

EVALUATION OF UCT OMBUD VISITOR QUESTIONNAIRE

During May 2014, the Office of the Ombud at the University of Cape Town (UCT) sent out questionnaires to 109 visitors who had made use of the services of the Ombud some time in 2013 or 2014. Visitors were asked to complete a questionnaire and return it to Debbie Budlender, Deputy Chair of UCT Council. They were told that their responses would be treated confidentially. The questionnaire did not ask for their name or any identifying details other than gender and whether they were a student, staff member or some other member of the university community. To preserve confidentiality, they could send the completed questionnaire from any email address.

In practice, several of the visitors – in sending through their completed questionnaires – added complimentary comments about the Ombud in their email.

Guidance was received from the Ombud's colleagues in the International Ombud Association during the development of the instrument.

A total of 29 visitors completed the questionnaire. This gives a response rate of 27%, which is a pleasing rate for this type of follow-up exercise.

Of the respondents, 14 were male and 15 female. PASS staff in grade 11 or below were most likely to respond, accounting for 10 of all respondents. Next most common were postgraduate students, numbering 7 (plus a further one for whom the response was said to come from both parent and student). Of the remainder, 4 were academic staff below the level of associate professor, 3 were undergraduate students, and one was a parent (plus the one responding together with the student). (These numbers include one who had used the Ombud's services both as a postgraduate student and as a PASS staff member.) The remaining 4 respondents classified themselves as "other". Three had previously been staff members, and one was previously an undergraduate student. The sample thus gives a relatively good spread across different categories, but does not include higher-level PASS or academic staff.

Some visitors could not remember exactly when, in terms of the month, they had first visited the Ombud. In terms of the year, 1 said this was in 2011 soon after the Office of the Ombud was established, 3 in 2012, 23 in 2013 and 2 in 2014. As noted above, only those visitors who had some contact with the Ombud in 2013 or 2014 were asked to complete the questionnaire. This is not surprising as the Ombud's services are more likely to be used by those with less power.

The table below suggests that most visitors experienced the problem for some time before consulting the Ombud. (In this and other tables the number may add to 28 rather than 27 because one visitor reported on the same questionnaire in respect of two issues.) More than a third visited the Ombud only after the issue had been ongoing for more than a year. At the other end of the scale, 8 visitors consulted the Ombud within a month or less of the problem arising.

Time before consulting Ombud	Freq.
Less than a week	3
More than a week but not more than a month	5
More than a month but not more than six months	7
More than 6 months but not more than year	4
More than a year	11
Total	30

The overwhelming majority of the visitors – in respect of 25 of the 30 issues – had tried to address the issue in other ways before contacting the Ombud. Most had tried several things before contacting the Ombud. Routes that were commonly named were the person’s line manager or management more generally (10 issues), Human Resources (4), faculty deans (4), DISCHO (3), trade unions (2), and transformation structures (2). In addition, visitors said that they had spoken to colleagues; friends; “everyone in the department”; “the department”; a student advisor; the International Academic Programmes Officer; the National Student Financial Aid “department” [seemingly of UCT]; the Commission on Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration; an unspecified mediator; the Department of Home Affairs; and the police, amongst others.

Visitors were asked how long they had to wait after contacting the Ombud before they were able to explain the issue to the Ombud. The table below shows the responses. More than two-thirds (21) were able to speak to the Ombud within a week, but 2 waited more than a month.

Time waited	Freq.
1 day or less	4
2-3 days	10
A week	7
More than a week	6
More than a month	2
Total	29

Visitors were asked a series of questions intended to assess the extent to which the Ombud is perceived to operate in line with the standards of the International Ombuds Association. Overall, the responses provided a very positive assessment in this respect, as follows:

- 28 of the 29 visitors felt that the Ombud’s Office treated them with respect, while one was unsure.
- 25 felt that the Ombud’s approach was impartial/neutral, 2 that it was not, and 2 were unsure. (For this question, it is not clear whether those who were not sure felt that the Ombud was “on their side” or on the “other side”.)
- 25 felt that the Ombud’s Office operated in line with the commitment to confidentiality, while 4 were unsure.

Six visitors said that they had suffered negative consequences from taking the issue to the Ombud. At least two of these explained that this was not in any way the fault of the Ombud. One was unsure whether there were negative consequences.

Just over half (15) visitors said that had taken their issue further with someone else or another office after contacting the Ombud. In 7 of the 15 cases, the person or office concerned had been suggested by the Ombud.

The next table shows that the Ombud was found to be successful in completely solving 8 issues and in partially solving a further 7 issues. In 4 cases the issue remained unresolved, while in another 2 the issue was resolved but not as a result of the Ombud’s assistance. The relatively large number of “other” responses includes 3 in which the issue was still being dealt with by the Ombud. Typically, the Ombud and visitor were waiting for a response from the person or office complained about. At least two people said that they had been retrenched, one noting that this was despite the Ombud’s efforts. One said that the reason the issue was not resolved that the other actors – in this case management – had to “come to the party” (which they had not) as otherwise the Ombud was not able to assist. Another visit answering “other” likewise reported that the person complained about refused to meet with the Ombud.

