ADVOCACY

Service Report May - August 2022

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 'Anecdata'

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

In this section of the report, I would normally be writing up case studies with commentary on some of the key issues that we observed during this period. However, owing to a significant amount of unplanned leave within the team over the last few months, the Advocacy Service has mostly been operating with skeleton staff, and I have not been able to find the time required to complete this section in the usual way.

Consequently, I will just provide a dot-point summary of some of the notable trends and issues we saw during May-August 2022:

- A formal allegation of misconduct issued to a student on the erroneous basis that the student had arrived to the exam late. Despite the student having evidence that the allegation was completely misconceived and trying to point this out to Faculty, they were still made to go through the formal disciplinary process, which culminated in a 5 minute hearing and the allegation being dismissed.
- A Chair and Secretary of a Faculty Misconduct Committee not understanding the student representative's role on the Committee, to the point that they asked the student representative to leave the meeting while they decided an outcome and penalty.
- Inviting a student to an informal meeting to discuss a possible breach of academic integrity rules, while simultaneously advising the student that they had already determined that the matter will be referred to a formal disciplinary process.
- Resistance from Faculties to providing adjustments for special consideration applications that have been deemed eligible by SEDS, and long delays in providing a final outcome for affected students.

Advocacy Service Statistics

Comparative data – May - August 2022

This period 617 students were provided a service resulting in 1809 contacts. In the same period last year, the service saw 693 students resulting in 2022 contacts. This reflects a stable demand across the 12 months. Last year 7% of casework was related to COVID-19, whereas this period in 2022, under 2% of matters were related to the pandemic's effect on students.

The shift in the nature and character of much of our casework, which has been observed over the past 1-2 years, appears to be the new normal. We continue to be presented with complex cases that require longer engagement with the student, which has prompted some thought about possible tweaks and changes to service delivery to better manage the caseload.

Additionally, the Advocacy website received just shy of 20,000 page views this period, which continues to be around twice the number of pre-pandemic years. As previously observed, this is unsurprising in the context of remote communications, but nevertheless remains a clear indicator of the students' reliance on UMSU generally, and the Advocacy Service specifically, for information and support.

UMSU also launched a new and improved website in February 2022, so it is also likely that this contributed to the large number of page views, and we hope it has made the user experience better for the many students that utilise the resources on our website.

The most popular pages were those featuring information on course academic progress, academic misconduct, remission of fees, and special consideration.

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 2022

All Students		
Course Academic Progress Committee	125	20.26%
Special Consideration	93	15.07%
Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	87	14.10%
Assessment Dispute	75	12.16%
Academic Misconduct - Exam	51	8.27%
Student Admin - Enrolment problems	25	4.05%
Academic Misconduct - Collusion	22	3.57%
Remission of Fees	21	3.40%
Academic Misconduct - Other	18	2.92%
Vocational Placement Problems	16	2.59%
COVID-19	11	1.78%
Other	9	1.46%
General Misconduct	8	1.30%
Academic Misconduct - Falsified docs	7	1.13%
Progress - HDR	6	0.97%
Student complaint about uni staff	6	0.97%
Incorrect Advice	5	0.81%
Selection Appeal	5	0.81%
Special Consid (ongoing)	4	0.65%
Sexual Harassment	4	0.65%
Advance Standing Credit/RPL	4	0.65%
Student complaint about another student	4	0.65%
Quality Teaching	2	0.32%
Scholarship Issues	2	0.32%
Exchange	2	0.32%
Graduation	2	0.32%
Supervision Problems	2	0.32%
Discrimination	1	0.16%
Intellectual Property Dispute	1	0.16%

Graduate Coursework students		
Course Academic Progress Committee	26	19.55%
Special Consideration	17	12.78%
Vocational Placement Problems	14	10.53%
Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	13	9.77%
Assessment Dispute	13	9.77%
Enrolment problems	8	6.02%
Incorrect Advice	4	3.01%
Academic Misconduct - Collusion	4	3.01%
Academic Misconduct - Exam	4	3.01%
Academic Misconduct - Other	4	3.01%
Remission of Fees	4	3.01%
Advance Standing Credit/RPL	3	2.26%
Other	3	2.26%
Not Specified	2	1.50%
General Misconduct	2	1.50%
COVID-19	2	1.50%
Student complaint about uni staff	2	1.50%
Special Consid (ongoing)	1	0.75%
Scholarship Issues	1	0.75%
Selection Appeal	1	0.75%
Sexual Harassment	1	0.75%
Graduation	1	0.75%
Student complaint about another student	1	0.75%
Supervision Problems	1	0.75%
Intellectual Property Dispute	1	0.75%

