

Student Union Advocacy Service Report

Trends and Issues

Annual Summary 2013 - 2014

Introduction

This is a brief report summarising the year to date statistics as well as the key trends and issues in the period 2013 – 2014.

Year to Date Statistical Overview 1/10/2013 – 30/9/2014

In this period there were a total of 978 individual cases presenting which resulted in 2218 separate contacts with students. Just on 40% were graduate students and 60% undergraduates.

Domestic students constituted 73% of service users and the balance were international student visa holders.

The top five presenting issues were Course Unsatisfactory Progress (54.84%), Special Consideration (8.35%), Assessment Disputes (7.12%), Plagiarism (4.93%) and supervision problems (2.47%).

The top five faculties most represented by student presentations were Science (25.87%), Melbourne School of Engineering (13.09%), Arts (12.35%), MDHS (9.08%) and Business & Economics (8.03%).

Trends and Issues - October - December 2013

Desperate measures – foolishness, fraud and HPR form forgery

In the context of an increasingly competitive environment - where GPAs and average marks can make a profound difference in students' options and opportunities – we are seeing evidence of students practicing increasingly desperate strategic behaviours.

Specifically this quarter we have assisted several students who were caught fabricating evidence to support their special consideration applications. Unquestionably this is very disturbing, as it represents an aggravated form of academic misconduct with potentially catastrophic ramifications for the student. Fraud and forgery are also major threats to the integrity of the special consideration system and potentially a blight on graduate attributes for the University. The following students received advice and assistance with their allegations.

Three international students from the Faculty of Business & Economics independently faced allegations that they had falsified their HPR forms. These students separately advised that they had purchased the document online through a website which they usually accessed to buy second hand text books, find rental accommodation and other University related resources.

One of the students told us that during a state of emotional crisis she accessed the website looking for advice on how to cope and that she frequently sought advice from peers on this site. At that time someone approached her with an offer to sell her an HPR form. The person told the student that they were alumni of Melbourne University and that – for a fee of \$200 – they would provide a fraudulent HPR form. The student advises that - although she knew it was wrong – in the context of the website where she had commonly accessed support and legitimate university resources – she decided to go ahead with it.

Another of the students who was in his first semester of study, realised his error after submitting the HPR form to the Faculty and tried – unsuccessfully - to withdraw his application for Special Consideration.

Another student advised that she had found a message on the website which claimed that after receiving a student's name, they would take it to a doctor who would then issue a "real" Medical Certificate/HPR form. Of course the HPR form would not be 'real' as it was obtained under false pretences. In any event, this was obviously a story to entice vulnerable or naïve students into thinking it was less than falsification. However a comparison between the different forgeries shows that they were a cut and paste of the same. It became apparent that these were not isolated incidents when yet another student presented with the same falsified HPR form but with a different medical practitioner stamp.

Another student had clearly forged a doctor's signature on their HPR form.

At the time of writing this report, all but one of the students had had their enrolments terminated by the Vice Chancellor for academic misconduct. The other student was suspended, probably on the basis of a compelling letter from a psychiatrist.

There is little doubt all of these students knew that their actions were wrong. It was equally clear to us however, that none of them had a full appreciation of just how serious their actions were and the ultimate consequences appeared to come as a shock to all of them.

It is worth noting that all of these students were really vulnerable and/or naïve in their own ways. Their vulnerability was compounded by the fact that these forged documents are for sale in plain view of a website – the seemingly common practice obscuring the seriousness and criminality of the trade.

Without in any way trivialising the students' responsibility for their own actions, it is hard not to speculate that the extremely high threshold the University sets for acceptable documentary evidence for special consideration may be in part responsible for the surge in this practice. It has been noted in previous quarterly reports that in some faculties it appears that the standard of proof for evidentiary material is higher than that required in a criminal court.

Some faculty special consideration committees maintain a list of unofficially 'black banned' medical practitioners. Students who provide an HPR form signed by these doctors are denied special consideration on the basis of 'insufficient evidence'. Additionally we have noticed an insistence by some special consideration committees that only HPR forms obtained on the same day that the student claims to have been affected by the condition will be accepted as evidence. For many students, this is simply an impossible standard to meet.

Update

We recommended that the review of the special consideration process take into account the difficulties students face in obtaining medical documentation which meets the threshold required by faculty special consideration committees with particular regard to whether the threshold is too onerous. Additionally we suggested that where there are genuine suspicions that medical practitioners are unethical in their preparation of HPR forms, they should be reported to the Health Services Commissioner rather than informally black banned.

We still hope to see these changes in the near future when the new BIP policy workstream finalises the new policies. As our statistics show – Special Consideration is the biggest single issue we deal with aside from CUPC. The reason for this is because the current process is so manifestly problematic and the way faculties deal with the issue often appears arbitrary or capricious.

January - March 2014

Communicating with Chinese Students over holidays – the Great Firewall of China

The Chinese Government routinely blocks access to certain internet domains and consequently some students have problems accessing their university emails in China as gmail is one of those sites targeted from time to time.

This has come up several times this quarter in student appeals from CUPC determinations made in their absence. The affected students were unable to access their University email while at home over the Christmas holidays and consequently they were unable to respond to notice of unsatisfactory progress.

As all formal notices are now sent to students via email – this issue has the potential to adversely affect students' interests.

Update

This issue did not seem to present again in the subsequent holiday period. We hope it is resolved.

