

Provider e-newsletter–April 2020

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Welcome to the April edition of the VET Student Loans Ombudsman newsletter. In this edition we cover:

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VET Student Loans quarterly update

The [VET Student Loans quarterly update for October–December 2019](#) is now available.

This update provides information on the complaints we have received and finalised, as well as common issues that were complained about during the October–December 2019 quarter.



COVID-19

This newsletter comes to you at a time when the world is experiencing extraordinary disruption due to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. We would like to reassure you that we are still providing external complaint handling services, including about complaints arising from COVID-19.

Although we are not accepting face-to-face appointments with students at present, we can receive complaints by phone and online. It may take longer than usual for us to contact students regarding their complaints due to government wide resources being focussed on the delivery of essential services to the Australian public. We will try to be as flexible as possible when investigating complaints, for example by ensuring that our requests for information are as brief and well targeted as possible, and by providing extensions of time for providers to respond to requests if necessary.

Please email us at VET.studentloans@ombudsman.gov.au with any questions. We will remain in touch throughout this period through our e-newsletter, and extend our thoughts to all those affected by the virus.

Preliminary Inquiries

When we receive a complaint, sometimes we make a preliminary inquiry with the provider to help us assess whether the complaint warrants an investigation. A preliminary inquiry can help us figure out early on whether a complaint is straightforward, or whether additional evidence and research will be required. It can also provide early indicators that we will not be able to achieve the remedy or outcome that the complainant is seeking, or that the provider has fulfilled their responsibilities and no investigation is needed.

The aim of a preliminary inquiry is to reduce the amount of time taken to process the complaint and reach a quicker outcome for everyone. If, following the preliminary inquiry stage, we believe an investigation is required, the information obtained at preliminary inquiry may help us formulate our questions and reduce the time and resources needed in the investigation.

The majority of our preliminary inquiries result in us declining to investigate the complaint. This is often because the student has not yet exhausted the complaints and appeals process with the provider, or the provider has forwarded evidence to us that suggests our Office does not need to investigate.

The remainder of cases that continue to be assessed after a preliminary inquiry has been made are those in which the provider confirms the student has exhausted the internal complaints and appeals process; and we find that there are circumstances that warrant further investigation.

If you are asked to provide information as part of a preliminary inquiry from our Office, you can assist by providing all information requested within the timeframe specified. This will help us to determine whether to investigate the complaint or not.

VET FEE-HELP Student Redress Measures

On 1 January 2019, the VET FEE-HELP Student Redress Measures came into effect. The measures provide a remedy for students who, due to the inappropriate conduct of their VET provider, incurred debts under the VET FEE-HELP scheme.

Under the redress measures, we assess complaints and decide whether we will make recommendations to the Department of Education, Skills and Employment¹ (the department) to remove individual VET FEE-HELP debts.

As at 31 December 2019, we had recommended the removal of VET FEE-HELP debts for 3,447 complaints, comprising 21,503 units of study under the redress measures. The total value of this debt was \$58.6 million, including \$48.8 million in tuition fees and \$9.8 million in loan fees.

If you have any questions about this process, you can email us at VET.StudentLoans@ombudsman.gov.au

Spotlight on: Responsiveness in complaint handling

When we talk about responsiveness in complaint handling, we are referring to an organisation's ability to adequately respond to the complainant's circumstances, background or needs. An obvious way is by having adequate complaint handling staff, but sometimes a complainant will have less typical needs.

These needs can be related to vulnerabilities with communication skills, organisational skills, learning difficulties, dealing with bureaucracy, and fear of making trouble.

Acknowledging that your organisation will need appropriate strategies can assist you in identifying improvements to support complainants and increase your responsiveness.

For complainants with challenges in communicating, using staff who can communicate simply, slowly and patiently, and who are trained to check understanding can be very helpful. If the complainant requests that you deal with another party on their behalf, having processes and policies in place supported by appropriate forms and documentation can assist your organisation in responding well.

To assist students who have anxiety around complaining, it can be helpful to make avenues available for them to give anonymous feedback or make suggestions. Having information around the campus such as posters or brochures indicating that your organisation welcomes complaints, that complaints are treated confidentially, and explaining the process can help to reframe 'complaining' as a positive activity.

Consider the complaints system in your own organisation. Can you think of any ways to improve its responsiveness to students?

You can read more about complaint handling in our [Better Practice Guide to Complaint Handling](#) on the [Commonwealth Ombudsman website](#).



¹ This department was known as the Department of Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business prior to 1 February 2020.

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