RHD students		
Progress - HDR	5	41.67%
Course Academic Progress Committee	3	25.00%
Supervision Problems	1	8.33%
Student complaint about uni staff	1	8.33%
Enrolment problems	1	8.33%
Not Specified	1	8.33%

May- August 2021

All Students		
Special Consideration	121	17.74%
Course Academic Progress Committee	100	14.66%
Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	86	12.61%
Academic Misconduct - Exam	74	10.85%
Assessment Dispute	66	9.68%
Academic Misconduct - Collusion	55	8.06%
COVID-19	48	7.04%
Student complaint about uni staff	15	2.20%
Remission of Fees	14	2.05%
Other	13	1.91%
Academic Misconduct - Other	13	1.91%
Enrolment problems	12	1.76%
Incorrect Advice	9	1.32%
Vocational Placement Problems	9	1.32%
Selection Appeal	8	1.17%
Supervision Problems	6	0.88%
Academic Misconduct - Falsified docs	6	0.88%
Course structure/changes	4	0.59%
Progress - HDR	4	0.59%
General Misconduct	3	0.44%
Graduation	3	0.44%
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%

Graduate Coursework students		
Special Consideration	34	17.89%
Course Academic Progress Committee	28	14.74%
Assessment Dispute	27	14.21%
Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	26	13.68%
COVID-19	16	8.42%
Academic Misconduct - Collusion	10	5.26%
Vocational Placement Problems	9	4.74%
Academic Misconduct - Exam	8	4.21%
Remission of Fees	5	2.63%
Enrolment problems	5	2.63%
Other	4	2.11%
Incorrect Advice	3	1.58%
Selection Appeal	3	1.58%
Student complaint about uni staff	3	1.58%
Not Specified	2	1.05%
Graduation	2	1.05%
Course structure/changes	1	0.53%
Quality Teaching	1	0.53%
Academic Misconduct - Other	1	0.53%
Supervision Problems	1	0.53%
Special Consid (ongoing)	1	0.53%

RHD students		
Student complaint about uni staff	4	20.00%
Progress - HDR	4	20.00%
Supervision Problems	3	15.00%
Special Consideration	2	10.00%
Enrolment problems	1	5.00%
Selection Appeal	1	5.00%
Research Ethics	1	5.00%
Other	1	5.00%
Incorrect Advice	1	5.00%
Special Consid (ongoing)	1	5.00%
Not Specified	1	5.00%

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Distribution by graduate/undergraduate status

May- August 2022

Graduate	214	34.68%
Undergraduate	382	61.91%
Unspecified	21	3.40%

May- August 2021

Graduate	237	34.25%
Undergraduate	455	65.75%

Distribution by International/Domestic Status

May- August 2022

Domestic	243	38.38%
International	306	49.59%
Unspecified	68	11.02%

May- August 2021

Domestic	265	38.29%
International	427	61.71%

Commentary

The proportion of graduate to undergraduate students was 34.68% to **61.91%, which is a similar figure to the equivalent** period in 2021 (34.25% to 65.75%). As noted in the Service Report for January to April 2022, this trend appears to be mostly explained by the significant increase in misconduct matters during the pandemic years, especially in relation to plagiarism and misconduct during online exams. Academic integrity in the online assessment context is an area of real concern, as we continue to see many cases where the evidence is circumstantial or speculative at best, and where the burden of proof is being reversed so that students are required to prove that they *did not* breach academic integrity rules, as opposed to a Misconduct Committee establishing probative evidence that they did.

The breakdown of international and domestic students during this period was 49.59% to 38.38%, which is interesting in comparison to the same period in 2021 (61.71% to 38.29%). The domestic figures are almost identical, while there is a significant drop for the international numbers; this may be explained by a reduction in Covid-related enquiries from international students during the middle part of 2022…or it may just be that the 68 (11.02%) unspecified contacts were mostly international students.

The breakdown of major presenting issues below provides further insights.

The primary presenting issue overall this period- representing just over 20% of all matters- were issues related to Course Academic Progress.

The next most common issue related to problems with and concerns about special consideration, then academic misconduct allegations in respect of plagiarism, assessment disputes, and then academic misconduct related to examinations.

