered specialised units of study; more opportunities in their desired field of interest, in addition to having access to personal supports that this provider would not afford them. The provider upheld their decision, telling the NSO that the students' reasons for appeal did not align to their policies for withdrawal and/or release.

The NSO contacted the provider to query the basis on which they had made the upheld decision. In its initial response, the provider reiterated its position and cited the policies for allowing withdrawal. In follow-up, the NSO sought clarification in how the provider had applied its policies.

After receiving the request for further information, the provider advised it had reviewed its policy in light of the questions raised by the NSO and in consideration of Amit's circumstances; the provider decided to reverse its decision and allow Amit to withdraw from their institution, thereby allowing Amit to enrol at their preferred provider and into a course of study more relevant to their interests. The provider also said they would undertake further review of its internal policies and clarify criteria and provide definitions.



Administrative processes, and student support services, matter

'It feels like the policies are in place to stop complaints but not to support students; it's just to make management's life easier without actually providing any real benefit or support to those they're there for.'

– Sam, university student

The quality of a provider's administrative processes matters to students and affects the quality of their experience. For example, administrative delays can have significant financial impacts on students.

Understanding student needs is also critical. For many students, life is complex and finely balanced. Seemingly small things make a big difference, particularly during a cost-of-living crisis. Support services (including counselling, support for culturally and linguistically diverse students and accessible study supports) can make a big difference too.



Case study: Sam

Sam is an undergraduate university student. He's a bit older than most students because he worked for a few years before university. He is also neurodivergent – he received a diagnosis soon after starting his studies.

Cost-of-living pressures meant that Sam had to work up to 40 hours a week as well as studying full time. Struggling to balance these demands, he applied for study support through the university's online student accessibility system early in the academic year. The system indicated that all appointment slots for the rest of the year were booked up but advised that student services would get in touch with students who could not book an appointment online. Sam had no follow-up contact from student services.

Sam tried several more times to access study support but was not offered any. University and work pressures snowballed and there was a direct impact on his wellbeing.

'It had been very difficult to work because of the amount of time I had to put into study because of the university's lack of support,' Sam says.

Sam complained to the university about the lack of study support. Dissatisfied with the response, he escalated the matter to senior levels, then lodged a complaint with the NSO.

After further information, support and guidance from the NSO, Sam felt comfortable engaging directly with his provider to resolve the complaint. As a result, the NSO took no further action on the matter.

Sam wants to highlight what he sees as systemic issues in providers' complaints-handling processes and their impact on student wellbeing.

Sam urges providers to take a more student-centred approach and treat students as individuals. He also believes that providers' policies and procedures need to be clearer.

'It feels like the policies are in place to stop complaints but not to support students; it's just to make management's life easier without actually providing any real benefit or support to those they're there for.'



Providers should put students at the centre

'The whole process just made me feel like the university wasn't interested in our individual wellbeing but more interested in just getting the money from students ... it was very transactional.'

– Daniela, international student

Creating a safe, high-quality student experience should be at the heart of provider priorities.

Listening to student voices – including complaints – and acting on student concerns is critical to improving the student experience.

A number of students told us they felt that their higher education provider had taken a transactional approach to handling their complaints, and in some cases to their overall education experience.



Case study: Daniela

Daniela is an international university student. She struggles with timed exams, so she was granted an academic adjustment plan. However, she says the plan did not provide much support in practice – only a little extra time between exams.

Daniela also says the university did not communicate clearly about the necessary pass mark for one of her subjects, directing her to a website rather than taking the time to explain the requirements to her. She narrowly missed out on the required pass mark, which put her ability to graduate in doubt and her student visa at risk.

Daniela made a formal complaint to her university about this experience. The university said it had given her enough information. It rejected her complaint and an internal appeal. Daniela, however, thinks the university did not consider all the information relevant to her complaint or her individual circumstances.

On top of the academic impact, the experience took a financial and emotional toll. Daniela complained to the NSO about it.

The NSO facilitated contact between Daniela and the university, which reviewed its original decision. Daniela is now on track to graduate, pending final exam results.

She believes that her experience could have been avoided if there had been more open communication and a person-centred approach from the outset. 'Addressing this issue was essential not only for my case but also for ensuring fair and just decisions for future students.'

3. Our achievements and impact

In the lead-up to the NSO opening its doors, and during our first five months of service, our achievements and impact centred on three areas:

- Establishing the NSO as a new ombudsman service
- Resolving student complaints and supporting positive change in the sector
- Engaging extensively with stakeholders and learning from their diverse experiences.

Establishing the service

Designing all NSO services

In the first six months of the 2024–25 financial year, significant work was undertaken to design and implement the NSO’s services in preparation for the commencement of operations on 1 February 2025.

