



ADVOCACY

Service Report May - August 2021

UMSU
UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE
STUDENT UNION

Introduction

Between 2012 and 2017 the Advocacy Service was funded by the University subject to a service contract. As part of the contractual reporting requirements, the Service produced a quarterly report to the University's Advocacy Service Reference Group (ASRG). Subsequent to the discontinuation of the separate Advocacy service contract with the University, after funding for the service was subsumed into the UMSU whole of organisation funding under the 2017 SSAF funding model, the ASRG was formally disbanded on 17 April 2018 at its final meeting.

Nevertheless, although the Service Report was originally commissioned by the ASRG as an accountability measure, it has also served to ventilate student experiences of processes within the relevant parts of the University. Over time, the circulation of the Report grew to encompass a good cross section of the University Community, establishing strong communication channels for feedback and issues management between relevant stakeholders. We hope to continue to expand and consolidate these channels and invite interested University staff to contact the Service directly to collaborate on responses to the issues identified in the Report.

Data and 'Anecdotal'

The data presented in this report is drawn from the statistics recorded in the Advocacy Service Case management database. It is not drawn from, nor is it correlated with university collected service data, to which we have no access. For this reason, it is important to interpret the data and analysis as pertaining solely to activities of the Advocacy Service. The Report statistics cannot be extrapolated to provide commentary on the performance of Faculties or Schools, unless specifically indicated in the commentary.

The 'Trends and Issues' identified in the report are based on both service statistics, and anecdotal observations and case studies. They are provided as insights into the student experience of university processes, or as potential indicators of systemic problems with administrative decision making and procedural fairness. These issues are not intended to reflect the totality of student experience, but rather those areas where the University needs to address potentially serious issues and risks.

The Service can generate drill down or other statistics on its activities, where these may be of interest to the University community, however due to relatively few resources, such requests need to be made with due notice.

Trends and Issues

After what we thought was a novel year in 2020, and despite the continued impacts of the pandemic on students' lives, this period has seen a clear return to the more common matters for this time of year. Accordingly, our casework during this period has predominantly involved special consideration matters, course academic progress matters, assessment disputes, and academic misconduct allegations. These have long been the common issues presenting at this time of year. Unlike this period last year where COVID related matters outstripped the usual types of advocacy issues, we have returned to near 'normal' this year – albeit a COVID normal. Given the discontinuation of COVID-specific measures such as the Emergency Support Fund this year, it is harder to track specifically COVID related issues. In other words, this doesn't mean the impact of the pandemic has eased off for students, simply that those COVID related impacts are now incorporated into the more usual presentations to the service, such as special consideration.

In terms of the sorts of trends and issues arising during the period, there have been:

- problems with a faculty unwilling or unable to meet the University's timelines for special consideration outcomes;
- the approach to complaints at the University which from our perspective seems at times to be in some kind of death spiral;
- faculties who still can't come to grips with the evidentiary (and other) requirements for misconduct proceedings; and,
- ongoing woes for offshore students needing psychological support.

I would like to say in relation to the following matters, I am aware that at times the commentary in these reports will be read as huffy or pedantic. However, I think it's important to point out that if the University exercised the degree of discretion and latitude with its students that it expects us to allow for its own actions, the Service would be far, far less underwhelmed by its approach. Hypocrisy and double standards however, do not engender patience and understanding.

Timelines and outcomes and double standards – oh my!

During this period, there were several cases which involved extremely late outcomes being provided to students with approved special consideration applications. We assisted students who were still awaiting outcomes from the Faculty of Science for approved special consideration application *six weeks into semester*. The *Assessment and Results Policy* requires:

4.132. To support timely academic progress of students, outcomes of special consideration applications, including details of the special assessment where relevant, must be provided to an applicant within five business days of receipt of the application and the supporting documentation. [emphasis added]

Where a faculty requires its students to wait more than six weeks for an outcome, it is safe to say that the University is woefully in breach of its own policy.

The students in these cases were forced into a position where they needed to lodge formal grievances in order to effectively force the University to comply with the obligations established in its own policy. This is not only totally unacceptable but represents a poor example to students, and an obvious double standard. Imagine a world where faculties accept assessment from students submitted six weeks after the due date, without explanation or any expectation of penalty...

The fact that students awaiting outcomes to eligible applications are already vulnerable and suffering disadvantage only makes this situation more egregious.

Recommendation:

Faculties need to be sufficiently resourced to make timely responses to students in conformity with the University's own policy. It is worth noting that the University cannot expect students to take administrative timelines seriously when it fails so abysmally to keep its own.

The journey is as important as the destination

I don't know who was first to coin that expression – but as aphorisms go – it's an apt reminder that there is more to complaint handling than just providing an outcome and closing a case file.

"My appeal has been dismissed without a hearing" is the most recent in a line of complaints from students about subject quality since teaching and learning went online. We are of the view that several recent subject quality complaints raised arguable and valid points with which the University should properly engage. When the grievances were dismissed on the basis that the Acting Provost, relying on the faculty's assertion that the quality of teaching and learning was acceptable, the students sought to exercise their right to make an appeal, which (in our reading of the Academic Board Regulation) should be considered by an impartial student appeal panel providing effective notice of the appeal citing appropriate grounds is submitted within the limitation period.

For some time now, the Advocacy Service has noted with increasing alarm, numbers of appeals being dismissed in a simple written notice without a hearing. In our view, many of these outcome notices evidence a lack of accountability for the reasoning behind the decision, often cite thin procedural grounds to deny a hearing, and sometimes evidence a clear misapprehension of the facts of the case which go to the heart of the decision to dismiss the appeal.

The University's complaints process for students *nominally* allows for an appeal from a complaint outcome which has left the student aggrieved, providing there are *prima facie* arguable grounds for the decision to be reviewed. Notwithstanding that an opportunity to present an appeal to an impartial panel by no means guarantees a successful outcome, it does provide for checks and balances against a concentration of decision making in one person's hands, and for the robust testing of an issue – a rigour one might expect of a research institution where views should be ventilated and examined objectively.

Accordingly, each stage of the complaint process is just as important as the outcome for both the student, and the integrity of the process itself.

However, the University appears to be unable to engage with the broader picture in respect of good complaints handling. There is more at stake than 'winning' and 'losing' in a complaint process. It may seem guileless to suggest that in a thorough and fair complaint handling system everybody wins – but where there are legitimate issues identified, rather than see that as a loss to avoid, the University should welcome the chance for improvement.

Students have made significant investments, materially and emotionally, in their time at this University, and they have a right to have their concerns treated with respect and dignity. Appeals dismissed without a hearing are final. There is no further chance to explore or resolve that dispute within the University. Students can approach the Ombudsman Victoria, but most won't have the energy or resources to do so.

It is not only the fact of summarily denying students access to an impartial appeal panel when they have put forward arguable grounds that is poor form, but the tone of the appeal outcomes is often also terse, impatient, and lacking in compassion. It does not do the University's relationship with its body corporate and politic (or the student's parents who are keenly watching) any favours to address students in this way. Students have advised us that they experience the tenor of some notices as a signal that raising concerns which have material impacts on their interests, and may represent particularly distressing circumstances, is wasting someone's valuable time or creating an inconvenience deserving of a smack down.

The Commonwealth Ombudsman's *Better Practice Complaint Handling Guide* points out the critical role good complaint handling has for an institution's quality assurance practice, and its role in maintaining positive relations with 'stakeholders'. The guide suggests that a good complaint handling process can:

- fix problems before they escalate
- provide better remedies for complainants
- help you understand your customers
- increase customer satisfaction and improve customer interactions
- increase staff satisfaction
- produce data and insights that help you continuously improve
- inform decisions about future services and programs
- enhance the [institution's] reputation and strengthen public trust...

On the contrary, poor complaint handling leads to:

- customer disengagement
- more complaints escalated internally and to [...] oversight agencies
- missed opportunities to improve
- loss of valuable data
- reputational damage
- loss of trust in [the institution].

The Service intends to ask the President of the Academic Board to consider a paper setting out our concerns with both the human and legal aspects of the current process. We hope this will lead to improvements in the way these matters are currently handled. We will report back on this in the next Service Report.

Additionally, we look forward to the reports from new Resolve case management system implemented for student complaint handling. We would hope that in the interests of transparency and accountability the University will make some of the deidentified data publicly available. We would expect an open and robust complaints process will indicate an increase in complaints over the last 18 months, given the pandemic, lock downs, and significant changes in the experience of teaching and learning which have provided significant challenges to the University.

Recommendation:

The University should review good practice guides from the State and Commonwealth Ombudsman and audit its processes to assess where the system needs improvement and greater resourcing. The current practice of dismissing appeals without a hearing needs to be reviewed against better practice guidelines, and we hope the President of the Academic Board will engage with our concerns on the lawfulness of the current appeals process and resolve to bring the process into compliance with the University's Regulations and Administrative Law.

