

REPORT ON POSTGRADUATE STUDENT CONTACT DATA, JANUARY - JUNE 2004

1. Executive Summary

As the peak representative body for postgraduate students at the University of Adelaide, the Adelaide University Postgraduate Students' Association (AUPGSA) represents its members at a number of levels in the University of Adelaide and in many different ways. One important area of student representation has been the advocacy and information services with which the AUPGSA provides its members. In mid-April 2004, the AUPGSA advocacy service was transferred to Student Care on a three-month trial basis as a means of centralising advocacy services. The transfer of advocacy services coincided with the launch of the new AUPGSA website.

Between 2000 and 2002, there was a steady increase in the number of postgraduate students contacting the AUPGSA. This increase in contacts was at a slightly slower rate than the number of postgraduate student enrolments at the University. In 2003, this steady increase was overtaken by a sharp increase in the number of students assisted by the AUPGSA. However, since the transfer of advocacy duties, the AUPGSA has recorded a significant drop in the number of students contacting the organisation for information and assistance – both in terms of numbers in comparison to the same period in previous years, and as a percentage of postgraduate enrolments at the University.

The effect of the changes in the quantity and nature of student contacts recorded by the AUPGSA needs to be assessed in the context of staffing levels for the organisation and for Student Care. In addition, the AUPGSA needs to examine the effect in the context of the role that it plays in the University environment so that the organisation can be revitalised and take a leading role in representing postgraduate students.

2. Background

Following discussions between the Adelaide University Union (AUU), the AUPGSA and Student Care in February and March 2004, the advocacy service provided by the AUPGSA was transferred to Student Care in mid-April 2004. It was agreed that the change in structure would be trialled for a three-month period to ascertain its effect on the workload of Student Care's Education and Welfare Officers. The AUPGSA Research Officer's duties for the organisation were therefore reduced; AUU project work was assigned to replace student advocacy.

3. Student casework load in previous years

The AUPGSA first started recording statistics for student contacts in March 2000. Between the commencement of keeping statistics and the end of 2003, there has been a steady increase in the number of students contacting the AUPGSA for advice, advocacy and information. In 2001 and 2002, there were slight increases in the number of student contacts the AUPGSA received for assistance. In contrast to such gradual development, in 2003 there was an 81.1% jump in the number of students contacting the organisation when compared to figures for 2002.

The student contact figures for the AUPGSA over the period 2000-2003 are detailed below:

Table 1: AUPGSA student contacts, 2000-2003

Year	Number of contacts	Percentage change from previous year
2000	476 ¹	n/a
2001	587	+ 1.3% ²
2002	647	+ 10.2%
2003	1172	+ 81.1%

In 2001 and 2002, the number of postgraduate students at the University³ increased at a higher rate than did the number of contacts the AUPGSA received. However, in 2003, the opposite was the case, with the percentage increase in postgraduate student enrolments under half of the growth in student contacts that the AUPGSA received.⁴

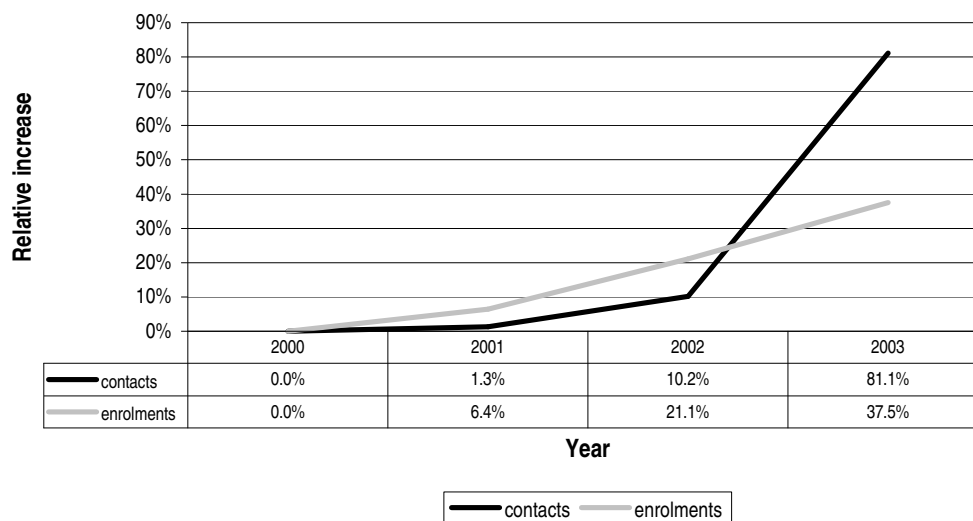
The following table details the growth in postgraduate student enrolments at the University from 2000 to 2004:

Table 2: University of Adelaide postgraduate student enrolments, 2000-2004

Type of course	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004 ⁵
Higher degree - research	1221	1205	1337	1587	1637
Higher degree - coursework	1218	1389	1804	2731	2689
Total	2439	2594	3141	4318	4326
Percentage increase from previous year	n/a	6.4%	21.1%	37.5%	0.2%

The dramatic escalation of postgraduate student contacts in 2003 deviates sharply from the steady growth in enrolments at the University, as is made clear in this graphic representation of the relevant figures:

Table 3: Growth in postgraduate student contacts and enrolments, 2000-2003



¹ March - December 2000.