A dedicated Project Management Office (PMO) was set up in mid-2024 to manage the implementation of the NSO. The PMO established the NSO Steering Committee, chaired by the Ombudsman, with membership across the OCO’s Executive, which governed the implementation of the NSO function. The NSO Steering Committee oversaw the work of the PMO and provided high-level governance oversight in relation to schedule, budget, scope, quality, risks, issues and assurance. The NSO Steering Committee met 15 times in 2024–25.

Another focus area for the PMO included recruiting and on-boarding the new NSO workforce including the First Assistant Ombudsman and Senior Assistant Ombudsman. To support recruitment, the PMO conducted comprehensive workforce planning and training to have the right staffing profile to deliver a trauma-informed national service from day one. Before opening our doors, we conducted significant whole of branch training in trauma-informed complaints-handling practices, gender-based violence and the higher education sector in Australia.

Once the NSO team was onboard, focus shifted to process design for complaints handling and the development of outreach and education products, including the design and launch of the NSO’s website (nso.gov.au).

The NSO team conducted extensive planning and internal and external consultation in the lead-up to the NSO starting operations, to ensure the service was ready to take complaints as soon as we opened our doors. Qualitative and quantitative research was conducted through JWS Research to understand students' current attitude towards making complaints, optimal channels, the style and key information to share with tertiary students and how to make it easy for students to engage with an Ombudsman service. The results of this research informed both outreach and branding activities as well as functional mapping and design of the NSO complaint process.

Legislation and agreements with State and Territory bodies

The Australian Parliament passed legislation on 28 November 2024 establishing the NSO under Part IIF of the *Ombudsman Act 1976*.

Ombudsman (National Student Ombudsman) Rules 2025 were made to prescribe the State and Territory bodies (such as human rights and anti-corruption bodies) with overlapping jurisdiction with the NSO. Prescribing these bodies in the Rules has enabled the transfer of complaints and reciprocal information sharing.

In January 2025, we signed agreements ('[letters of exchange](#)') with all state and territory ombudsman offices to facilitate coordination, cooperation and information sharing between our organisations. They do not create any enforceable legal rights or obligations but are agreements to act reasonably and cooperate in good faith.

These arrangements were made to support warm referrals to the NSO and minimise the need for students to navigate prescribed bodies' overlapping jurisdictions.

When we identify out-of-jurisdiction complaints, we provide warm transfers to state Ombudsman services or other complaint bodies.

'I'm glad that I reached out to your office to submit a complaint against the university, I also have to say "thank you" for stepping into my life to not only give me a listening ear but for also lending a helping hand.'

– Carlos, university student

Classifying our complaints

As the service began to receive complaints, the NSO prioritised designing a complaint classification system to appropriately record the broad nature of complaint issues students were raising with our office. Ensuring that complaint issues were classified appropriately was important, and has supported the NSO to:

- Identify urgent complaint issues for immediate action.
- Monitor changes and trends in complaints reported, for the issue type and the provider.
- Support NSO staff to build their understanding of the knowledge required to address common complaint topics.
- Enable the NSO to communicate effectively with the higher education sector about the types of complaints we receive, facilitating student-centred improvements to higher education practices.

Resolved student complaints and supported positive change

Achieving individual student complaint outcomes

The NSO has experienced strong demand from students for our services. We received our first contact within 15 minutes of opening our doors on 1 February 2025. Since then, students have contacted the NSO 1,791 times, including 1,470 complaints. On average, the NSO has received 1 new complaint every 2 hours and 27 minutes.

During the first five months of operations, the NSO team conducted inquiries and used other early resolution options to successfully resolve matters for individual students. We had success in talking with providers informally to quickly address administrative issues preventing students from progressing with their studies or to graduation. We were able to respond quickly to emerging issues with the potential to affect large groups of students, including by engaging higher education providers early. For example, in one case where a whole class was affected by a marking decision, we asked the provider to help us understand what they were doing to mitigate the issue. We then communicated the provider's explanation to the students who contacted us.

'What you did resulted in me being able to return to my studies.'

– Mei, university student

In consultation with industry experts, we established a restorative engagement framework and built our internal capability to provide this service with highly skilled NSO staff as facilitators, with a focus on student needs and safety.

We commenced two restorative engagement processes, one relating to gender-based violence and one relating to disability inclusion. Of these, one matter proceeded to a restorative engagement conference, resulting in meaningful closure for the student. We supported the other student to reach a satisfactory resolution of their matter prior to the restorative engagement conference.