Complaints love company – but to appeal you are alone

Under s 4.5 of the *Student Complaints and Grievances Policy*, students may submit joint grievances where more than one student has been affected. Students do not need to be named as part of the group in order to be subject to the outcomes of the joint complaint and, logically, then are considered parties to the complaint. These sorts of joint cohort wide grievances have been employed to ventilate issues arising in subjects affected by rapid changes to subject delivery during lockdown. In such cases, typically one or two students have taken responsibility for lodging the complaint on behalf of the whole cohort. There is also a history to this type of 'collective' grievance that pre-dates the pandemic.

However, in March 2021, a new section - 4.7A - was added to the *Student Appeals Policy* which provides 'a student may only submit an appeal on their own behalf, not on behalf of a group or any other student'. This makes express that only an *individual named student* in the joint complaint can be an appellant. This means that all students in a joint grievance need to be named in order to preserve an option to appeal. Where students are unnamed, despite being a party to a joint grievance who are consequently affected by the outcome, they do not have the right to appeal, and they will not necessarily be the beneficiary of any outcome of an appeal on the same grievance. Effectively this means

that, despite the availability of cohort wide joint grievances, appeals from those outcomes must be lodged by each and every student in that group individually.

Recommendation:

Notwithstanding that there is presumably a rationale for the requirement that appeals can be made only by individual named appellants, the inconsistency with the grievance procedures which are a condition precedent to an appeal is undesirable and confusing. It also raises our concerns that the burden of hearing each individual party to a joint complaint in an appeal may further fuel the appetite to dismiss appeals without a hearing in order to avoid the time and resources required to hear each case individually. It is also self-evident, that should multiple appeals be heard from the one joint grievance, there is potential for different, even contradictory outcomes.

For these reasons the relevant provisions of the *Student Complaints and Grievances* and the *Student Appeals* policies needs to be reviewed and aligned.

Evidence? That's for us to know and you not to find out

The practice of Zoom recorded exams has continued to raise issues for students, and not surprisingly – exam misconduct matters are primary among them. During the relevant period we have been concerned about the approach taken by the Faculty of Science to these allegations. Specifically, we understand that the approach had been to provide the student misconduct committee with access to the Zoom recording, as part of the evidence relied upon in making the allegation, while the student facing the allegation was not provided access to the recording.

Procedural fairness requires that a person facing an allegation is provided with sufficient information to properly understand the case to be met. That includes all evidence relied upon in making the allegation. This is codified in the University Academic Board Regulation and the supporting *Student Academic Integrity* policy.

The situation was all the more concerning given the high volume of allegations the faculty was pursuing this semester.

The Service escalated our concerns to the Academic Secretary as the policy steward for academic misconduct matters on the basis of de-identified reports from committee members, allegation notices from students, and relevant correspondence between students and staff in the faculty. In these situations, we raised a number of questions:

1. Whether a recording exists in the students' particular case;
2. Whether this recording has been made available to the Committee determining their case; and
3. If or how the student is able to view this evidence.

Critically, our observations of the relevant correspondence suggested that the evidence was only provided if a student requested it. When students did request access to this evidence, it was often so late in the process they had little or no time to view it themselves (let alone seek advice) in order to meaningfully prepare for their hearing.

Recommendation:

Both the rules of procedural fairness, and the Regulations governing student integrity unequivocally require all evidence provided to a misconduct panel must be made available to a student *with the allegation notice*, and always with sufficient time to engage with advice in respect of that evidence. Once again, our recommendation is that the University comply with its own rules and the requirements under administrative law.

Again, this points to the urgent need to train and resource staff undertaking these processes.

We also recommend that there is a university-wide audit of misconduct processes – perhaps facilitated by the reporting functions of the Resolve Case Management system now in use. Where the audit identifies students impacted by breaches of procedural fairness there should be an acknowledgement and measures to address that impact on the affected students.

More fun with Science

At the risk of appearing to prosecute some kind of vendetta against the same faculty – I should note that Science is a very large academic division – so there is a better than average chance there will be a concentration of issues arising there. Additionally, it may be that science students are finding and utilising the Advocacy Service more than students from other faculties – which is a good thing ... right?

Timelines governing the formal investigation of alleged academic misconduct and the timing of Student Academic Misconduct Committee Meetings are specified in the *Student Academic Integrity Policy*. The timelines for responding to an allegation notice and the period of notice of a hearing are set having regard to the rules of procedural fairness. Adequate time ensures the student has an opportunity to seek advice, draft a written response and prepare for the meeting. The policy provides that a student should have 10 business days to respond to an allegation and indicate whether they would like to attend a hearing or not. Upon being advised of the student's intention to appear at a hearing, the faculty must then allow at least five business days' notice of the time and place of the hearing.

That notwithstanding, s 5.43 of the *Student Academic Integrity Policy* provides that a student academic misconduct committee meeting

... may be convened at any time of the calendar year. However, the student and the chair of the committee may agree in writing at any time to extend or shorten the time limits referred to in this policy or to reschedule the date, time and place for any meeting of the committee.

In these proceedings, the faculty attempted to waive the 10 working day turn around for student responses to academic misconduct allegations by setting the date of the hearing only seven business days from the notice, requiring the student to provide a written response advising if they will attend a hearing in only five business days. Significantly, the notice stated the *Faculty will assume that we have your agreement for this shorter timeframe unless you respond in writing that you do not accept this variation.* In other words, presuming the students' consent to shorten the deadline by their silence.

Unsurprisingly, it is the experience of the Advocacy Service that many students only become aware of an allegation notice a few days after its deemed receipt. Consequently, in a shorter timeframe their silence most certainly cannot be regarded as consent. We first became aware of these defective notices when students contacted us in a panic because they had either not seen the allegation or did not understand its contents until a number of days after the notices were sent. Even where those students contacted us the same day as they received the notice, the Service found it very difficult to provide authoritative advice in that timeframe. Accordingly, while the policy allows for timelines to be shortened by mutual written consent, presuming silence equals consent creates a real risk that a student may only become aware of the allegation **after** the putative deadline has elapsed.

There is no reason a faculty cannot seek to negotiate a shorter limitation period where a student consents (or requests it) in writing. However, in the absence of written indication by the student, the statutory 10 business day deadline must remain in order to preserve the right to procedural fairness.

Our concern regarding these university breaches of policy is not mere pedantry. The impacts of faculties' conduct on student wellbeing- particularly student mental health- are significant. It seems particularly antithetical to initiatives in the area of student mental health to have parts of the University flouting policy and good practice and impacting negatively on students' health in the process.

As these processes involve a number of staff across multiple academic divisions, clearly, it's proving very difficult for the University to obtain a coherent and compliant approach to misconduct allegations.

However, as discussed above, if the University cannot adhere to its own policies and regulations, then it cannot reasonably expect students to do so. Minimally, we would expect where we raise these issues with the policy steward, these issues will be escalated to an appropriate authority within the relevant academic division who can enforce policy compliance.

We have long argued that staff involved in these processes should receive regular training (just as the student members on the committees receive training from the Advocacy Service). The sorts of issues we are seeing seem to betray staff's lack of familiarity with relevant regulations and supporting policy and how to implement the processes meeting the requirements of procedural fairness. This results in poor practice in interacting with often vulnerable students. The resourcing of the areas dealing with misconduct in the academic divisions would also appear to be a priority, as many of the poor practices seem motivated by an attempt to avoid the administrative burden of doing things the right way.

Recommendation:

Staff involved in these processes should receive regular training, and the resources required to promote policy compliance should be audited and provided.

CAPS off – it’s a two-tier society for offshore students

In July the Service assisted a student in Pakistan who had been struggling for some time to access counselling support and special consideration.

Unfortunately, while this experience seems an extreme example, it has not been unusual to see such perverse episodes during the pandemic. It certainly illustrates how students stuck offshore are not receiving the same quality of or access to support that they would enjoy were they in country.

Consequently, this case provides an opportunity for us to highlight why some students express the belief that the University makes decisions affecting their interests without compassion or insight for the student’s actual circumstances, something that has served to compound the acute distress many students are currently experiencing.

In this case, the student presented seeking assistance for an unsuccessful special consideration application. In the course of our communication with the student, it emerged that they were suffering acute psychological distress, and would benefit from counselling support which they had found impossible to access in Pakistan for various personal and structural reasons. Accordingly, the Service initially contacted the Associate Director Wellbeing Services because we were aware of the limitations the University’s Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS) had in assisting students currently offshore.

Specifically, the Advocate wanted to avoid a situation where they provided a referral to CAPS only for the student to be advised that CAPS could not assist due to the student being offshore. It was the advocate’s view that the student’s distress was already such that any double handling or raised expectations being subsequently dashed could further exacerbate their extreme feelings of isolation and anxiety. For this reason, the Advocate first sought advice from the Associate Director Wellbeing Services, explaining our concern that the student may be turned away if they were referred to Counselling and seeking to make a warm referral to avoid multiple hand-offs. We were very appreciative of a prompt response advising the student could make an appointment with CAPS through the online form and providing a contact for a suicide prevention helpline local to the student in Pakistan.