² Calculated by extrapolating the total for the ten months in 2000 in which figures were recorded for the entire year.

³ The AUPGSA membership also includes honours students as enshrined in its constitution, whereas the University classifies honours students as undergraduates.

⁴ University of Adelaide, Statistic Summaries. Accessible at <<http://www.adelaide.edu.au/opd/stats/summary/index.html>>.

⁵ 2004 statistics are for the first semester only; all other years include students enrolled only in one semester of that particular year.

The increase in the number of contacts that the AUPGSA received in 2003 is suggestive of an increased demand for its services. This theory is supported by an analysis of the number of initial and repeat contacts from postgraduate students that the AUPGSA received.⁶ The AUPGSA first started to record initial and repeat contacts in 2002. From 2002 to 2003, there was a 71.0% percent increase in the number of initial contacts, and the number of repeat contacts almost doubled during the same period:

Table 4: AUPGSA student contacts – initial and repeat, 2002/2003

Nature of contact	2002	2003	Percentage increase, 2002-2003
initial	396	677	71.0%
repeat	251	495	97.2%

4. Student contacts in the first half of 2004

In the first six months of 2004, 382 contacts had been recorded. This represents a 43.4% drop from the same period in 2003. In order to best understand and make use of the statistics presented in table 5, the following points should be noted:

- For most of April and May 2002, the AUPGSA was without a Research Officer; a consequence of this situation was that the AUPGSA's ability to assist students diminished and students were referred to Student Care for advocacy services;
- In February and March 2003, the AUPGSA dealt with several complex cases that required extensive contact with the students involved; these two months are therefore anomalies, and the second quarter of 2003 presents a more accurate representation of the level of student contacts for 2003;
- The AUPGSA's advocacy services were transferred to Student Care on 13 April 2004.

Broken down by calendar year, the AUPGSA contact statistics for the first six months of the year from 2002 to 2004 are as follows:

Table 5: AUPGSA student contacts, January-June; 2002-2004

Year	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Total
2002	57	54	56	43	39	45	294
2003	65	145	137	106	118	104	675
2004	76	84	88	52	43	39	382

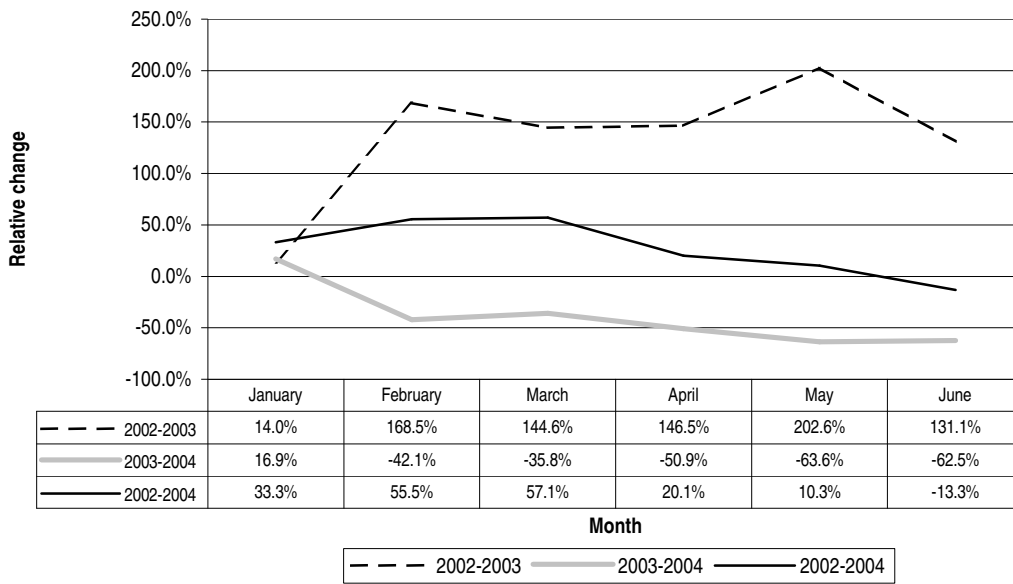
When examining the percentage change between years, as well as over a two-year period, it becomes apparent that:

- Since April 2004, there has been a decrease consistent with the transfer of advocacy services to Student Care;
- This decrease has occurred both in relation to 2002 and 2003;
- For the first time, in June 2004 the outright number of student contacts in a month was lower than for the equivalent month in 2002.