We also created a bespoke conciliation service and commenced 14 conciliation processes, led by NSO staff who are specialist conciliators, covering matters including gender-based violence, disability inclusion, discrimination, course administration and fees. Of these, three proceeded to conference and were resolved through mutual agreement. These matters related to course administration, disability inclusion and discrimination.

During our first five months, we also commenced six complaint investigations. Of these, one was resolved through investigation as well as a subsequent conciliation conference. Our investigation function has focused on using early resolution for complex complaints wherever possible. By exploring these early resolution methods, we have established our threshold for investigation for future operations.

Across all our functions, we have resolved 33% of complaints received in the first five months. This translates to tangible outcomes for students such as:

- HELP/HECS debts waived or refunded
- Special consideration requests reconsidered
- Course enrolments actioned where there had been delays
- Graduations and official course accreditation requirements progressed following delays
- Apologies given to students for inadequate or unreasonable services
- Improvements made to the accommodation facilities provided by universities
- Improvements made to learning adjustment plans for students with a disability.

Sector systemic improvements

We are grateful to all the students who have put their trust in our new service to resolve their complaints. Students' individual complaints have given us the opportunity to enable systemic improvements across the sector. These changes will continue to benefit many other students.

The below graphic illustrates some of the positive changes we have influenced on the back of student complaints in our first five months.



Updates to website content: following a complaint referral, the NSO noted that the way the provider explained their policy on their website was unclear. The provider agreed and updated their website and student guide to prevent requirements being misunderstood in future.

Apology and process improvements: a student complained to their provider about an antisemitism incident and months later had not received a response or any outcomes. After the NSO contacted the provider, they provided an apology and made improvements to their complaint handling and incident reporting processes.



Implementing staff training: after a complaint to the NSO about the actions of an employee who managed a provider's accommodation, the provider agreed to deliver training to its staff on complaint de-escalation and customer service techniques.

Refund policy changed: following a complaint to the NSO about a rejected refund requested within 24 hours of accepting a course and making payment, the provider adjusted their policy to allow refunds to occur within 48 hours with only a small administration fee.



Improved trauma informed complaints process: the provider's participation in a restorative engagement conference led it to identify systemic changes to appropriately and safely respond to students who have experienced gender-based violence.

Improved procedural fairness processes: the NSO raised a complaint about a misconduct appeal. The provider made improvements to its appeals workflow to prevent future procedural fairness issues pending a broader policy review later in 2025.



Improving our services

Our goal is to help every student that comes to us with a complaint in a fair, reasonable and timely way. We have worked hard to achieve this goal, focusing not only on building the service but also on continuous improvement. This culture of continuous improvement resulted in increases to the proportion of complaints resolved against complaints received. We delivered a 39% increase in the monthly average number of complaints resolved in May and June compared to the rate achieved through February, March and April. As a young service, this is something we are proud of and will continue to focus on in the remaining 7 months of our first year in operation.

Engaged extensively with stakeholders on shared priorities

Working with other Ombudsman and human rights bodies

From the start we recognised the importance of working closely with our counterparts in human rights organisations and in state and territory ombudsman offices to avoid a duplication of services.

In January 2025 we signed agreements ([‘letters of exchange’](#)) with all state and territory ombudsman offices to facilitate coordination, cooperation and information sharing between our organisations. They do not create any enforceable legal rights or obligations but are agreements to act reasonably and cooperate in good faith.

Working with government agencies

We have implemented a regular cadence of meetings with key government stakeholders and regulators to discuss sector developments, priorities and to share information with. This includes TEQSA and the Department of Education.

- With TEQSA there are distinct meetings for the NSO leadership group and our operational teams. We have also established protocols for TEQSA to refer complaints to the NSO, and the NSO can share information with TEQSA, including potential breaches of the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021.
- With the Department of Education, early discussions were focused on the [National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence](#), for which the Department of Education will be the lead agency. At the operational level meetings are leading to opportunities to cross promote each other’s work as well as clarify matters and messaging.

- On international student matters we engaged with the Department of Home Affairs, the Department of Education and the Overseas Student Ombudsman (the OSO, which is also part of the OCO). With the OSO we shared experiences and lessons learned and transferred internally any complaints more appropriately dealt by the other body, in line with our ‘no wrong door’ approach to handling complaints.

Education and outreach

The NSO has an education and outreach function dedicated to raising awareness of the NSO’s service with students and the sector, ensuring the NSO has effective working relationships with other entities in the higher education oversight system and supporting the sector through advice on best practice complaints handling.

Early success is attributed to:

- Creating an identifiable, vibrant brand
- Promoting the NSO to students, providers and associated stakeholders ensuring stakeholder mapping captured the range of special interest and equity groups.
- Using multiple channels for promotion and leveraging existing channels within the OCO and stakeholder groups

The impact of this broad and intensive engagement was receiving our first contact within 15 minutes of commencing operations and nearly 1,800 contacts from students across the country to 30 June.