Up until that point, it was a brilliant example of seamless collaboration between the Advocacy Service and the University’s Wellbeing Services. Then the wheels fell off.

The student soon came back to us reporting that, upon meeting with the Counsellor, they were advised that CAPS could not in fact assist them because they are in Pakistan. The Counsellor apparently then referred the student to online resources and recommended they approach the Graduate Students Association for future advocacy assistance (rude! ...and futile as the GSA does not have an advocacy service). This latter suggestion unsettled the student further, prompting them to question if we were providing them appropriate assistance, and whether there was a better service they could access. Given the exact same scenario that we had carefully set out to avoid had by then been realised – the student’s confidence in the assistance they could expect was primed to view us as yet another disappointing provider. Undermining students’ confidence in the Advocacy Service really does no one any favours – everyone is worse off.

The student was struggling to meet the strict deadlines for supporting documentation for their special consideration application due to religious holidays and other barriers specific to their domestic context. Having restored the student’s faith in our capacity to assist, we then set about attempting to liaise with SEDS through an established escalation path to facilitate a more timely and nuanced response to the student’s special consideration needs. However, at peak season for special consideration matters, that proved very difficult.

The good news is that, by the end of July, the student’s special consideration extensions were approved, and while they did not ultimately receive any counselling or psychological support from the University, the simple granting of the extensions gave them enormous relief and the student felt a ‘huge burden has been lifted from my heart’.

Recommendation

We accept there are concrete limitations to the wellbeing services the University can provide to offshore students due to restrictions on healthcare professionals providing services to those located outside Australia.

Regardless of its cause, over the course of the pandemic international border closure, a two-tiered student society has evolved and calcified. It is little wonder so many students studying offshore resent the fees they are paying when these students have effectively become second class citizens across a range of University services and activities.

For this reason, the University needs to both acknowledge and respond to the differing circumstances of students who are studying offshore to wind back this differential student experience and ensure equity for all enrolled students, regardless of their location. We look forward to seeing the implementation of the commitment announced by the University in August to *providing further counselling and psychological support enhancements, including more personalised engagement for offshore students, to help support their mental wellbeing.*¹

¹ <https://about.unimelb.edu.au/newsroom/news/2021/august/university-of-melbourne-expands-support-measures-for-students-during-global-pandemic>

Programmes and Initiatives

Submissions to the University

This was a busy period for submissions to policy and other reviews.

The Service contributed to the:

- [UMSU submission on Consultation on Proposed Sexual Misconduct Prevention and Response Policy](#) - 17 August 2021. The submission acknowledges that the draft policy represents a significant improvement, in both tone and content, from previous policies dealing with sexual misconduct. However, we note that the draft policy remains largely aspirational, lacks significant procedural detail and relies on many vague and ill-defined terms. Other concerns raised with the draft include poor accessibility, its problematic interaction and reliance on other unreformed policies, and a conspicuous lack of alternative options for victim/complainants including restorative justice approaches. Finally, UMSU believes that the lack of options provided for support of and advice to victim/complainants fails to provide an approach which would empower victim/complainants and restore their agency and control. We look forward to seeing these matters addressed in a further iteration of the policy.
- [UMSU Feedback Academic Progress Review in Graduate Research Courses Policy](#) - 9 July 2021. The Service endorsed the objectives set out in this proposed policy overall and requested two aspects of the policy be clarified regarding the student's rights in respect of several potential impacts on their interests.
- [UMSU Feedback Responding to Student Traumatic Event Policy](#) - 1 July 2021. Again, while the Service endorsed the objectives set out in this proposed policy, we set out our concerns that the policy did not appear to adhere to a trauma-informed approach, which may have the effect of retraumatising students; and that the proposed policy does not include any policies that meaningfully and practically support affected students.

Annual User and Uni Staff Experience Surveys

The Advocacy Service conducts an annual survey of student users of the service and every two years we conduct a similar survey of key university staff who have direct dealings with the service.

This year the annual service user survey was conducted during the month of September. An invitation to complete the online survey was sent via email to just under 400 students who had indicated they were happy to be contacted for this purpose.

The reports on the findings are attached at **Appendices 1 & 2** to this report.

Advocacy Service Statistics

Comparative data – May - August 2021

This period 693 students were provided a service resulting in 2022 contacts. In the same period last year, the service saw 1014 students resulting in 2767 contacts. This is a substantial decrease (30%) since last year, however during this period in 2020 our casework was up more than 20% due predominantly to issues newly arising due to COVID-19. Last year 40% of casework was related to COVID-19, whereas this period in 2021, only 7% of matters were related to the pandemic's effect on students. Compared with 2019 it is still a 5% increase in presentations.

Anecdotally, staff have observed a significant shift in the nature and character of casework for this period compared to last year. While last year there were high volumes of contacts from students needing advice about how to deal with novel situations – predominantly transactional exchanges with students involving referrals or explanations of processes – this year the matters presenting have tended to involve higher numbers of relatively complex casework, often involving a high number of contacts and longer engagement with the student. This is reflected statistically in the proportion of contacts with students in this period.

Additionally, the Advocacy website received over 19 000 page views this period, which continues to be around twice the number of pre-pandemic years. While unsurprising in the context of remote communications, this nevertheless continues to be a clear indicator of the students' reliance on UMSU generally and the Service specifically, for information and support. It is a 30% increase over the same period in 2019, with the most popular pages featuring information on course academic progress, academic misconduct and special consideration.

Given that the global pandemic is the most significant event to impact on student experience since 2019, this increase web traffic is likely to indicate:

- The ongoing adverse impact of the pandemic on students
- An increase in contested interactions between the University and students.

Distribution by primary issue

The primary issue is generally identified as the university process to which the student's main concern or problem relates. Data is classified in this way because it provides a standardised and more meaningful breakdown which may be useful for tracking policy trends amongst other things.

Previously, the majority of our casework presented via either our contact form or through our drop-in service. However due to the shift to remote service delivery, students have found us through a variety of other sources, many of which are not optimised to collect the usual base data which is routinely collected via our contact form or drop-in service. This includes data on students' faculty, award level (including graduate or undergraduate status) and whether they are a domestic or international student. We have done our best to collect these demographics wherever possible, however the sheer volume and urgency of many contacts has meant that our demographic data is in many cases not as detailed as usual. We have also taken advantage of the reach of our social media channels to provide advice and these contacts may also be lacking in the usual detail. This makes reporting along on graduate/undergraduate and domestic/international lines problematic in this report.

May- August 2021

All Students			Graduate Coursework students			RHD students		
Special Consideration	121	17.74%	Special Consideration	34	17.89%	Student complaint about uni staff	4	20.00%
Course Academic Progress Committee	100	14.66%	Course Academic Progress Committee	28	14.74%	Progress - HDR	4	20.00%
Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	86	12.61%	Assessment Dispute	27	14.21%	Supervision Problems	3	15.00%
Academic Misconduct - Exam	74	10.85%	Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	26	13.68%	Special Consideration	2	10.00%
Assessment Dispute	66	9.68%	COVID-19	16	8.42%	Enrolment problems	1	5.00%
Academic Misconduct - Collusion	55	8.06%	Academic Misconduct - Collusion	10	5.26%	Selection Appeal	1	5.00%
COVID-19	48	7.04%	Vocational Placement Problems	9	4.74%	Research Ethics	1	5.00%
Student complaint about uni staff	15	2.20%	Academic Misconduct - Exam	8	4.21%	Other	1	5.00%
Remission of Fees	14	2.05%	Remission of Fees	5	2.63%	Incorrect Advice	1	5.00%
Other	13	1.91%	Enrolment problems	5	2.63%	Special Consid (ongoing)	1	5.00%
Academic Misconduct - Other	13	1.91%	Other	4	2.11%	Not Specified	1	5.00%
Enrolment problems	12	1.76%	Incorrect Advice	3	1.58%			
Incorrect Advice	9	1.32%	Selection Appeal	3	1.58%			
Vocational Placement Problems	9	1.32%	Student complaint about uni staff	3	1.58%			
Selection Appeal	8	1.17%	Not Specified	2	1.05%			
Supervision Problems	6	0.88%	Graduation	2	1.05%			
Academic Misconduct - Falsified docs	6	0.88%	Course structure/changes	1	0.53%			
Course structure/changes	4	0.59%	Quality Teaching	1	0.53%			
Progress - HDR	4	0.59%	Academic Misconduct - Other	1	0.53%			
General Misconduct	3	0.44%	Supervision Problems	1	0.53%			
Graduation	3	0.44%	Special Consid (ongoing)	1	0.53%			
Special Consid (ongoing)	2	0.29%						
Advance Standing Credit/RPL	2	0.29%						
Quality Teaching	2	0.29%						
Cross-institutional enrolment denied	1	0.15%						
Scholarship Issues	1	0.15%						
Fitness to Practice (FTP)	1	0.15%						
Exchange	1	0.15%						
Student complaint about another student	1	0.15%						
Research Ethics	1	0.15%						
Bullying	1	0.15%						

