

AN ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS AT RISK IN THE BACHELOR OF ARTS PROGRAM TO DEVELOP BETTER STUDENT SUPPORT

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Executive Summary

The project involves a case study of 27 students in the Bachelor of Arts (BA) who commenced in Semester 1 2013 and were not on good academic standing at the end of that semester. The project also investigated causal factors of poor academic standing of this target group and the effectiveness of the academic advising service offered by Arts & Social Sciences for such students, and provided a range of ideas and strategies to assist students to restore good academic standing.

Methodology

- Collect and analyse student data from SIMS and JULIA data warehouse
- Undertake literature review
- Conduct staff survey in the Arts & Social Sciences Student Centre
- Develop a survey tool

Introduction

Arts & Social Sciences has about 500 undergraduate students at the end of each semester who are not on good academic standing out of 6000 undergraduate students. The Faculty has a Student Advisor whose main role is to meet with students not on good academic standing as part of UNSW academic advising process.

This project involves a case study of 27 students who commenced the BA in Semester 1 2013 and who were not on good academic standing after the release of results in that semester. It will analyse the background of the students, recurrent patterns of difficulty, and academic advising support. It also reports the findings of an academic advising survey sent to 2012 and 2013 BA students not on good academic standing.

Academic Advising

For the past eight years Arts & Social Sciences has implemented a process where students not on good academic standing are advised to attend academic advising sessions with the Student Advisor.

Background of students in target group

A total of 296 students commenced the Bachelor of Arts in Semester 1 2013 with 28 international students and 268 domestic students.

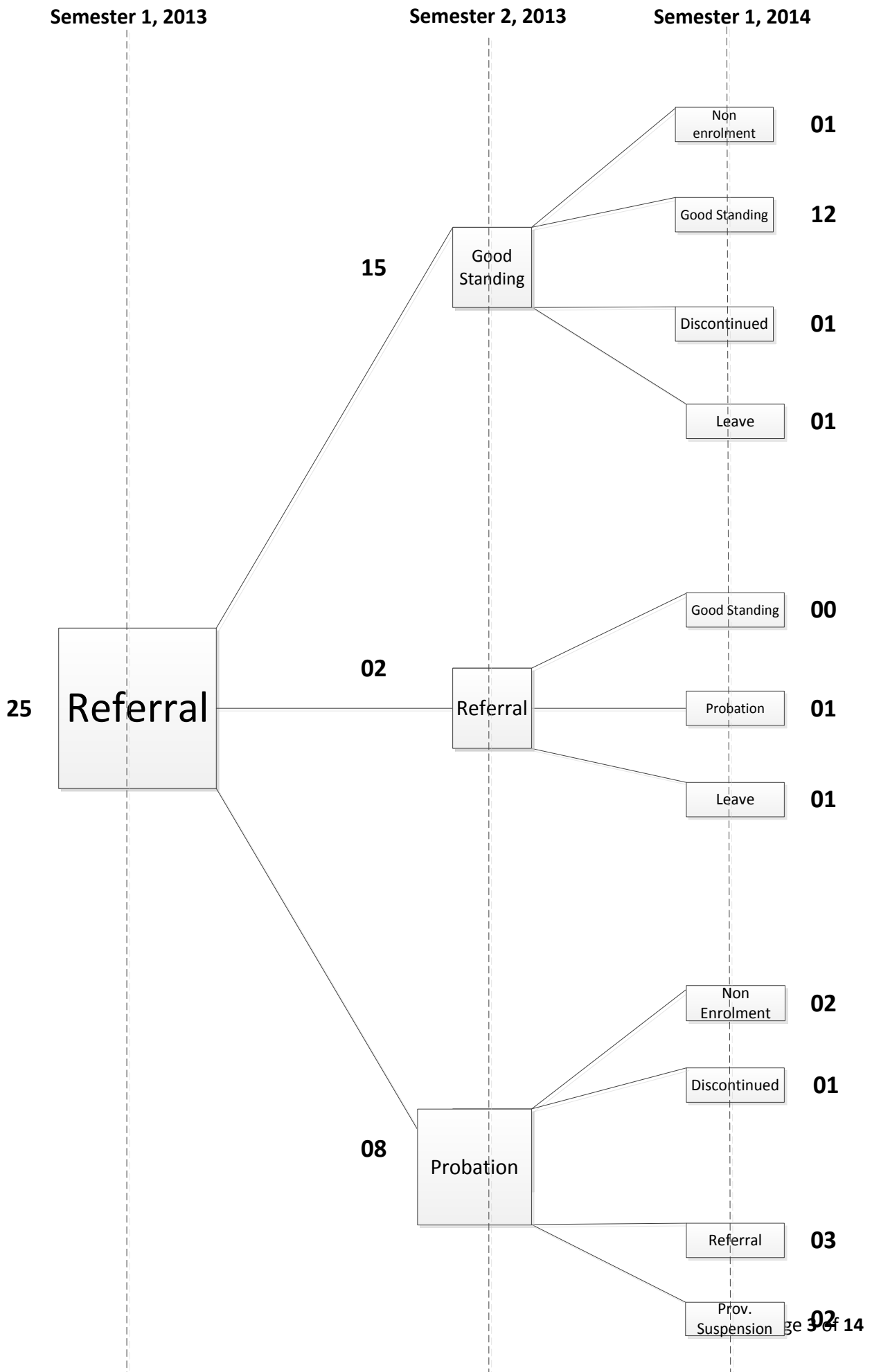
UNSW calculates academic standing of students at the end of each semester after results are released. A student's academic standing is determined by the proportion of courses passed in the current semester and their academic standing from the previous semester. All students start with Good standing, but continued poor progress will lead a student down the following scale: referral, probation, provisional suspension, provisional exclusion, suspension and exclusion.