We completed more than 250 public engagements in our first five months of operation.

Our public engagements included:

- Meetings with 31 vice-chancellors across all states and territories – see Box 3 for details
- Extensive engagement in O-week activities at 31 on-campus events in February and March across all states and territories, including metropolitan and regional campuses and large and smaller providers
- Meetings with and presentations to student unions, the National Union of Students, postgraduate student advocates, international student advocates, gender-based violence peak bodies, disability advocates, first nations advocates, and BIPOC student representatives
- Meetings with and presentations to peak bodies such as Universities Australia and Independent Higher Education Australia
- Regular meetings with Special Envoys to combat Antisemitism and Islamophobia.

Box 3: Meetings with vice-chancellors

From January to June 2025, First Assistant Ombudsman Sarah Bendall met with 31 vice-chancellors in all states and territories. Meetings with the remaining vice-chancellors are planned from July.

The universities visited range from smaller metropolitan and regional ones to some of the biggest nationally. They include both public sector and private sector providers, and members of peak bodies such as the Group of Eight, the Regional Universities Network, Innovative Research Universities and the Australian Technology Network of Universities.

Over 50 different university roles were represented among those who attended the meetings along with their vice-chancellors, demonstrating both wide-ranging interest in the NSO and the breadth of the higher education sector. All were seeking to understand the NSO and how the higher education sector and the NSO can work together.

The student experience was a central part of the conversations. Vice-chancellors were keen to share how they are looking to address points of concern or challenge, and to talk about initiatives intended to improve the student experience overall. We used insights from the meetings to deepen our understanding of the sector and its priorities and to identify potential areas for improvement.

A consistent positive message from these meetings was the universities' willingness to work with the NSO, while recognising our independence and impartiality. Universities also recognise the NSO's role in supporting systemic improvements and our education and training function.

Box 4: Northern Territory regional visit

As part of our commitment to accessibility and engaging with students and other stakeholders across the country, First Assistant Ombudsman Sarah Bendall led a small team of NSO staff on a visit to Darwin in May 2025. The team met with a variety of stakeholders including Charles Darwin University's leadership team and student council, Legal Aid NT, the NT Anti-Discrimination Commission and student accommodation providers.

The experiences of First Nations students and the priorities and challenges for students and providers in regional Australia were among the topics discussed. The team received positive feedback from a student about being able to share their story in person.

We will continue our regional circuit in 2025–26, to offer opportunities for in-person complaint services for students and outreach in locations where we do not have an office.

Box 5: Engaging with independent providers

Understanding the independent higher education sector was a focus for the NSO from the start. We recognise that the priorities and concerns of independent providers and their students – who make up around 10% of the overall higher education sector and cover the whole AQF range from diplomas to doctorates – can differ from those of public universities.

The NSO engaged regularly with independent providers and Independent Higher Education Australia (IHEA), their peak body. First Assistant Ombudsman Sarah Bendall's presentation to IHEA's annual members forum in May 2025 helped us promote the NSO's role and early observations and understand independent providers' priorities.

The independent sector shows strong interest in the NSO's work and we welcome the openness of independent providers to collaborating with us wherever possible to improve complaints handling and the student experience. We also welcome their insights into the complexities and challenges they face in an evolving higher education landscape.

Advice and training

Providing advice and training for higher education providers about best practice complaints handling is an NSO function under the Ombudsman Act.

In our first five months we developed our education strategy and started engaging with providers to understand their training needs. To inform our education strategy, we surveyed students and provider complaints handlers (see Box 6). We expect to roll out our education strategy in the second half of 2025.

We also developed our own capabilities in areas such as addressing Antisemitism and Islamophobia, embedding trauma-informed practices and supporting overseas students. This focus on internal capability building reflects our recognition that we are a new service and the sector is large, complex and diverse.

Box 6: Insights from complaints handlers

In June 2025 we conducted a survey of higher education provider complaints handlers to help us understand the challenges they face and identify types of training that would help to strengthen complaints handling. We received responses from 268 complaints handlers. Of these, 40% reported that they had never or rarely had training in managing student complaints.

Respondents expressed strong interest in targeted training and other professional development in areas relating to student complaints – for example, trauma-informed practice, managing sensitive cases involving mental health, and implementing principles of better practice complaints handling. These topics aligned closely with the sorts of complaints that respondents told us they found challenging.

Insights from the survey will directly inform the NSO's Education Plan – which we will roll out in 2025–26.