May- August 2020

All Students			Graduate Coursework students			RHD students		
COVID-19	381	37.76%	COVID-19	122	38.61%	Progress - HDR	5	26.32%
Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	129	12.78%	Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	45	14.24%	COVID-19	5	26.32%
Special Consideration	108	10.70%	Special Consideration	39	12.34%	Supervision Problems	4	21.05%
Assessment Dispute	77	7.63%	Assessment Dispute	22	6.96%	Not Specified	2	10.53%
Academic Misconduct - Collusion	65	6.44%	Academic Misconduct - Collusion	18	5.70%	Remission of Fees	1	5.26%
Academic Misconduct - Exam	47	4.66%	Academic Misconduct - Exam	15	4.75%	Enrolment problems	1	5.26%
Enrolment problems	22	2.18%	Not Specified	8	2.53%	Assessment Dispute	1	5.26%
Not Specified	22	2.18%	Course Academic Progress Committee	7	2.22%			
Student Admin - Remission of Fees	21	2.08%	Enrolment problems	7	2.22%			
Selection Appeal	17	1.68%	Other	5	1.58%			
Academic Misconduct - Other	16	1.59%	Vocational Placement Problems	5	1.58%			
Course Academic Progress Committee	15	1.49%	Academic Misconduct - Other	5	1.58%			
Other	14	1.39%	Remission of Fees	4	1.27%			
Advance Standing Credit/RPL	13	1.29%	General Misconduct	2	0.63%			
Student complaint about uni staff	11	1.09%	Selection Appeal	2	0.63%			
General Misconduct	8	0.79%	Advance Standing Credit/RPL	2	0.63%			
Incorrect Advice	6	0.59%	Academic Misconduct - Falsified docs	2	0.63%			
Supervision Problems	6	0.59%	Student complaint about uni staff	2	0.63%			
Vocational Placement Problems	5	0.50%	Bullying	1	0.32%			
Progress - HDR	5	0.50%	Exchange	1	0.32%			
Course structure/changes	4	0.40%	Supervision Problems	1	0.32%			
Quality Teaching	3	0.30%	Special Consideration - ongoing	1	0.32%			
Scholarship Issues	3	0.30%						
Exchange	3	0.30%						
Bullying	2	0.20%						
Academic Misconduct - Falsified docs	2	0.20%						
Special Consideration - ongoing	2	0.20%						
Discrimination	1	0.10%						
Graduation	1	0.10%						

Distribution by graduate/undergraduate status

May- August 2021

Graduate	237	34.25%	
Undergraduate	455	65.75%	

May- August 2020*

Graduate	381	37.57%	51.70%
Undergraduate	356	35.11%	48.30%
Not specified	277	27.32%	

*This report is missing over a quarter of the data – however the final column shows the adjusted statistics based on information recorded.

Distribution by International/Domestic Status

May- August 2021

Domestic	265	38.29%	
International	427	61.71%	

May- August 2020*

Domestic	394	38.86%	55.26 %
International	319	31.46%	44.74%
Not specified	301	29.68%	

*As above with respect to missing data.

Commentary

The proportion of graduate to undergraduate students was 34.25% to 65.75%, which is a major change from the steady 50:50 split of recent years. For the last two years during the equivalent period, graduate students have been slightly overrepresented, last year we saw 51.70% graduates to 48.3% undergraduates (compared with 52.23% to 47.77% for the same period in 2019). One reason for this may be the overrepresentation of undergraduate students contacting about their concerns that there was no WAM adjustment in the first half year this year, despite being in a range of circumstances which were arguably more difficult than in the second half year 2020, when the WAM amnesty was in force. Undergraduate students tend to be more concerned about impacts on their WAM as their future graduate study prospects are directly contingent on this score.

In a trend in the other direction, the proportion of international students accessing the service during this period with the proportion of international students presenting around double that of domestic students. The same period last year it was 55.26% domestic to 44.74% international students. This would suggest that students studying offshore may be experiencing especially difficult circumstances and reinforces the view that the University's response to the pandemic is creating a two-tiered student experience. The breakdown of major presenting issues below provides further insights.

The primary presenting issue overall this period- representing just under 20% of all matters- were issues related to Special Consideration. Matters specifically arising from the impacts of COVID-19 comprised only 7% of all matters during this period, in contrast to this time last year where they made up around 40% of our casework. This does not mean that students are no longer affected by the pandemic, but rather it reflects the degree to which the University has withdrawn specific programs it had previously provided in response to COVID which made up the bulk of the presentations to Advocacy for advice. This period, COVID specific matters were predominantly focused on concerns about the impact of the pandemic on students' WAM in Summer and first semesters, and in other matters related to students' academic results, including special and technical consideration. These preoccupations evidence that the University's approach to the impacts of the pandemic on students in the first half year 2021 are out of step with student experience. This is especially the case for those students who have been stuck offshore for the entirety of the first half year, and whose circumstances are frequently far more onerous than those in Melbourne, lockdowns notwithstanding.

The next most common issue related to problems with and concerns about course academic progress, then academic misconduct allegations in respect of plagiarism and examinations respectively.

Special Consideration matters involved assistance with advice on late applications, disputes over outcomes which predominantly concerned late applications, and those deemed to have insufficient evidence. The majority of Special Consideration related matters involved students enrolled in the Faculties of Science and Arts.

Almost a third of Course Academic Progress matters concerned advice to students for their first attendance. The majority of those students cited the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic as the primary reason for their unsatisfactory academic progress. The majority of appeal related matters concerned restrictions on enrolment. A significant proportion of these did not progress as the students had not been able to audit the subjects and consequently by the time of the hearings, it was too late for them to enrol and catch up.

The majority of Course Academic Progress arose in the Faculties of Science and Arts, followed by Business and Economics, ABP and MDHS. Unusually, there were more disputes from undergraduate students than graduates this time. Many undergraduate students remain extremely concerned at their competitiveness for graduate programs, even with the current Academic Board WAM Resolution. Consistent with previous periods, domestic students were represented three times more than international students in assessment disputes.

COVID-19 related matters by Reason

WAM concerns	14	29.17%
Special Consideration	9	18.75%
Technical Consideration	8	16.67%
Travel Restrictions	4	8.33%
LOA/Student Visa	4	8.33%
Return to Campus	2	4.17%
Online teaching quality	2	4.17%
Fee discounting	2	4.17%
Semester 2 impacts	1	2.08%
Online examination issues	1	2.08%
Enrolment Problem	1	2.08%
	48	

Distribution of COVID matters by graduate/undergraduate status

May- August 2020

Graduate	15	31.25%
Undergraduate	33	68.75%

Distribution COVID matters by International/Domestic Status

May- August 2020

Domestic	23	47.92%
International	25	52.08%

Special Consideration – Contacts by Stage of Process

STAGE	REASON	Total
Application	Late Application	38
		38
Internal Review	Late Application	21
	Deemed Insufficient Grounds	12
	Unhappy with outcome provided	6
		39
Formal Grievance	Deemed Insufficient Grounds	21
	Late Application	19
		40
Appeal	Unhappy with outcome provided	1
	Deemed Insufficient Grounds	1
		2
Total Special Consideration Matters		121

Special Consideration – by Faculty

Faculty of Science	33	27.27%
Faculty of Arts	26	21.49%
Faculty of Business and Economics	25	20.66%
Melbourne School of Engineering	11	9.09%
Melbourne School of Design (AB&P)	10	8.26%
Faculty of MDHS	7	5.79%
VCA & Music	3	2.48%
Melbourne Graduate School of Education	3	2.48%
Faculty of Veterinary and Agricultural Sciences	3	2.48%
Melbourne Law School	1	0.83%
Melbourne Business School (MBS)	1	0.83%

Special Consideration – by Graduate/Undergraduate

Undergraduate	84	69.42%
Graduate	37	30.58%

Special Consideration – by International/Domestic

Domestic	43	35.54%
International	78	64.46%

Course Academic Progress – Contacts by Stage of Process

STAGE	REASON	Total
First Attendance	COVID-19 impacts	12
	Mental health	8
	Online study	4
	Poor study skills	2
	Family responsibilities	1
		27
Second Attendance	Mental health	18
	COVID-19 impacts	6
	Online study	5
		29
Academic Board Appeal	Restrictions on enrolment	19
	Termination of enrolment	15
	Suspension of enrolment	8
		42
Ombudsman Vic	Termination of enrolment	2
Total CAPC Related Matters		100