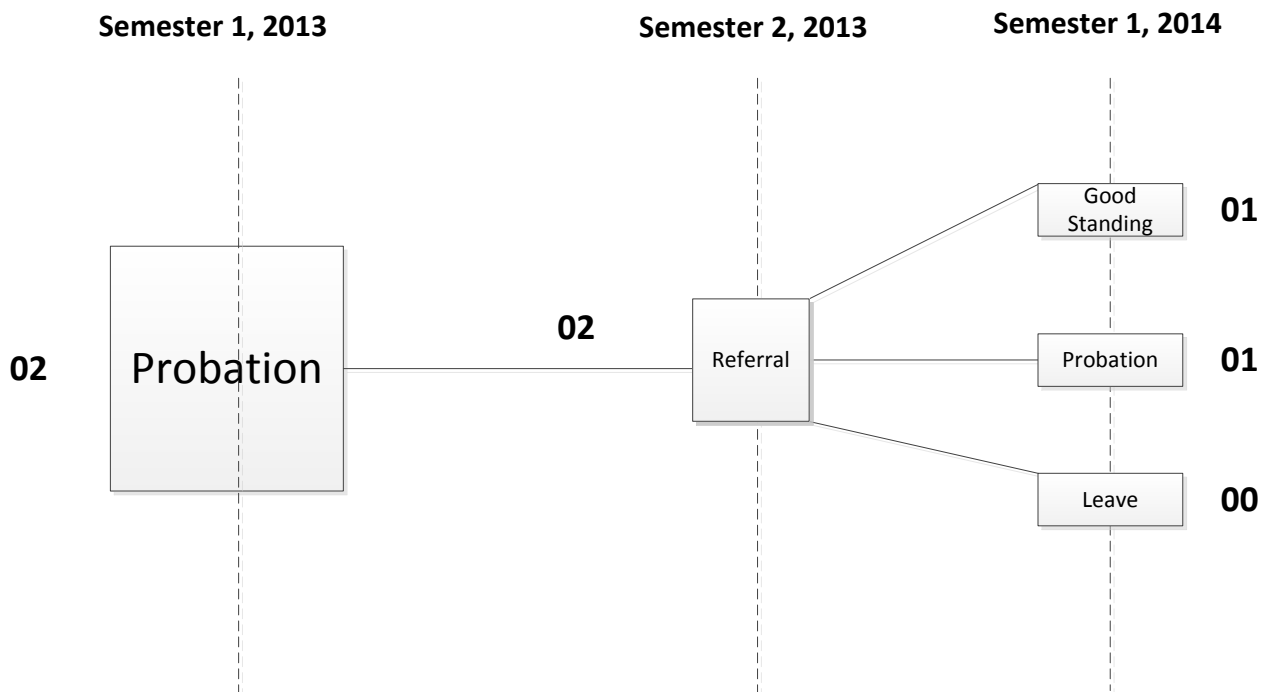
At the end of Semester 1 2013, a total of 27 students were not on good academic standing. The academic standing of the students was:

- Referral: 25 students
- Probation: 2 students

Academic Standing of students from Semester 1 2013 to Semester 1 2014

The diagram below tracks the academic standing of the students from Semester 1 2013 to Semester 1 2014 (three semesters).





Observations

- **Academic Standing**

At the end of Semester 2 2013, 15 of the 27 students returned to good standing. At the end of Semester 1 2014, 13 of the 27 students were on good standing. Two students went from probation to provisional suspension.

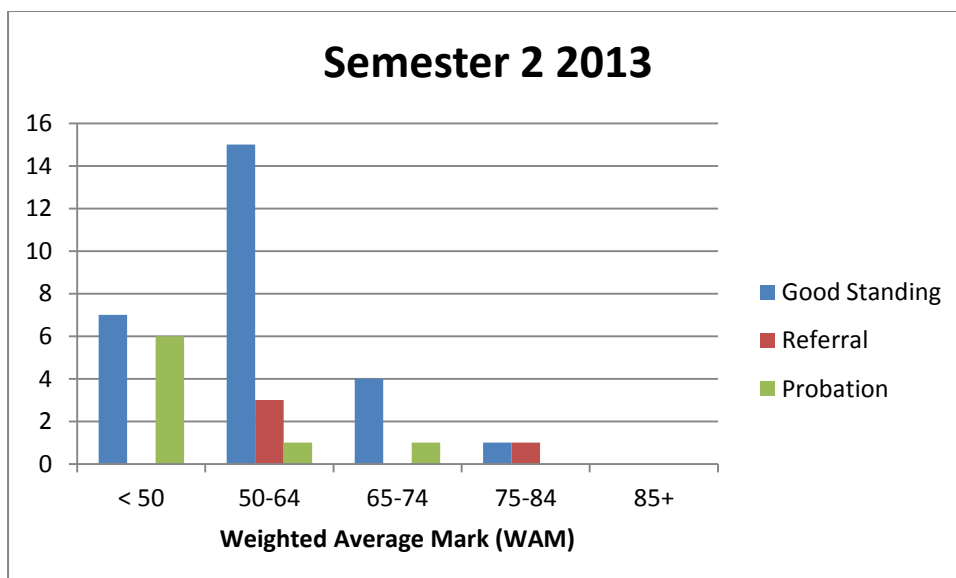
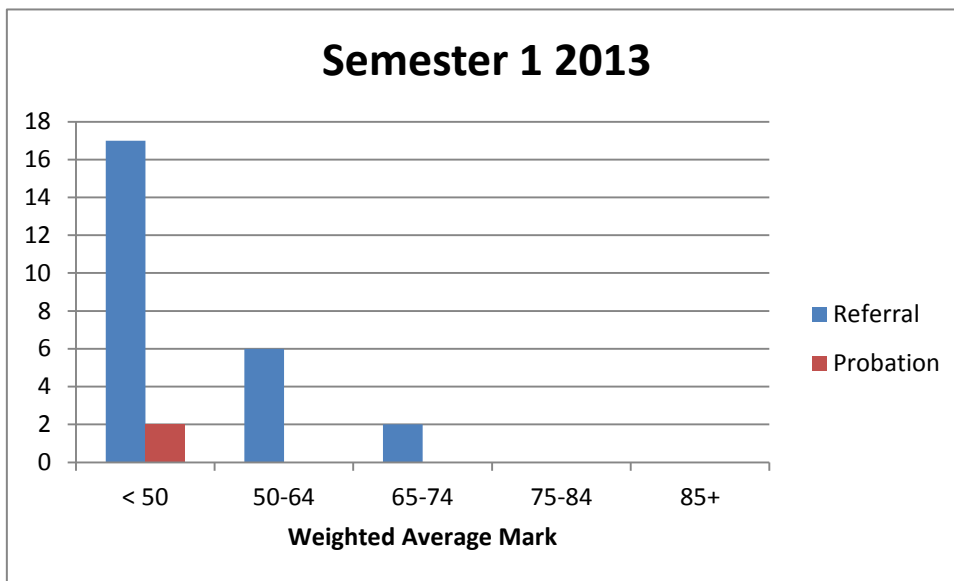
Seven students did not study in Semester 1 2014 as they were on program leave, discontinued the program or failed to enrol.