4. NSO reporting obligations – sector activity report

The activity report below covers key complaint and investigation data from the NSO in our first five months of operation from 1 February to 30 June 2025, and the number and nature of complaints recorded by higher education provider.

Also included in this section is the data the NSO is required to report on annually under section 21AX of the Ombudsman Act.

Complaints

Table 3: Number of contacts and complaints

Description	Number
Contacts received	1794
Enquiries	164
Contacts classified as out of jurisdiction	157
Contacts classified as complaints	1470
Complaints resolved	482

Table 4: Nature of complaints

Description	Percentage
Complaints about course administration issues	33%
Complaints about unmet academic requirements or misconduct issues	19%
Complaints about unmet teaching and learning issues	19%
Complaints about fees and other financial issues	13%
Complaints about discrimination, racism or inadequate support	7%
Complaints about health and safety	5%
Complaints about provider administration	3%
Complaints about facilities and living arrangements	1%

Table 5: Calls to the service

Description	Result
Total calls received	2172
Abandonment rate	9%
Average wait time	3m 13s
Average calls per week	102

Table 6: How we receive complaints

Mode of complaint	Complaints registered
Internet	935
Telephone	333
Email*	181
In Person	19
Written	1

*Email includes referrals from State or Territory bodies

Table 7: Referrals from state and territory bodies

Referring organisation	Number of referrals
Anti-Discrimination Commission of Queensland	1
Ombudsman - New South Wales	77
Ombudsman - Queensland	3
Ombudsman - Tasmania	6
Ombudsman - Victoria	26
Ombudsman - Western Australia	13
Other	5
TEQSA	2
Total	133

By individual higher education provider

Table 8 shows the number and nature of complaints in relation to each higher education provider about which a complaint was made to the NSO.

We note that the number of complaints about any one provider is only one part of a broader picture. Complaints may relate to a range of issues and do not necessarily indicate a systemic concern.

A higher number of complaints can also be a positive indication that students know how to raise concerns about their provider and feel empowered to do so.

Table 8: Complaints and issues recorded by individual higher education provider Financial Year 2024–25

Higher education provider name	Total complaints received	Total issues recorded	Course administration	Discrimination, racism or inadequate support	Facilities and living arrangements	Fees and other financial issues	Health and safety	Provider administration	Teaching and learning	Unmet academic requirement or misconduct matter
Academy of Interactive Technology	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Acknowledge Education Pty Ltd	5	5	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
Adelaide Institute of Higher Education Pty Ltd	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Alphacrucis College Ltd	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Analytics Institute of Australia Pty Ltd	4	4	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	0
Apex Institute of Higher Education	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Asia Pacific International College	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Australasian College of Health and Wellness Pty Ltd	2	2	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Australian Catholic University	24	30	12	1	2	4	3	0	5	3
Australian College of Applied Professions	14	16	5	1	0	4	2	0	4	0

Higher education provider name	Total complaints received	Total issues recorded	Course administration	Discrimination, racism or inadequate support	Facilities and living arrangements	Fees and other financial issues	Health and safety	Provider administration	Teaching and learning	Unmet academic requirement or misconduct matter
Australian College of Natural Medicine Pty Ltd	9	12	4	0	0	4	0	1	3	0
Australian Guild of Music Education	3	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
Australian Institute of Business Intelligence	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Australian Institute of Business Pty Ltd	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Australian Institute of Higher Education Pty Ltd	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Australian Institute of Professional Counsellors Pty Ltd as trustee for AIPC Trust	6	7	3	0	0	1	1	0	1	1
Australian National University	27	38	15	7	1	3	1	1	6	4
Avondale University	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Bond University Limited	10	12	6	0	0	1	0	0	3	2
Box Hill Institute	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Charles Darwin University	13	15	4	1	0	0	0	0	10	0

Higher education provider name	Total complaints received	Total issues recorded	Course administration	Discrimination, racism or inadequate support	Facilities and living arrangements	Fees and other financial issues	Health and safety	Provider administration	Teaching and learning	Unmet academic requirement or misconduct matter
Charles Sturt University	40	49	12	2	1	4	5	2	14	9
Chartered Accountants Australia and New Zealand, Institute of Chartered Accountants in Australia	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Christian Heritage College	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
CQ University	18	20	7	1	1	5	0	1	0	5
Crown Institute of Higher Education	7	8	3	0	0	3	0	0	1	1
Curtin College (College of Business and Technology (WA) Pty Ltd	7	9	2	1	1	2	0	1	0	2
Curtin University	44	46	13	3	1	6	0	1	9	13
Deakin College	3	5	3	0	0	0	1	0	1	0
Deakin University	56	65	16	6	2	4	2	2	19	14
Edith Cowan College Pty Ltd	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Edith Cowan University	21	23	4	1	0	5	2	0	8	3