Course Academic Progress – by Faculty

Faculty of Science	36	36.00%
Faculty of Business and Economics	23	23.00%
Faculty of Arts	14	14.00%
Melbourne School of Engineering	9	9.00%
Faculty of MDHS	7	7.00%
Melbourne Graduate School of Education	3	3.00%
VCA & Music	2	2.00%
Melbourne School of Design (AB&P)	2	2.00%
Faculty of Veterinary and Agricultural Sciences	2	2.00%
Melbourne Law School	1	1.00%
Melbourne Business School (MBS)	1	1.00%

Course Academic Progress – by Graduate/Undergraduate

Graduate	31	40.26%
Undergraduate	46	59.74%

Course Academic Progress – by International/Domestic

Domestic	29	29.00%
International	71	71.00%

Plagiarism – Contacts by Stage of process

STAGE	REASON	Total
Formal/Committee Hearing	Deliberate	40
	Inadvertent	30
		70
Informal/Educative	Inadvertent	8
Academic Board Appeal	Excessive Penalty	8
Total Plagiarism Related Matters		86

Plagiarism – by Faculty

Faculty of Science	36	41.86%
Faculty of Arts	23	26.74%
Melbourne School of Design (AB&P)	8	9.30%
Faculty of Business and Economics	6	6.98%
Melbourne School of Engineering	4	4.65%
Faculty of Veterinary and Agricultural Sciences	3	3.49%
VCA & Music	2	2.33%
Melbourne Law School	2	2.33%
Melbourne Graduate School of Education	1	1.16%
Faculty of MDHS	1	1.16%

Plagiarism – by Graduate/Undergraduate

Graduate	60	69.77%
Undergraduate	26	30.23%

Plagiarism – by International/Domestic

Domestic	23	26.74%
International	63	73.26%

The next Advocacy Service report will cover the quarter September to December 2021 and will be available in early 2022.

Phoebe Churches

Manager, Advocacy & Legal

October 2021

UMSU Advocacy Service User Survey 2021

Background

The UMSU Advocacy Service has surveyed its service users annually since 2009. The survey allows respondents to grade our services on a 5-point scale, and also provide qualitative feedback on their experience. Our service benchmarks derived from our previous funding contract with the University, have historically been set at a minimum aggregate score of 3.5, and not less than 3 for any specific question. The Service has consistently achieved scores well beyond these benchmarks for over a decade.

The survey is distributed as an online questionnaire to service users who have had contact with the service within the previous 12 months. The invitations are sent only to students who have indicated as an opt-in on their initial contact form that they are happy to be contacted for this purpose. To encourage responses, the Service offered the chance to win one of four \$50 Officeworks vouchers for completing the survey.

Since last year, given the extraordinary circumstances we have all shared, we have included some specific questions about COVID-19 impacts which we hope will assist us with post-pandemic service planning under “COVID normal”, whenever that may be.

Executive Summary

The Survey was open for four weeks between 1st and 30th September 2021. There were 69 responses received of 397 invitations – a 17% return rate.

The service has once again exceeded the established benchmarks. The overall aggregate score was 4.36 (4.40 last year) and the lowest score for a specific question was 4.12 (last year 4.14).

Respondents’ contact with staff was well distributed across the service: 19% of respondents reported contact with Paul Lewis-Hornsby, 17% with Donna Markwell, 15% with Phoebe Churches, 12% with Nadia Streistermanis, 11% with Alanna Smith, and 4% with Michelle Almiron indicating a representative spread of feedback on the experience of each member of staff. It is important to note that the proportion of contacts with a given staff member generally has nothing to do with the number of students respective staff assist, and the proportions vary yearly in a way that indicates it says more about the respondents than the staff. Around a quarter of all respondents indicated that they could not recall who had assisted them, which is less than the 30% of respondents last year and significantly fewer than previous years where it had consistently been closer to 50% of respondents who could not recall who had assisted them. This shift is likely to be due to the amount of assistance provided via email over the lockdown period.

While last year the presenting issues for respondents included a number of matters peculiar to a period of the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, this years’ issues returned to a more common spread. Around a fifth of the matters about which respondents approached the service comprised academic misconduct, and special or technical consideration, assessment disputes and academic progress matters contributed to 13% each of the presenting issues with COVID-19 specific matters making up less than 10% of issues (compared with about half of all issues last year).

Given the continued impact of the pandemic on students and the service delivery offered for the period surveyed, the survey asked whether the impact of COVID-19 on their studies had been the primary reason for respondents' contact with the service. 70% of respondents indicated they would have contacted the service regardless of COVID (compared to around 50% last year), and 70% said they would have used the same contact method with the Service regardless of the COVID related changes to service delivery.

With the Service operating remotely for almost the entirety of the surveyed period, it was not surprising that more than three-quarters of the respondents had had email contact with the Service. Around 11% of respondents had zoom appointments and just under 8% used telephone appointments. The drop-in service did not run during the period.

Overall satisfaction with the service was at 90% in this survey which is on par with last year's average of 91% and also a significant improvement on the 2019 average of 83%. Every year there are a small number of very unhappy respondents, and we have found that number to remain stable since the survey was introduced in 2009. This gives credibility to the notion that there will always be service users who are disappointed with the service, but they are consistently represented in raw numbers, regardless of the return rate of responses.

The lowest aggregate score of 4.12 was in response to the question the '*advocate made persuasive arguments in meetings or hearings on my behalf*'. The overall agreement rate for this question was 80%. The qualitative information correlated with these responses indicated that those students did not receive the outcomes they had sought. In the past we have noted that responses to this question are problematic to interpret in the absence of qualitative feedback detailing what aspect of the advocates representations were disappointing. Additionally, responses to this question are likely due to misapprehensions about the Service's capacity to coercively influence university decisions.

The majority of respondents found their way to the Service via the UMSU website, which given the reliance on digital communications for the majority of the surveyed period, is not surprising.

With respect to the demographics of the respondents, the majority – almost 60% - were undergraduate students (a reversal on the last few years where graduate students were overrepresented), 80% studied on the Parkville campus, with 17% from the Southbank campus (also a significant overrepresentation in relation to the proportion of enrolled students), and there were roughly twice as many respondents who were domestic compared with international students.

Commentary

Lowest Scores

After the question *'the advocate made persuasive arguments in meetings or hearings on my behalf'* discussed above, the next lowest aggregate score was in response to *'I found information on the Advocacy Service website useful'*. Interestingly, year in and year out, these two questions compete for the lowest aggregate score. UMSU is expecting its new website to come online in 2022, and we hope that the chance for a comprehensive overhaul of the information architecture will finally move the website out of this low scoring spot – or at least improve satisfaction levels.

There were three respondents who disagreed that their advocate made persuasive arguments on their behalf. The qualitative feedback for these respondents indicated that the poor experience related particularly to assessment disputes. This is unsurprising, as there are only very narrow grounds upon which students can pursue a review of their grade.

In another case a student who was very dissatisfied with this aspect of the Service stated it was because their problem was not resolved in the way they wanted. Again, this was in relation to a review of their grade in a subject. It appears that, although the advocate had cautioned the student that a possible outcome could be a lower grade, when this happened, they still felt the service was responsible. In these cases, we may need to accept it is an occupational hazard to be shot as the messenger.

Ultimately, when assessing respondents' views on the quality of the representations we have made on their behalf, we cannot always know to what extent their experience is reflective of an advocate's efforts at persuasiveness, and to what degree their response was influenced by a failure to secure the desired outcome. Given we have no more coercive powers over university decisions than a lawyer does a Court's findings, this is a largely misconceived view. We generally take poor scores on this question as a sign that we need to be clearer with service users about our powers, and to manage expectations accordingly.

Several of the less satisfied respondents had contacted us for assistance with subject quality complaints with a view to obtaining fee discounts on their tuition fees. The Service approached this issue in two ways. In so far as the issue was a systemic and collective concern, it was passed to the UMSU's student representation and campaign arms. On an individual advocacy footing, the Service assisted a number of students to lodge formal grievances establishing a nexus between the educational experience delivered, and that which was promised. At least one respondent assisted in this way thought we could have explained ourselves in plainer, more accessible language.

Generally, regardless of the individual student's reasons for dissatisfaction, it is an important reminder that we must be clear about our powers, fully explain our empowerment-based service model, and generally ensure our service users understand our role and assistance from start of our contact until the end.

Other negative feedback

It is always troubling to read that service users had an adverse experience of the Service. However, the Service reviews these responses carefully and they form an important topic of discussion at our annual end of year planning and review day. In cases where specific staff have been identified in the negative survey responses, those staff will consider what might have happened, and we all look together as a team at ways we can handle such situations better in future. It can be easy to dismiss negative feedback as simply a product of a service user who did not get what they wanted. In reality however, where a respondent has taken the time to articulate why they are unhappy with the service they received it will almost always disclose something we could have done better. The

qualitative responses are included in full at the end of this report, however some of the themes warrant specific discussion in this commentary.

The broad themes of dissatisfaction are addressed below.