- **ATAR**

The 27 students had an ATAR between 77 and 99.95. One student had an ATAR of 99.95 and five others had over 90. Poor academic standing is not limited to students who entered the program with a lower ATAR.

- **Term WAM**

An analysis was undertaken of students' term WAM and their academic performance. Their academic performance in relation to their WAM is shown below:



The number of students who achieved a WAM above 50 increased in Semester 2 2013. The majority of students responded positively to being placed on not good academic standing.

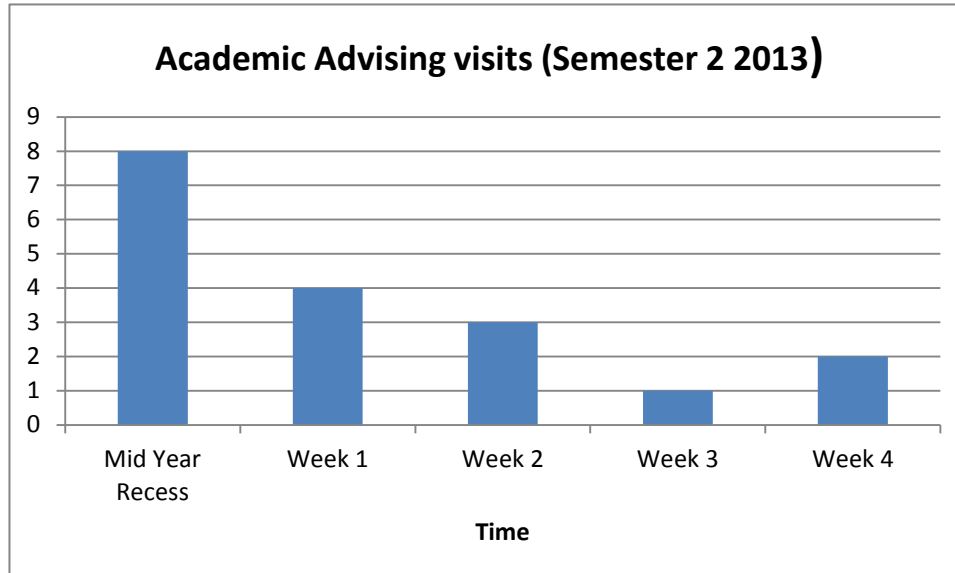
- **Progression of Academic Standing**

Student	S1 2013	S2 2013	S1 2014	Student Advisor
1	Probation	Referral	Probation	No
2	Referral	Probation	No enrolment	No
3	Referral	Good Standing	No enrolment	No
4	Referral	Good Standing	Good Standing	Yes
5	Probation	Referral	Good Standing	Yes
6	Referral	Good Standing	Good Standing	Yes
7	Referral	Probation	No enrolment	No
8	Referral	Good Standing	Good Standing	Yes
9	Referral	Probation	Provisional Susp	Yes
10	Referral	Good Standing	Good Standing	Yes
11	Referral	Good Standing	Program Leave	No
12	Referral	Probation	Referral	Yes
13	Referral	Good Standing	Good Standing	No
14	Referral	Probation	Referral	Yes
15	Referral	Probation	Provisional Susp	Yes
16	Referral	Good Standing	Good Standing	No
17	Referral	Good Standing	Good Standing	Yes
18	Referral	Referral	Program Leave	Yes
19	Referral	Good Standing	Discontinued	Yes
20	Referral	Good Standing	Good Standing	No
21	Referral	Probation	Referral	No
22	Referral	Good Standing	Good Standing	Yes
23	Referral	Good Standing	Good Standing	Yes
24	Referral	Good Standing	Good Standing	Yes
25	Referral	Referral	Probation	No
26	Referral	Good Standing	Good Standing	Yes
27	Referral	Probation	Discontinued	Yes

At the end of Semester 1 2014 (two semesters of intervention), 13 students of the group of 27 had returned to good standing and remained there. Ten of the 13 students had academic advising so it could be inferred it was helpful with their turnaround.

- **Meeting with Student Advisor**

18 of the 27 students met with the Student Advisor once between Mid-year recess and week four of Semester 2 2013. None of the 18 students returned to seek advice after that.



17 of the 18 students reported that factors affecting them were temporary. Factors include:

- Psychology, Economics or Management courses were too hard
- Not sure what to study
- Don't like the courses
- Struggle with writing/course content
- Changed enrolment
- Missed classes
- Time management
- Family pressure
- Heavy workload
- Financial constraints
- Personal issues (e.g. relationships)
- Sickness/accident
- First time out of home
- Travel to university