Higher education provider name	Total complaints received	Total issues recorded	Course administration	Discrimination, racism or inadequate support	Facilities and living arrangements	Fees and other financial issues	Health and safety	Provider administration	Teaching and learning	Unmet academic requirement or misconduct matter
Educational Enterprises Australia Pty Ltd (Eynesbury)	2	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
EQUALS International	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Excelsia College	4	5	2	0	0	1	0	0	2	0
Federation University Australia	14	16	2	1	1	3	0	0	6	3
Flinders University	12	15	3	1	0	3	2	0	5	1
Griffith College, QIBT	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Griffith University	31	39	20	2	0	9	1	0	5	2
Holmes Institute	13	16	5	1	0	3	2	0	3	2
Holmesglen Institute	4	4	1	0	0	0	1	0	2	0
Ikon Institute of Australia	8	8	6	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
International College of Management, Sydney	3	4	1	0	0	2	0	0	1	0
ISN Psychology	7	9	3	2	0	0	0	1	2	1
James Cook University	8	9	3	2	0	0	2	0	1	1
JMC Academy	1	2	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0

Higher education provider name	Total complaints received	Total issues recorded	Course administration	Discrimination, racism or inadequate support	Facilities and living arrangements	Fees and other financial issues	Health and safety	Provider administration	Teaching and learning	Unmet academic requirement or misconduct matter
Kaplan Business School	12	12	5	0	0	1	0	0	1	5
Kaplan Higher Education Pty Ltd	5	6	4	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
Kent Institute Australia	1	2	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
La Trobe University	33	45	13	4	1	6	0	2	7	12
LCI Melbourne	1	3	0	2	0	0	1	0	0	0
Macquarie University	51	54	28	5	0	2	3	2	7	7
Melbourne Institute of Technology Pty Ltd (VIC)	4	4	1	0	0	2	0	1	0	0
Melbourne Polytechnic	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Monash College	7	8	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	4
Monash University	27	32	9	4	2	4	1	0	5	7
Murdoch College	2	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Murdoch University	8	7	5	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
Photography Studies College	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Polytechnic Institute Australia Pty Ltd	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Higher education provider name	Total complaints received	Total issues recorded	Course administration	Discrimination, racism or inadequate support	Facilities and living arrangements	Fees and other financial issues	Health and safety	Provider administration	Teaching and learning	Unmet academic requirement or misconduct matter
Queensland University of Technology	26	33	6	2	0	7	4	0	7	7
Raffles College of Design and Commerce	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology	86	110	46	4	0	13	2	4	12	29
SAE University College	7	2	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
South Australian Institute of Business and Technology	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Southern Cross Education Institute (Higher Education) Pty Ltd	6	8	2	0	0	2	0	1	2	1
Southern Cross University	25	31	9	1	0	7	1	0	7	6
SP Jain School of Global Management Pty Ltd	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Stanley College	9	9	0	0	0	8	0	0	1	0

Higher education provider name	Total complaints received	Total issues recorded	Course administration	Discrimination, racism or inadequate support	Facilities and living arrangements	Fees and other financial issues	Health and safety	Provider administration	Teaching and learning	Unmet academic requirement or misconduct matter
Swinburne University of Technology	38	43	15	4	0	6	2	2	7	7
TAFE SA	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Taylors College	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Technical and Further Education Commission	5	4	0	0	0	3	0	1	0	0
The Australian Institute of Music Ltd	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
The Cairnmillar Institute	2	3	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
The Institute of International Studies (TIIS) Pty Ltd	1	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
The University of Adelaide	38	50	16	4	0	2	4	3	13	8
The University of Melbourne	52	68	26	3	0	10	7	0	11	11
The University of New England	27	33	6	4	1	3	0	1	11	7
The University of Newcastle	23	26	9	2	0	4	4	3	4	0

Higher education provider name	Total complaints received	Total issues recorded	Course administration	Discrimination, racism or inadequate support	Facilities and living arrangements	Fees and other financial issues	Health and safety	Provider administration	Teaching and learning	Unmet academic requirement or misconduct matter
The University of Notre Dame Australia	12	15	6	0	0	0	1	4	4	0
The University of Notre Dame Australia WA	8	7	2	0	0	0	2	0	2	1
The University of Queensland	41	48	25	3	1	1	1	0	9	8
The University of Western Australia	15	13	2	1	0	1	0	0	6	3
Top Education Institute (IMC)	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Torrens University Australia Limited	46	48	18	2	0	13	1	0	5	9
University of Canberra	15	16	4	1	0	1	0	1	5	4
University of New South Wales	72	78	22	8	1	10	5	2	9	21
University of South Australia	17	20	7	0	0	1	1	1	4	6
University of Southern Queensland	15	13	6	1	0	1	0	0	4	1
University of Sydney	83	102	44	9	0	4	8	1	5	31