Not getting the desired outcome

- My situation remains unchanged. I think if service good it will give me good outcome.
- No effective conclusion - I wanted my work regraded - but Phoebe was only prepared to assist me within the policy - which is too narrow. Then I ended up with a lower mark.
- The outcome did not change

We do ask students to try to focus feedback on the service they received rather than the outcome:

Some of you might have been really happy with the outcome of your issue, others may not have got what you were looking for from the University. While we can't control those outcomes, we want to make the experience easier, and we want to know how we did supporting you with the process, the clarity of our advice, and advocacy with the University along the way.

However, it's unsurprising some respondents find it difficult to uncouple the quality of assistance from the result. Ensuring we sensitively manage expectations is really all we can take from this feedback.

Lack of responsiveness or sensitivity to the respondents' issues

- The support the advocate could offer me was abysmal. I already said I didn't feel comfortable going to the Head of Department on my own, but she still encouraged me to do that. I don't think it's her fault, it's the advocacy system's fault for not providing adequate support and representation. I asked for an academic or someone in the POC department to come with me and my advocate couldn't provide me with that. The advocacy service should have people they can call on to provide further support on specific issues like racism in a university subject.
- Only general info. Wouldn't be involved into details
- Legal jargon and terminology and certain procedures were not explained to us or mentioned in ways that held an expectation that we should already have known the information.

This sort of feedback is always painful to read. We clearly got things wrong in our approach, at least to some extent. In the first comment, there is an element of unmanaged expectations, however, it's not unreasonable for respondents to let us know that they think the Service should do more, or different things. However, where there are expectations that the advocate has a say in who can attend meetings, what standing a support person has to make representations etc – clearly, we can only try harder to make clear the statutory limits of our assistance.

Other feedback reminds us that we are here to provide clear and accessible advice, and sometimes we may pitch our information in a way that assumes greater familiarity with dispute resolution constructs. It reminds us to check in, as students will not always let us know they aren't following.

Not being available when the respondent needed us

- They said they were too busy with the high demand to help me further and did not offer to attend my CAPC meeting, although they did explain I could take another support person with me.
- I had a two week deadline from my faculty. I applied to UMSU immediately, and was allocated an advocate quickly, but by the time they made contact they were going on planned leave the following day, so could only offer one phone call, and my deadline was already about half over. The advice they gave was helpful enough to get me started/know how to proceed with my faculty, but I would have appreciated more support or at least an advocate that would be available to see me through the whole process. I could have seen someone else but I think I should be able to stick with just one advocate
- It would have been better to keep the advocate on case as it proceeded further
- Because you said you were too busy with the high volume of requests, I didn't want to request someone else attend the CAPC. You should have plenty of staffs to be able to come to all the meetings the service is not big enough

This feedback reminds us that there is a delicate balance between asking students to be patient while we are in a busy period and need to triage enquiries, and potentially being seen to fob people off by saying “we’re too busy”. During very busy periods the Service uses automated messages letting students know we have received their enquiry and that we will respond within two business days. We then triage for urgent deadlines or highly distressed students, yet still responding to the less urgent matters within the advertised turnaround time.

In some cases, our assessment of priority - which is done with respect to specified procedural limitation periods, or a clearly expressed level of distress - may not match the student’s own assessment of the issue’s urgency. In other cases, respondents have expressed disappointment that they may be unable to have the same advocate if they wanted a more immediate response. This is difficult with a staff of five (who are entitled to take leave). Accordingly, we cannot reasonably guarantee 100% continuity of advocates.

Not being on the students’ side or not taking up complaints on students’ behalf

- They were helpful but not too much. I think they should just go to uni for us.
- I was hoping the advocate would be helping argue my case at the hearing, however, I was instructed that the advocate was not allowed to speak instead of me at the hearing although present.

The limitations of the advocate’s role and the varying degree of their standing in different formal processes can be hard for students to understand or accept. It may seem like reluctance to go in on a student’s behalf, whereas it is simply that we have no recognised standing in a process to do so. Some students equate our capacity to represent them with that of a lawyer engaged to act. This is not the case with internal university processes by and large, which are predicated on students explaining their circumstances in their own terms and limiting the advocate’s role to supporting and advising the student in that process.

That notwithstanding, in many cases advocates can and do make direct representations to the University on behalf of students, especially where the issue may impact a number of people or entire cohorts. Consequently, it may be that we need to be clearer when there are limitations on our capacity to act, and where we can advocate directly on the student’s behalf.

Positive responses

The question with the highest degree of positive agreement was the *'advocate followed through with what s/he said they would do to assist'*. The next highest positive score was for the *'advocate clearly described university processes relating to my issue'* (notwithstanding some negative feedback about the use of 'legal jargon').

In fact, it is notable that in many cases the positive responses suggest at least some students had the opposite experience to the respondents who were very dissatisfied. We hope this indicates that the less satisfactory experience is not consistently the standard.

In their positive feedback some respondents also noted that they found the Service helpful, even when they did not receive the outcome they had sought.

Qualitatively, positive comments highlighted the clarity and confidence regarding University policy and procedure respondents acquired through contact with the Service, as well as the advocates' expertise provided in drafting formal submissions and complaints. Others noted the thoroughness of the Service's advice, and appreciated the detailed assistance provided, sometimes over protracted periods.

Ultimately, we are mindful that there is always room for improvement, and we must deal patiently and sensitively with people who may be vulnerable and very stressed by their situation. We appreciate the opportunity to better understand our service users' needs and preferences.

FINDINGS

- OUR STAFF

1. Which staff of the Advocacy service have you dealt with?*

Can't remember	19	21%
Paul Lewis-Hornsby	17	19%
Donna Markwell	15	17%
Phoebe Churches	13	15%
Nadia Streistermanis	11	12%
Alanna Smith	10	11%
Michelle Almiron	4	4%

*Respondents could choose more than one staff member.

2. Please write briefly the issue for which you sought assistance:

Academic Misconduct	19	21%
Special Consideration/Technical Consideration	18	20%
"Show Cause" / Course Academic Progress (CAPC) / RHD Progress	12	13%
Assessment Dispute	12	13%
WAM concerns	6	7%
COVID-19 impacts on course progression	5	6%
Incorrect Advice	4	4%
General Misconduct	3	3%
Selection Appeal	3	3%
COVID-19 impacts - not otherwise specified here	2	2%
Supervision Problems	2	2%
Discrimination, Equity and Access issues	1	1%
Residency program at UVet, supervisors made redundant and significant changes to running of hospital that resulted in students not being able to complete program.	1	1%
Financial Help	1	1%
Formal grievances, appeal hearing	1	1%

*Respondents could choose more than one option.

3. Was the impact of COVID-19 on your studies the primary reason for your contact with the service?

Yes	20	28.99%
No	49	71.01%

4. What was your main method of consultation with the advocate?

E-mail/Webform	68	75.56%
Telephone Appointments	7	7.78%
Zoom Appointments	10	11.11%
In a hearing or appeal	4	4.44%

*Respondents could choose more than one option.

5. Would you have used the same method of contact with the service regardless of COVID restrictions?

Yes	48	69.57%
No	21	30.43%

5.a. If no, what form of contact would you prefer outside of lockdowns?

Drop-in service on campus	17	37.78%
Face to face appointments on campus	28	62.22%

- THE ADVOCACY SERVICE

6. Based on your experience dealing with our staff, please tell us your agreement with the statements below:

Answer Options	Strongly disagree		Neutral		Strongly agree	N/A	Aggregate	Agreement % 2021 / 20 / 19		
Once I made contact with an Advocate, they assisted me in a fast and efficient manner	0	2	2	22	43	0	4.53	94	93	89
The advocate clearly described university processes relating to my issue.	0	1	2	23	42	1	4.56	96	92	85
The advocate took my wishes into account. and guided me on the best strategy to achieve my desired outcome.	1	3	2	27	36	0	4.36	91	89	89
The advocate followed through with what s/he said they would do to assist.	0	2	0	24	35	8	4.51	97	92	94
I was kept informed of any action the advocate took in relation to my circumstance.	0	3	3	14	28	21	4.40	88	96	86
The advocate made or helped make persuasive written submissions in relation to my circumstances.	3	0	3	13	33	17	4.46	88	95	87
The advocate made persuasive arguments in meetings or hearings on my behalf.	2	1	2	7	13	44	4.12	80	86	64
Outcome of my case was clearly explained by the advocate.	1	2	2	17	20	27	4.26	88	94	78
The advocate made appropriate referrals to other service providers.	1	0	5	16	19	28	4.27	85	89	73
I am satisfied overall with the assistance given by the advocate.	1	1	8	24	35	0	4.32	86	87	82

7. How did you first hear about the Advocacy service?		
UMSU Website	39	35.45%
Referral from someone who has used the service	15	13.64%
Referral from Stop 1	14	12.73%
Referral from Academic staff	10	9.09%
A University Notice or letter	10	9.09%
UMSU social media	9	8.18%
UMSU Brochure	5	4.55%
Referral from another UMSU department	3	2.73%
Every Uni has advocacy	2	1.82%
Counselling service	1	0.91%
Google	1	0.91%
The GSA	1	0.91%

*Respondents could choose more than one.