Yet another used this option to report that the issue was not resolved satisfactorily, elaborating that the Ombud did not seem to have, or did not use, any authority, and the process thus appeared to be more like a public relations exercise on UCT’s part than a real dispute resolution office. This visitor said that they had been warned about this by another person who had used the office. The visitor further clarified that this was not a reflection on the office staff, who were “pleasant at all times”, but rather on their lack of credibility and authority. The visitor said that the exercise had been a waste of finances and time, especially as they had travelled from a rural village in the north of the country to meet with the Ombud.

Ombud’s assistance in resolving issue	Freq.
Yes, completely resolved	8
Yes, partly resolved	7
No, issue remains unresolved	4
No, issue resolved but Ombud did not help	2
Other	9
Total	30

Visitors were then asked to report which of a list of adjectives described their overall experience of taking their issue to the Ombud. The list included a mix of positive and negative adjectives which were interleaved with each other. The table below shows that at least half gave ratings of useful (15) and excellent (14), with 12 stating the visit was worthwhile and 9 that it was empowering. Two each of the visitors reported that the visit was a waste of time, disappointing and frustrating. Some of those who gave these negative ratings combined them with positive ratings. No-one said that the visit was insulting.

Of the eight who chose “other”, 2 noted that this was the first time they had felt “heard”; one said the experience was “life-saving” and saved UCT’s reputation; one added the adjective “friendly”; one found it “extremely reassuring”; another “fairly helpful”; and one felt “put at ease”. Finally, one said that the Ombud had not been able to help but this was not surprising as at that point the Office of the Ombud reported directly to the Vice-Chancellor so there was a “slim chance” that anything would be done about the complaint in respect of management.

Adjectives that describe experience	Freq.
Useful	15
Excellent	14
Worthwhile	12
Empowering	9
Waste of time	3
Disappointing	3
Frustrating	3
Insulting	0
Other	8

Of the 29, 23 said that they would definitely contact the Ombud if they had another issue, 1 was unsure, and 4 said that they would not do so. Three of the 4 had issues which remained unresolved, while the other one's issue had been solved by the Ombud.

All but two of the visitors said that they either had recommended, or would recommend the Ombud to someone else who had a problem at UCT. One of the two exceptions did not answer this question.

Finally, there was an open-ended question in which visitors were asked what recommendations they had for the Ombud's Office at UCT. Several of those who had submitted questionnaires with complimentary responses to other questions simply said "none". Others used this opportunity to add further compliments. Extracts from these are as follows:

- "She was such a wonderful support to me, maintained high levels of professionalism, respect and neutrality at all times, and renewed my strength and sense of self-worth completely. Even one year later I sometimes find myself thinking back to that hard time and feeling extremely grateful that I had her to lean on and guide me. She was amazing."
- Neutral; approachable; makes time to listen & understand; no judgment or expression
- Keep up excellent work. Definitely needed at UCT
- "Continue serving with utmost professionalism"
- "Keep up amazing work; and THANK YOU for your help, which was a mental-health saver when I needed it most: dealing with the Ombud's Office was like a breath of sweet, fresh air after dealing with the lack of honesty, and bad faith, represented by ... management."
- "Keep on doing sterling work for people who don't feel they have other options"
- I suggest the ombud receives a commendation for superb service and the contribution she makes. Without her, my ordeal would have been much worse; she was the only person at UCT who showed compassion, insight, had good advice and cared. Her honesty, authenticity and insight was extremely valuable. Her willingness to meet numerous times and assist was admirable. If I think back on 25 years at UCT, the one person that stands out as meaningful and who made a beneficial difference, is Zetu. Also commendable is Birgit, who is always helpful and friendly, and caring. The fact that UCT had the foresight to have an Ombud office and appointed a brilliant person like Zetu, made up for the ineffectual and insipid HR department and their meaningless 'help'..."
- Empathetic, great to talk to, impartial, great ear for others' problems

Several of the responses bemoaned the perceived lack of power of the Ombud that she "has no teeth"; "is a lovely and trustworthy person but has no power whatsoever"; that greater respect for the Ombud and greater adherence to her recommendations were needed; and that the Ombud should have the authority to enforce "rulings" and hold other parts of UCT accountable. The

latter felt that they would have won if they had taken UCT and the other relevant institution to court, but were hoping instead for an arbitrator who would "recommend a fair resolution".

One visitor suggested that the office staff be expanded given the extent to which people were "scared" of current structures at UCT. The visitor who had highlighted the perceived problem of the Ombud initially reporting to the Vice-Chancellor again emphasised the importance of the shift to reporting to Council.

Several responses suggested that the patterns emerging from visits to the Office should be collated and used to identify units or departments that were problematic. It seems that some visitors might not have been aware of the Ombud's annual report and/or the way in which the Ombud engages with the Vice-Chancellor and other senior managers to alert them to problematic trends.

A student suggested that the Ombud have a table at Orientation week and use social media and a website to advertise the services. Another visitor also recommended an "on-line presence". Another student suggested that the Ombud should work out a practical solution with students and then monitor how it is implemented.