Higher education provider name	Total complaints received	Total issues recorded	Course administration	Discrimination, racism or inadequate support	Facilities and living arrangements	Fees and other financial issues	Health and safety	Provider administration	Teaching and learning	Unmet academic requirement or misconduct matter
University of Tasmania	27	33	8	0	3	5	3	5	6	3
University of Technology Sydney	39	45	9	4	0	5	4	0	11	12
University of the Sunshine Coast	14	19	4	7	0	1	0	2	4	1
University of Wollongong	14	18	4	1	0	5	1	0	6	1
UTS College (name change from Insearch)	3	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
Victoria University	30	32	14	2	0	3	2	0	9	2
Victorian Institute of Technology Pty Ltd	2	2	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Wentworth Institute of Higher Education Pty Ltd	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Western Sydney University (formerly University of Western Sydney)	72	78	19	3	1	5	3	1	15	31
Total	1,470	1,711	571	116	20	226	88	47	321	320

Table 9: Higher education providers with nil complaints received Financial Year 2024–25

Providers	Providers
Academies Australasia Polytechnic Pty Ltd	Bureau of Meteorology Training Centre (Commonwealth of Australia)
Adelaide Central School of Art	Campion Institute (College)
Adelaide College of Divinity Inc	Canberra Institute of Technology
AIE Institute Ltd	Carnegie Mellon University
Astra Group Australia Pty Ltd	Centre for Pavement Engineering Education
Australasian Academy of Higher Education	Chisholm Institute
Australia Advance Education Group Pty Ltd	Churchill Institute of Higher Education
Australia Institute of Future Education	CIC Higher Education
Australian Academy of Music and Performing Arts	Commissioner of the Australian Federal Police (Australian Institute of Police Management)
Australian Campus Management Pty Ltd	Danford Higher Education
Australian Chiropractic College Ltd	Eastern College Australia
Australian College of Christian Studies Ltd (formerly Tabor College (NSW) Ltd)	ECA Higher Education Institute Pty Ltd (ECA College of Health Services)
Australian College of Nursing	Elite Education Institute Pty Ltd
Australian College of Physical Education	Engineering Institute of Technology Pty Ltd
Australian College of the Arts (Collarts)	Gestalt Therapy Brisbane Pty Ltd
Australian College of Theology	Global Higher Education
Australian Film, Television, and Radio School	Global Leadership Institute
Australian Industrial Systems Institute	Governance Institute of Australia
Australian Institute of Business and Management Pty Ltd (King's Own Institute)	Group Colleges Australia and Universal Business School Sydney
Australian Institute of Management Education and Training Pty Limited	Health Education and Training Institute
Australian Institute of Police Management	Higher Education Institute
Australian Institute of Technology and Commerce Pty Ltd	Higher Education Leadership Institute
Australian International Institute of Higher Education	Imperial Engineering Education
Australian Performing Arts Conservatory	Institute for Emotion Focused Therapy, Banksia Institute Australia
Australian School of Accounting Pty Ltd	Institute of Health and Management
	International College of Hotel Management
	International Graduate Institute

Providers

International Institute of Business and Information Technology

Iona Trinity College

Jazz Music Institute

Kollel Beth HaTalmud Yehuda Fishman Institute

La Trobe College Australia

Le Cordon Bleu Australia Pty Limited

National Institute of Organisation Dynamics Australia

Nova Anglia College

Oxford Institute of Higher Education

Perth Bible College

Russo Business School

Sheridan Institute of Higher Education

Sicop Education and Technology Pty Ltd trading as Gateway Business College

Skyline Higher Education Australia

Southern Academy of Higher Education

Southern Cross Institute (SCI) Pty Ltd

SSR Higher Education Pty Ltd (Australian Institute of Advanced Technologies)

Sydney College of Divinity

Sydney Institute of Business and Technology Pty Ltd

Sydney Institute of Health Sciences Pty. Ltd (Sydney Institute of Traditional Chinese Medicine)

Sydney Institute of Higher Education Pty Ltd (formerly Australian Institute of Commerce and Management Pty Ltd)

Sydney Metropolitan Institute of Technology Pty Ltd

Providers

Sydney Polytechnic Institute Pty Ltd

Tabor College Incorporated

TAFE Queensland

Technical and Further Education Commission

Texila College Australia Pty Ltd

The Australasian College of Dermatologists

The Australian Data Institute Pty Ltd

The Australian Institute of Professional Counsellors Pty Ltd

The Australian Institute of Theological Education

The College of Law

The Institute of Creative Arts & Technology Pty Ltd. (formerly Macleay College Pty Ltd)