8. Were you aware of the service prior to the COVID-19 pandemic?		
Yes	36	52.94%
No	32	47.06%

9. Based on your experience dealing with our advocate(s), please tell us your agreement with the statements below:											
Answer Options	Strongly disagree		Neither		Strongly agree		N/A	Aggregate	Agreement %		
									2021	20	19
The Advocacy Service staff were helpful when I made my initial enquiry.	0	0	4	25	39	0	4.51	94	93	90	
I found information on the Advocacy Service website useful.	1	1	5	31	22	8	4.20	88	82	88	

A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOURSELF

10. Please indicate the type of degree you were undertaking when the above issue occurred:

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Undergraduate	59.42%	41
Graduate coursework	28.99%	20
Graduate research/PHD	11.59%	8

2. Which campus were you mostly studying in when the above issue occurred?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Parkville	79.71%	55
Southbank	17.39%	12
Werribee	1.45%	1
Burnley	1.45%	1

3. Were you enrolled as an international student when the above issue occurred?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	33.33%	23
No	66.67%	46

Appendix A

Please tell us the reason why you are satisfied/not satisfied with the assistance you received:

- The service was responsive but was not able to do much in my particular circumstances.
- The support the advocate could offer me was abysmal. I already said I didn't feel comfortable going to the Head of Department on my own, but she still encouraged me to do that. I don't think it's her fault, it's the advocacy system's fault for not providing adequate support and representation. I asked for an academic or someone in the POC department to help me out and my advocate couldn't provide me with that. The advocacy service should have people they can call on to provide further support on specific issues like racism in a university subject.
- Only general info. Wouldn't be involved into details
- The result is acceptable
- Very generous. Helped me all the way
- My situation remains unchanged. I think if service good it will give me good outcome
- I got the help I was looking for and the outcome I wanted
- No effective conclusion - I wanted my work regraded - but Phoebe was only prepared to assist me within the policy - which is too narrow. Then I ended up with a lower mark.
- I felt really lost and confused but you guys really explained everything to me and made me feel so much better. So thank you so much for that
- It was good that I had an avenue I could go to to help me with my special consideration appeal. I was satisfied with the advice UMSU Advocacy gave me as it helped me ease my anxiety. However, the response time took a little while and whilst waiting for their response, I felt really anxious as I wasn't sure how to go through the process on my own without UMSU Advocacy's help
- I was confident that the advocate was well-informed, understood my situation and gave sound advice.
- I really appreciate the support provided by student advocacy, all responses were prompt and really helpful. The special consideration process can be really tricky, and I felt a lot more confident navigating it with someone with experience in the area!
- They said they were too busy with the high demand to help me further and did not offer to attend my CAPC meeting, although they did explain I could take another support person with me.
- They gave me options on what could be done but they were careful to not promise me anything either. They redirected me to the university services that would most likely help with my cause and offered their assistance to review my written submission.
- Helpful but haven't got back to my most recent email yet
- They were excellent in their job
- Fast, efficient, extremely helpful.
- Both Alanna and Paul were so very clear in their explanations, guiding me to achieving the best possible outcome for my case. I felt well supported and as though they genuinely cared for easing my concerns. I would 100% recommend the Advocacy unit to any student struggling with aforementioned issues.
- Nadia assisted me in solving the issue that I would have otherwise failed the 3rd year subject, due to special consideration technical
- They were prompt and informative
- Speedy reply and detailed explanation
- Because they are willing to talk
- I raised an issue and had a reasonably quick response about the sections of the academic handbook that related to my question and recommendation for how to approach.
- friendly and helpful
- The University was dismissive of the seriousness and damaging impacts of lack of access service provisions and lack of duty of care by staff regarding our case.
- I got the help I needed
- It helped me achieve my outcome, however the whole process was very lengthy and a little stressful (but not necessarily advocacy's fault)
- Up to this point I was at a loss as to where to go from where I was/what to do. I'd reached my capacity. Paul genuinely listened to my query and assisted with guidance and navigation around what to do next.
- They helped me a lot when I was feeling so stressed out about the issue I had.
- Their response was clear and compassionate - they provided me with all the information and support necessary and answered follow-up questions. All responses came through very quickly. I left the interaction feeling I could return for assistance at any stage and be welcomed and supported.
- Very prompt response entailing all the facts that I needed to know, and processes I could follow
- Phoebe kindly guided me through the process and assisted me writing a persuasive arguments. She also responded very quickly to my emails.
- I was really appreciate on the assistance from advocacy
- I had a two week deadline from my faculty. I applied to UMSU immediately, and was allocated an advocate quickly, but by the time they made contact they were going on planned leave the following day, so could only offer one

- phone call, and my deadline was already about half over. The advice they gave was helpful enough to get me started/know how to proceed with my faculty, but I would have appreciated more support or at least an advocate that would be available to see me through the whole process. I could have seen someone else but I think I should be able to stick with just one advocate
- It was helpful
 - He gave me more than enough support, though the result didn't meet my expectation.
 - It would have been better to keep the advocate on case as it proceeded further
 - Provide with the correct help and support.
 - I was really happy with the assistance I received and found it really helpful but given the number of students also in my position I was hoping that UMSU might take some action themselves and rally the law school to make and communicate a decision
 - The advocate is knowledgeable, patient and helpful
 - not helpful
 - I really appreciate the genuine support and assistance that my advocate provided in constructing my appeal to the academic board. (Unfortunately my case was dismissed without a hearing so I will have to continue my appeal through external means, but I am also grateful that my advocate took the time to follow up to help me understand this unexpected and disappointing outcome, and to know my options moving forward)
 - They were helpful but not too much. I think they should just go to uni for us.
 - Quick, effective advice
 - Paul had done an exceptional job. It is hard to exaggerate how grateful I was when Paul successfully advocated on my behalf for the legitimacy of the unpleasant situation in which had been. It is a horrible feeling to face an Institution that doesn't recognise your situation as legitimate without the know-how (especially in the middle of an exam period). After my experience with ya'll I gained a newfound appreciation for advocacy. Your service has been priceless. Thank you.
 - Michelle was very instrumental in getting the problem resolved, and very compassionate and understanding of the situation.
 - The outcome did not change
 - Amazing customer service by Alannah
 - Paul was very helpful throughout the process.
 - Phoebe was very knowledgeable, empathetic and supportive. She gave me good and clear advice and followed through.
 - were able to help me through the process, which was something I was very unfamiliar with.
 - Feedbacks from the advocacy team works for me and let me make appropriate decisions based on the response.
 - They explained everything perfectly when the University did not have adequate information online or would not answer my queries directly. In the end, I got a desirable outcome despite all the hoop jumping but Advocacy stuck with me the whole way through, even though the issue took over a month to resolve due to the University's lack of assistance.
 - Legal jargon and terminology and certain procedures were not explained to us or mentioned in ways that held an expectation that we should already have known the information.
 - My advocate was very knowledgeable of the issue and gave great advice based on this issue
 - I think I get the information I want and the processing time is faster than I expected
 - "There was little that UMSU could do in the circumstance.
 - The faculty didn't have the capacity to provide what they needed to in the time before exams started..."
 - Very helpful, caring and efficient.
 - Thank you. Mine was just a faculty level issue but the guidance I received was helpful and enabling.
 - Very helpful and informative.
 - Paul was fantastic in the advice and support he provided throughout my case. He clearly explained the University's policies and procedures, outlined a comprehensive and cogent line of argument for us to pursue, and was consistently compassionate, thoughtful, and professional. I am therefore very satisfied overall with the assistance he provided and with my experience with the Advocacy Service as a whole.
 - efficient communication - quick response and explained the academic appeal process well
 - I was referred to the right place
 - I was hoping the advocate would be helping argue my case at the hearing, however, I was instructed that the advocate was not allowed to speak at the hearing although presented.
 - As I am not sure how many students would have the courage to go down the path I had to, due to extreme unexpected circumstances. I feel that there are quite bit of gaps between university policy and service provided to students especially in terms of accommodating disability in general.
 - The University's policies are hurtful to many students. It means that the advocate service may have more to work with the policy maker and service provider to implement and to amend the service, as well to policy, for those people who had to be struggling due to unfortunate circumstances, do not have to suffer again the extra stress and time loss.

- I am also not too sure if any students could afford to go through such traumatic process without their help
- I felt a lot more reassured after receiving their response
- First of all during the whole process I felt like I wasn't heard by my faculty and I felt frustrated and also thought that the problem was me and not the situation or the faculty. When I first asked for help, I felt like each staff that I communicated regarding both of my situations listened to me and understood the situation and the issues I faced. I felt heard and felt like i was talking to someone who understood me rather than the faculty and the special considerations whom just was not listening properly. All the advocates were friendly and explained the process and what needed to be done carefully. I received positive outcome for both of the situations and I was very happy to have the advocates help me along the way as otherwise I would have given up at a much earlier stage.
- Was extremely helpful
- Phoebe is really one of the most skilled and intelligent people I have ever met. I was always in safe hands and never doubted I would be successful in my dispute.