Follow up on desperate measures – foolishness, fraud and HPR form forgery

In the October – December 2013 report, we documented the very troubling trend of students falsifying Health Professional Report (HPR) forms to support special consideration applications. Specifically we documented the use of a website which the students usually accessed to buy second hand text books, find rental accommodation and other University related resources – which was advertising the HPR fabrication 'service'.

The website is a popular resource for Chinese students <<http://www.yeeyi.com/bbs/index.php>>. The advertisement for the falsified HPR documentation is in the "Forum" section which is a kind of online bulletin board.

Some of the students we have seen in relation to misconduct allegations have described posting on the forum site, asking for advice about how to handle the pressures of study. In reply they were directed to the person offering the fraudulent HPR forms. The students subsequently made contact with this person via online chat to conclude the deal. Apparently the person or people selling the fraudulent documents claimed they were alumni of Melbourne University. The fee charged was \$200.00.

After the initial spate of students facing misconduct allegations in this regard, this Service posted warnings about this practice on our website and in our social media channels. We are also working in collaboration with University International Student Services and UMSU International to disseminate information about the dangers of this scam to vulnerable students via Chinese social media and a YouTube video.

Update

There have been no further reports of this practice and we hope this means the trade in forged forms had now ceased.

April - June 2014

Health Assessments – who says?

A large number of university students fall into in the age group featuring the highest proportion of those who suffer mental illness.¹ We frequently see students who have been struggling to keep up with their studies due to problems with their mental health and these students can be particularly vulnerable to the gap between the special consideration process and those mechanisms to support students with chronic disabilities or ongoing health problems. This is due to both the episodic nature of acute illness as well as this effect such illnesses can have on the organisation and motivation required to negotiate the current special consideration regime.

Unsurprisingly, such students frequently show up in the ranks of those asked to face the Course Unsatisfactory Progress Committees. From time to time the faculty's assessment appears to override those of the health professionals who supply supporting documentation for those students. We saw several cases

¹ That is – between 16 and 25 years old. *Mentally Ill Students' Guide for Academics* <<http://www.unimelb.edu.au/accessibility/guide/mental-illness-2.htm>>.

this quarter where students faced protracted CUPC appeals and special consideration disputes in relation to mental health issues. In one of these cases where the student's enrolment was terminated despite a positive mental health assessment from the student's treating psychiatrist, the wording of the CUPC report appeared to be a *de facto* mental health assessment directly contradicting the evidence of the students' treating mental health professional. The student's appeal from the termination of enrolment in this instance was upheld by the Academic Board; however we remain concerned that in some cases the CUPC may be substituting its own assessment for those of the relevant health professional.

Update

We will continue to monitor this issue during this year's CUPC season.

Business Improvement Program and the Advocacy Service

Implications for our Student Booking System

Since May 2012, the Advocacy Service has used the Student Booking System (SBS) - developed and supported by the University- to coordinate student appointments. This service, originally created and utilised by the Faculty of Business and Economics, was further rolled out to a range of Student Centres and Student Service providers as an effective appointment management system. While the University moved to the new Student Advising System last year, the University has continued to maintain the SBS solely for the use of our service. The SBS has allowed us to draw from ISIS data to quickly set up appointments with enrolled students and it allows staff to manage availability in relevant advice categories to release appointment spots which students book through the Student Services Officer. This booking generates an outlook appointment request for the staff member and an email and SMS reminder for the student which also permits cancellation via SMS if the student can no longer attend. The SBS has had a marked impact on productivity when it comes to coordinating staff availability and appointments, and has significantly reduced the incidence of student "no-shows".

We are advised that the unit which currently hosts and supports the SBS for us is one of the proposed areas impacted by the consolidation and standardisation processes arising from BIP. As it is, we have noticed that the system is no longer being populated with updated student data from ISIS. Already this has diminished the value of the SBS as we must increasingly enter appointments manually and those students who are not in the system do not benefit from system generated messages and reminders. A potential outcome of BIP is that this service is no longer hosted or supported by the University at all, and we will need to source an alternative booking system or lose the benefits we have enjoyed with the SBS.

Possible solutions at this stage include:

- The Student Union IT is briefed and can take over hosting and support functions – this would still be reliant on regular student data being populated by the University;
- The University continues to host and support the SBS post BIP with student data populated and updated regularly; or
- The SBS functions are integrated into our current casework management system – and a method for populating it with student data will be necessary.

The timeline for this change is as yet unclear; however a resolution is a priority for the Advocacy Service to ensure no gaps in the quality of service provision to students.

Update

Michael Everett who had been our chief point of contact at FBE will be finishing at the University early next year. He has advised that the system is very stable and needs no work on it to maintain. There will be one staff member left from the FBE team who has the capacity to maintain the system should there be a major problem – but the platform has been stable continuously for 18 months so there is no indication there is a

maintenance issue. Michael advised that the future of the software would be determined ultimately by Ms Diana Dalton, the executive director of FBE. On the issue of the data feed from ISIS – the problem remains that we have no live feed. However, if the Advocacy Service were able to get a data dump from ISIS in spreadsheet format twice a year, we can fairly quickly and easily update the data ourselves. Accordingly the issue is whether ITS who maintain ISIS are prepared to provide the data file to us for this purpose. I have the necessary information on how to format the file and the method by which it can be uploaded into the system.

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