The Student Advisor referred all 18 students to the Counselling Unit and/or Learning Centre.

The majority of students were advised to reduce their study load (between 12 uoc and 18 uoc) in the subsequent semester.

Recurrent patterns of difficulty

On examination of student transcripts some recurrent patterns of difficulty were evident. These include:

- **Persistence in unsuitable courses**

A student's fails tend to cluster around a single subject area or a single faculty, while they pass all or nearly all of their courses in other subject areas. Despite these repeated signs that the student is ill suited to that subject area, or requires sustained remedial work, the student keeps taking and failing courses in that subject area. This pattern seems to occur almost entirely in two subject areas: psychology and economics.

- **First year setbacks**

Students in this group fail most or all of their courses in their first year. These students then divide into two sub-groups – those who drop out, and those who continue on with their studies with much improved academic performance.

Some of these students resolved their difficulties by taking 18 uoc or less per semester instead of the usual 24 uoc full time load for the remainder of their studies.

- **“Difficulty all the way”**

Students in this group continually fail their courses, sometimes mitigating the fails with low passes. It is difficult to know from the transcripts alone if their academic potential is being affected by other factors such as ill health or stressful life situations, whether they were ill-prepared by their high school studies for the tertiary environment and would be fine with some remedial assistance, or whether they cannot demonstrate the required level of performance.

- **“One offs”**

The students in this group experience one semester of poor performance but then revert to making good progress in their program. Based on experience with applications for withdrawal without penalty and academic advising interviews, usually this is a result of events such as time management, personal or family issues, as well as laxity in lecture attendance and preparations for assessment.

- **Using the BA program as a stepping point to a more competitive program, e.g. Business**

Some students enter the BA with limited commitment and/or with intention to transfer to another program. This may impact on their success in the BA program.

Student Survey on Academic Advising

A survey was conducted of approximately 130 students who commenced the BA in 2012 and 2013 and who had at least one semester of not good standing to find out how they seek academic advising. The response rate was about 20% and the responses are summarised in Appendix 1.