If you have any general comments about or suggestions for the advocate, please write them here:

- Students may not their rights in a particular case. As such, more customised services like this are needed.
- What good is your service if I get a worse outcome? She did tell me it was possible but I didn't seriously expect that. Why doesn't the advocate tell the uni what to do - what's the point otherwise
- They were clear and good
- Because you said you were too busy with the high volume of requests, I didn't want to request someone else attend the CAPC. You should have plenty of staffs to be able to come to all the meetings the service is not big enough
- Keep doing what you're doing guys. You're absolute angels :)
- no
- The advocate was very helpful. The University access and equity system is broken.
- Make it easier to find UMSU advocacy?
- Very grateful - thank you.
- Alanna - thank you for your support. You helped guide me through a situation where I was feeling very uncomfortable and nervous. Thank you for the work you do!
- He was really helpful and gave me good advice for addressing my concerns which I used.
- I just want to sincerely thank Paul and the rest of the advocacy staff for all the work that you do. I do hope the issues with the Academic Board are resolved soon, for everyone's sake!
- How can a recipient of your services express their gratitude and thanks? - Donation?
- Thankyou Michelle, you were awesome! :)
- Thanks you for everything you do for students.
- Donna and Paul were both so respectful and wonderful. Paul helped towards the end of the whole debacle and really had my best interests and possible outcomes in mind. He encouraged me to keep fighting for a result I deserved over giving up when I reached a boiling point. Thank you all for your help!
- All good - please continue helping us!
- Paul is very professional in helping me, and in understanding my situation.
- I think each of the advocates are doing everything right from understanding the student's situation to talking about the steps to take. The help I received from the advocates have become one of the highlights of my uni life. So thank you so much for everything, I really appreciate all of you for listening and providing me with all the help.
- Please never leave unimelb!!

If you have any general comments or suggestions for the Advocacy Service, please write them below.

- Maybe provide some examples of how to ask for remark od assignment on the website?
- If advocacy can't make the uni do the right thing for grading - what is the point of it
- I think during Covid and for as long as international students are not allowed back into Australia, the Advocacy Service should have a Zoom drop-in where students can connect with someone quicker just to ease their anxiety whilst waiting for a response. The Zoom drop-in could provide general advice and explain how the Advocacy process work. Apart from email, I could not find any other ways to contact the Advocacy Service and I think there should be other avenues to get in contact even during lockdown
- Keep doing what you're doing :)
- None
- no

- I wasn't aware that this service could help me with my issue and approached the wrong service initially (counselling service - who then referred me to advocacy).
- Thank you for what you do - it can be difficult to navigate uni and all its services, particularly when an issue arises and knowing the proper steps to take is unclear - thank you for the support you provide to students in such circumstances
- Every student that starts university should be made aware of the Advocacy Service. I hope no student ever finds themselves in the need of their services, but the suffering of stress between the times of hitting a brick wall that the institution places in front of you and finding the Advocacy group can be mitigated with knowledge about them and what they do.
- Good - please keep this work up
- No suggestions. An excellent service.
- the service is really the only great thing about melbourne uni

UMSU Advocacy Service Staff Interaction Evaluation 2021

Background

This survey is conducted by the Service every two years by way of an online invitation based instrument. Key stakeholders in the University Community are identified by their position and their contact or likely contact with the Advocacy Service. The survey provides a snapshot of the way the Service at large and its staff individually, are perceived by staff at the University.

The last two years have presented particular challenges for the Service's relationships with the University. Remote working arrangements, staff with whom we have built relationships with leaving, many new staff who have never had direct contact with us in the churn of the Pandemic Reset Program's major change processes and the pressures of the 'Corona-coaster' on everyone's workload has presented many difficulties.

Results may disclose service or skill gaps or areas which require further relationship building. In many cases the results are evidence that the collegial, procedure-centric focus adopted by the Advocacy Service in recent years is operating effectively within the University community.

Executive Summary

The Survey was open for one month between 1st and 30th September. There were 10 responses of 45 invitations – a 22% response rate, which is a lower response rate than in previous years, but a reasonable sample according to research benchmarking, which indicates an average return rate for external email based surveys of this type is between 10-15%.²

There was a relatively even spread of contact with staff given the small sample size. A fifth of respondents had primary contact with Alanna Smith, 16% of respondents had contact with Phoebe Churches, and 16% couldn't recall who they had dealt with. One respondent identified a staff member who is responsible for finding student panel members for misconduct committees, however they do not form part of the Advocacy Service.

The majority of respondents had had contact with the staff members in the context of a faculty misconduct hearing and student appeals.

The responses to this survey were overwhelmingly positive.

88% of respondents agreed that the advocate displayed a good grasp of regulations, policies and procedures in their arguments on behalf of a student. Recommendations made by the advocate were regarded as accurate by 87% of the respondents to whom it applied, and 86% of respondents agreed that e-mails and phone messages were promptly returned by the advocate they had dealings with – with one respondent clearly disappointed in this area. The qualitative feedback for this respondent indicated that they were referring to contacts to arrange a student member of their faculty misconduct panel which is not a function of the Advocacy Service. We have passed this feedback onto the UMSU staff member responsible, and changes have been put in place to ensure responses are always prompt and effective.

In answer to the question 'overall, I am assured by the Advocacy Service's ability to provide effective advocacy to students', there was 88% agreement.

A few respondents provided comments in relation to their experience, and these are included in full below.

² Data Analysis Australia.

FINDINGS - OUR STAFF

1. Which staff of the Advocacy service have you dealt with?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Alanna Smith	20.00%	5
Phoebe Churches	16.00%	4
Don't remember	16.00%	4
Michelle Almiron	12.00%	3
Paul Lewis-Hornsby	12.00%	3
Donna Markwell	8.00%	2
Nadia Streistermanis	8.00%	2
Maria Tandoc	4.00%	1
Other (a member of UMSU staff who does not work in Advocacy Service)	4.00%	1

*Respondents could select more than one staff member.

2. In which circumstance(s) have you worked with our staff?

Answer Options*	Response Percent	Response Count
In the context of a Faculty based misconduct committee hearing	19.05%	4
In the context of an appeal	14.29%	3
Other (please specify)	14.29%	3
Indirectly in a case (e.g. advocate communicated with me in relation to a case but did not accompany the student at the hearing)	9.52%	2
I supplied administrative information about a case to the advocate	9.52%	2
I referred a case to the advocate (or vice versa) and liaised with them on its progress	9.52%	2
In the context of a Course Academic Progress Committee meeting	9.52%	2
Directly opposite in a case (e.g. advocate accompanied and made arguments on behalf of a student and I was on the committee)	4.76%	1
In the course of informally resolving a grievance or dispute	4.76%	1
In the context of a formal grievance	4.76%	1

*Respondents could select more than one option.

3. Based on your experience dealing with our advocate(s), please tell us your agreement with the statements below:

Answer Options	Strongly disagree		Neither		Strongly agree	N/A	Aggregate
The advocate(s) displayed a good grasp of regulations, policies and procedures in their arguments on behalf of a student.	0	0	1	2	5	2	4.44
Recommendations given by the advocate(s) to me or students I deal with have been accurate.	0	0	1	2	5	2	4.50
My e-mails and phone messages were promptly returned by the advocate(s).	1	0	0	0	6	3	4.43
The advocate(s) appropriately referred cases to me or my service.	0	0	1	1	5	3	4.57
The advocate(s) can be relied on to follow through with whatever action they said they would do to assist.	0	0	1	0	7	2	4.75
Overall, I am assured by the Advocacy Service's ability to provide effective advocacy to students.	0	0	1	1	7	1	4.57

4. Please provide any general comment or suggestion you have for the advocate(s) and/or the Advocacy Service

- I am disappointed not to have been made aware of your services. It would be good to get some information from you, or even a chat.
- Have always found the Service and advocates responsive, well informed and helpful to me as a Counsellor and to any students I have referred.
- Very good to deal with-excellent advocates for students.
- I find the students that have sought advocacy advice prior to attending academic misconduct hearings are much more aware of the process and more open to conversation with the panel around what occurred and their understanding of policy/assessment rules. This makes the hearings more beneficial for the student in regards to education (why it happened/how to stop it happening again) rather than just trying to get to the bottom of what happened.
- It takes a very long time for the student union to respond to initial requests for a committee meeting for academic misconduct. As it's a tight turn around these requests need to be actioned much more efficiently.

5. Which of these best describes your work area in the University?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Academic / Student services	50.00%	6
Faculty management or administration	25.00%	3
Faculty hearing committees or panels	16.67%	2
Academic Board appeals	8.33%	1

*Respondents could select more than one option.