Table 6 (below) is a graphic depiction of the dynamic percentage changes in student contacts in the first six months of 2002, 2003 and 2004. It clearly shows a marked decrease in student contacts following the transfer of student advocacy to Student Care:

⁶ An initial contact is defined as an approach to the AUPGSA for assistance by an individual about a specific issue; should the same individual contact the AUPGSA at a later stage about a different issue, it is recorded as a new initial contact. A repeat contact is defined as an approach to the AUPGSA for assistance by an individual about a specific topic, on which s/he has previously already sought advice or assistance.

Table 6: Percentage change in number of student contacts, 2002-2004

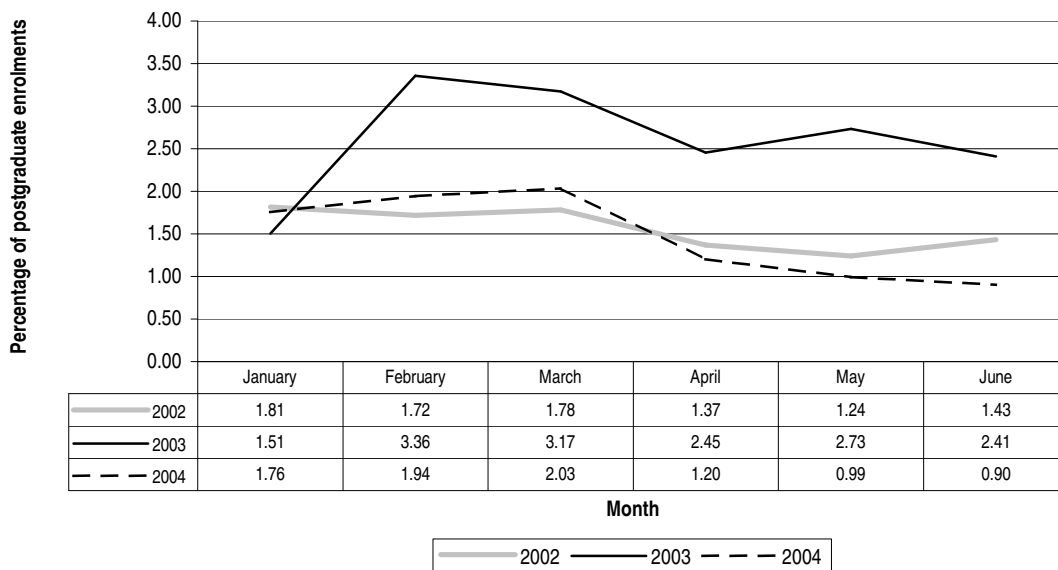


Establishing a correlation between the number of contacts that the AUPGSA receives monthly with the number of postgraduate students enrolled in the years 2002-2004,⁷ it emerges that:

- Since April 2004, the AUPGSA has been contacted by a lower percentage of its membership than its has during any period since January 2002;
- The percentage of its membership contacting the AUPGSA since May 2004 is under one percent.

Comparing contacts as a percentage of postgraduate enrolments over the same period demonstrates that the number of contacts as a percentage of enrolments has remained steady in general, with the exception of the unusually high caseload in February and March 2003, and since April 2004:

Table 7: Number of contacts as a percentage of postgraduate enrolments; January-June, 2002-2004



⁷ This data does not distinguish between initial and repeat contacts from postgraduate students, as differentiation of this nature has no bearing on the level of casework load.

Indeed, since April 2004, there have been significant drops in the majority of issues about which the AUPGSA is contacted. There are two primary reasons for these changes:

- The transfer of the AUPGSA's advocacy service to Student Care on 13 April;
- On 8 April, the new AUPGSA website was launched. In addition to the more detailed and up to date information it contains, it is far easier to navigate and find relevant content than it was using the old website.

The effect of these changes is shown by the relative drop in most categories of assistance about which the AUPGSA is contacted from April 2004, when compared to the same month in 2003. Of particular note are the following points:

- With the exception of the marked increase in resource-related contacts in April 2004, the six increases in the number of contacts recorded were small;
- In one category of contact in each of April, May and June 2004 was there no change in the number of postgraduate students contacting the AUPGSA from the same period in 2003.
- There were 36 decreases in contacts from postgraduate students in the period April – June 2004;
- In nine of the 36 decreases in the number of contacts, there were no contacts for the particular month.