The Institute of Internal Auditors–Australia

The Metavision Institute

The National Institute of Dramatic Art

The Tax Institute Higher Education

Think: Colleges Pty Ltd

Top Education Group Limited (Australian National Institute of Management and Commerce)

Universal Higher Education Pty Ltd

University College London

University of Divinity

UNSW Global

UOW College Australia

Victorian School of Commerce

Western Sydney University International College Pty Ltd

Whitehouse International

William Angliss Institute of TAFE

Investigations

The following section outlines the number of investigations commenced and completed by the NSO, including those in response to a complaint or on the NSO's own initiative to address systemic issues in the higher education sector. Complaints which raise complex issues appropriate for investigation can take time to explore, and the ratio of complaints progressed to investigation will continue to increase beyond the first 5 months of NSO operations.

Complaint investigations

For Complaint investigations	Number
Started during the reporting period	6
Completed during the reporting period	1

Own motion investigations

For own-motion investigations	Number
Preliminary enquiries sent to providers (across two potential own motion investigation topics)	18
Started during the reporting period	0

Investigation reports

Recommendations

Details of recommendations made during the reporting period in reports from the NSO to higher education providers (reports under section 21AV).

No investigation reports were completed within the first five months of NSO operations. With no investigation reports completed, no recommendations were made within the reporting period.

Actions by providers

Details of any actions the NSO is aware of higher education providers having taken during the reporting period in response to recommendations made in reports from the NSO to providers (reports under section 21AV).

No investigation reports were completed within the reporting period. With no investigation reports completed, there were no actions to report.

Referral of complaints

The Ombudsman Act provides the NSO with the ability to refer a complaint received to the higher education provider. This referral calls for the provider to conduct their own investigation of the complaint, and then report back to the NSO on their conclusions. Following the provider's report, the NSO can also make recommendations for additional action.

Complaints referred by the NSO to a higher education provider for investigation and report (under Division 3(C))	Number
Use of the referral power in the reporting period includes: Number of complaints referred	84
Number of referrals investigated by the provider with a report provided back to the NSO	78 (93%)

Alternative dispute resolution

The NSO uses conciliation as its formal 'alternative dispute resolution' method.

Complaints where the NSO has used Conciliation under Division 3(D)	Number
Alternative dispute resolution (conciliation) processes started during the period	14
Number of processes resulting in a mutual agreement	3
Number of processes assessed as no longer suitable for conciliation	2
Number of processes carrying over into next financial year	9

Nature of complaints assessed as suitable for alternative dispute resolution (conciliation) related to:	Number
Disability accessibility and support	6
Gender-based violence	1
Discrimination	2
Bullying and harassment	1
Learning environment	4

Providers were receptive to the conciliation and engaged meaningfully with the NSO and students.

Restorative engagement

Restorative engagement processes used by the NSO (under Division 3(E))	Number
Number of processes started during the period	2
Number of processes held during the period	1
Number of processes resulting in closure prior to conference	1

Nature of complaints assessed as suitable for restorative engagement related to:	Number
Gender-based violence	1
Disability access and support	1

Providers expressed their willingness to engage in the restorative engagement process and were committed to student closure and healing.

Actions to promote best practice complaints handling

Details of any action that the NSO took during the period to promote best practice in handling of complaints by higher education providers (section 21AX (j))

See 'Advice and training' (page 52).

Observations about complaint trends, broader issues which arose from investigations, and improvements to complaints handling by higher education providers

Details of the National Student Ombudsman's observations (if any) during the period regarding the following (under section 21AX (k)):

- (i) any trends in complaints;
- (ii) any broader issues that arise from investigations;
- (iii) any improvements that could be made to the handling of complaints made by higher education students

For the NSO's observations about trends in complaints, see **Part 2** of this report – complaints data and insights.

As the NSO completed one investigation in the reporting period, we did not have any observations regarding any broader issues that arose from investigations for inclusion in this report.

For commentary on improvements that could be made to the handling of complaints, see the 'Lessons for the sector' section of **Part 2** of this report.

Abbreviations

Short form	Long form
AQF	Australian Qualifications Framework
BIPOC	Black, Indigenous, People of Colour
IHEA	Independent Higher Education Australia
LAP	Learning Access Plan
NSO	National Student Ombudsman
NSSS	National Student Safety Survey
OCO	Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman
OSO	Overseas Student Ombudsman
O-week	Orientation Week
TEQSA	Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WIL	Work Integrated Learning

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