Some observations include:

- Students learned about the Faculty academic advising service when they received an email from the university and faculty.
- Students sought academic advising during enrolment time and/or when the stress was occurring.
- Most students only saw the Student Advisor once.
- About 50% of respondents rated the academic service as effective.
- Students found enrolment planning and help with admin processes most helpful in academic advising.
- Most students used a variety of support systems in the university.

Ideas and Strategies for Consideration

Some possible avenues of further work include:

- Adopt a team approach in providing support to students rather than having only one Student Advisor as it is difficult to connect with all students at risk.
- Redefine and expand the role of academic advising to intervene at an earlier stage of a likely failure.
- Implement an “Early Warning System” to identify students at risk and mitigate poor academic standing (“Early Warning” factors may include low LMS participation, WAM drop, multiple fails in the same course, absences, English language, etc.)
- Examine courses with high failure rates.
- Support first year students transitioning into university studies.
- Research similar processes in other universities.
- Undertake further research into the specific causes of poor academic standing (e.g. disengagement, inadequate academic preparation, dissatisfaction with teaching and learning, and financial or work related reasons).
- Consider flexible teaching to accommodate student lifestyles.
- Adopt greater information-sharing and cooperation with other university support systems.
- Involve academic staff in identifying and referring students to support services.

Conclusion

The study of students at risk is a beginning and more work is required to understand student behaviour.

The recurrent patterns of difficulty outlined in the study could be used to further investigate this area so that appropriate support mechanisms can be implemented.

Students at risk are an institutional problem therefore a university approach to identify such students through early warning systems is important.

At the faculty level the current practice of contacting students after they are not on good academic standing is reactive. Proactive measures need to be considered to identify students at risk.

Due to the volume of students at risk a team approach rather than a one Student Advisor would be more effective in achieving better results.

A number of ideas and strategies have been proposed and each warrants further investigation.

Academic Advising Service Survey

What kind of support did you expect from the Faculty Student Advisor?

- I was expecting some empathy and solutions rather than to be told to 'go here for solutions and go there for resources'.
- I expected them to know more than I did, and to therefore know the best way to approach a certain requirement or dilemma in regards to my student life.
- Just a good talking to and patching up questions that might've been missed otherwise.
- Understanding.
- Good advice on how to raise my grades.
- Advice on how to do better at uni or how to choose subjects I would be able to complete, or how to choose the subjects necessary for my major.
- Consultation regarding academic plan and some advises regarding academic standing.
- Advice on how I should go about my study load.
- I'm not sure who the faculty student advisors are. Are they the office people at the faculty offices? If so, I think I'd want advice on how to best structure my degree to make it as efficient as possible.
- To help understand the structure/workings of a degree.
- Tell me what everything (WAM, results) meant.
- Explain clearly about what left in the degree, how would the students overcome the difficulties in study and offers the good supportive feedback.
- I wasn't sure what to expect as this was my first time.
- Guidance and supervision in regards to the direction of my studies and degree.
- General advice which could reinforce my understanding and options within my degree.
- Current achievements and future requirements.
- Guide me through my subject choices and planning out my university life as well as help me through my struggles academically at uni.
- Didn't know what to expect.
- Info on enrolments/transfers
- Planning my degree.
- Support with progress.
- Receive support in regards to my grades.
- Support after failure of a subject and looking at future progression.
- Advise me for my next strategies to improve.

Did the service you received match your expectation of the service?

Most replied 'Yes' but a few said:

- Definitely not.
- No, they gave no advice but just allowed me to enrol as I chose.
- Yes. The student advisor pointed out the issues with my current plans and recommended certain approaches to catching up so that I could graduate on time (e.g. summer school as apposed to overloading). That was essentially what I was there for, figuring out how to make up for the subjects I had failed, and it didn't disappoint. I am now on track.