The following table provides a breakdown of student contacts into broad subject groupings, showing the percentage change by month between 2003 and 2004:

Table 8: Comparison of number of contacts, January – June, 2003 v. 2004

Issue	Year	January	Change, 2003-2004	February	Change, 2003-2004	March	Change, 2003-2004	April	Change, 2003-2004	May	Change, 2003-2004	June	Change, 2003-2004
Accommodation	2003	6	-83%	5	-100%	4	-50%	5	-100%	3	-100%	2	0%
	2004	1				2						2	
Administration	2003	12	-83%	19	-100%	17	-100%	4	-25%	12	-83%	6	-67%
	2004	2						3		2		2	
Assessment	2003	3	167%	4	75%	8	0%	7	-71%	2	-50%	4	-100%
	2004	8		7		8		2		1			
Candidature	2003	1	600%	8	-63%	6	-17%	5	-60%	6	-50%	4	25%
	2004	7		3		5		2		3		5	
Enrolment	2003	10	-50%	28	-79%	18	-67%	5	-40%	8	-50%	9	-89%
	2004	5		6		6		3		4		1	
Fees	2003	1	600%	2	-50%	1	0%	1	100%	3	-100%	1	-100%
	2004	7		1		1		2					
Harassment	2003	1	-100%	1	-100%	2	250%	1	-100%	12	-100%		100%
	2004					7						1	
Insurance	2003	5	60%	6	17%	6	0%	16	-50%	25	-88%	20	-55%
	2004	8		7		6		8		3		9	
Intellectual property	2003	2	-50%	10	-80%	1	200%	19	-100%	2	-100%	11	-100%
	2004	1		2		3							
Information techn.	2003	1	100%	7	-71%	7	-71%	6	-100%	3	-33%	5	-60%
	2004	2		2		2				2		2	
Other	2003	8	63%	35	-26%	30	-10%	17	-35%	25	-36%	24	-79%
	2004	13		26		27		11		16		5	
Resources	2003	3	167%		100%	12	17%	3	500%	6	0%	5	-40%
	2004	8		17		14		18		6		3	
Scholarships	2003	5	-40%	5	-80%	4	-50%	1	0%	4	-50%	4	-25%
	2004	3		1		2		1		2		3	
SSF	2003	4	-100%		0%	1	200%		100%	4	-100%	2	-100%
	2004					3		1					
Supervision	2003	3	267%	15	-20%	20	-90%	16	-94%	3	33%	7	-14%
	2004	11		12		2		1		4		6	

	Decrease in contacts from 2003 to 2004
	No change in contacts from 2003 to 2004
	Increase in contacts from 2003 to 2004

5. Comparative information from Student Care

In July 2004, the AUU Education and Welfare Officers (EWOs) prepared a report for the AUU, which included a section on the effect that the transfer of postgraduate student advocacy had had on Student Care. In the opinion of the EWOs, there had been:

- A significant increase in the amount of postgraduate advocacy that they were conducting;
- An increase that correlates with the decrease in the number of postgraduate students contacting the AUPGSA for assistance.

In the opinion of Student Care, the current postgraduate advocacy load was not sustainable unless there are corresponding increases in staffing levels:

We have always had some case-load in this area, especially where cases went beyond academic issues to include welfare and personal issues not appropriately handled by the PGSA.

Post-graduate academic grievances are usually complex, involving multiple consultations with academics and the Graduate Studies Office, as well as the students themselves.

[..]

The statistics the EWOs have kept since April indicate that our workload due to Postgraduate academic advocacy has increased conservatively by approximately 22% with a corresponding drop off in [the AUPGSA's] statistics in the same areas. Currently we have maintained the increased workload by working additional hours as TOIL [time off in lieu], which cannot easily be maintained with current staffing levels, and will inevitably compound an existing situation of excess hours and leave credits.

The additional current post-graduate caseload equates to a minimum of 11.25 hours/week minimum.⁸

6. Conclusion

Following the changes made to AUPGSA services, the following effects have been recorded:

- There has been a substantial reduction in the number of postgraduate students contacting the AUPGSA for assistance;
- The reduction in student contacts has occurred despite the increasing numbers of postgraduate students enrolled at the University of Adelaide;
- Since the changes were carried out in April 2004, the relative level of contacts from postgraduate students has fallen below the level recorded in 2002;
- Since June 2004, the number of students contacting the AUPGSA for assistance has fallen below the number of contacts recorded in June 2002, in outright terms;
- The reduction has been due to both the transfer of advocacy services to Student Care and the launch of the new AUPGSA website;
- There has been a corresponding increase in the level of advocacy with which Student Care's Education and Welfare Officers provide postgraduate students.

The effect of transferring the responsibility for advocacy to Student Care has been generally positive for the AUPGSA. However, the task remains to confirm that the level of advocacy able to be offered by Student Care is enough to ensure that all students at the University of Adelaide are able to access the much-needed services that the Education and Welfare Officers provide. In addition, the AUPGSA needs to examine its structure and responsibilities to instigate further positive change in the future.

ANTHONY LONG
Research Officer

13 August 2004

⁸ Student Care, report to the Adelaide University Union, July 2004.