In the previous report, we noted that in the period January to April 2022, we received 11 contacts relating to allegations of General Misconduct, as compared to just 3 during the corresponding period in 2021. In the May to August period of 22, we received 8 contacts relating to allegations of General Misconduct, compared to 3 in the same period of 2021.

The upward trend there is continuing, so it remains an interesting area to watch.

Special Consideration matters involved the usual assistance with advice on late applications, disputes over outcomes, and those deemed to have insufficient evidence. However, it is worth noting that disputes involving applications for Special Consideration (technical) are a unique category, mostly centring on students' capacity to meet a very high evidentiary threshold, which is made more complicated by the fact that it is often very difficult for students to evidence the technical disruption they have experienced, or that students are expected to calmly and methodically gather

evidence for a special consideration application when they are in a state of panic and desperation because their internet has dropped out with four minutes of the exam time remaining.

The majority of Course Academic Progress matters arose in the Faculty of Science, followed by Arts, ABP and then MDHS and FBE.

COVID-19 related matters by Reason

Technical Consideration	5	45.45%
Special Consideration	4	36.36%
WAM concerns	2	18.18%
	11	

Distribution of COVID matters by graduate/undergraduate status

May- August 2022

Graduate	3	27.27%
Undergraduate	8	72.73%

Distribution COVID matters by International/Domestic Status

May- August 2022

Domestic	7	63.64%
International	3	27.27%
Unspecified	1	9.09%

Course Academic Progress – Contacts by Stage of Process

STAGE	REASON	Total
At Risk	Transition to university	14
First Attendance	Cultural adjustment	12
	Employment commitments	10
	Mental health	4
	Poor study skills	1
	COVID-19 impacts	1
	Financial issues	1
	Health problems	1
	Transition issues	1
		45
Second Attendance	Health problems	20
	Financial issues	13
	Employment commitments	11
		44
Academic Board Appeal	Termination of enrolment	14
	Suspension of enrolment	13
	Restrictions on enrolment	8
	Duration	1
		36
Total CAPC Related Matters		**125**

Course Academic Progress – by Faculty

Faculty of Science	37	29.60%
Faculty of Arts	23	18.40%
Melbourne School of Design (AB&P)	17	13.60%
Faculty of MDHS	14	11.20%
Faculty of Business and Economics	14	11.20%
Melbourne Graduate School of Education	6	4.80%
Faculty of Veterinary and Agricultural Sciences	6	4.80%
Melbourne School of Engineering	5	4.00%
Melbourne Law School	2	1.60%
Melbourne Business School (MBS)	1	0.80%
Faculty of Science	37	29.60%

Course Academic Progress – by Graduate/Undergraduate

Graduate	52	41.60%
Undergraduate	73	58.40%

Course Academic Progress – by International/Domestic

Domestic	45	33.33%
International	80	57.78%

Special Consideration – Contacts by Stage of Process

STAGE	REASON	Total
Application	Late Application	16
	Deemed Insufficient Grounds	9
		5
Internal Review	Late Application	34
	Deemed Insufficient Grounds	7
	Unhappy with outcome provided	6
		47
Formal Grievance	Deemed Insufficient Grounds	4
	Late Application	4
		8
Appeal	Unhappy with outcome provided	13
Total Special Consideration Matters		93

Special Consideration – by Faculty

Faculty of Science	23	24.73%
Faculty of Business and Economics	20	21.51%
Faculty of Arts	14	15.05%
Faculty of MDHS	10	10.75%
Melbourne School of Engineering	6	6.45%
Melbourne Graduate School of Education	6	6.45%
Melbourne School of Design (AB&P)	5	5.38%
VCA & Music	3	3.23%
Melbourne Law School	3	3.23%
Faculty of Veterinary and Agricultural Sciences	2	2.15%
Melbourne Business School (MBS)	1	1.08%

Special Consideration – by Graduate/Undergraduate

Undergraduate	68	73.12%
Graduate	25	26.88%

Special Consideration – by International/Domestic

Domestic	49	52.69%
International	44	47.31%

Plagiarism – Contacts by Stage of process

STAGE	REASON	Total
Formal/Committee Hearing	Inadvertent	40
	Deliberate	33
		73
Informal/Educative	Inadvertent	7
Academic Board Appeal	Excessive Penalty	7
Total Plagiarism Related Matters		**87**

Plagiarism – by Faculty

Faculty of Arts	21	24.14%
Faculty of Arts	21	24.14%
Faculty of Science	19	21.84%
Faculty of Science	19	21.84%
Melbourne School of Engineering	13	14.94%
Melbourne School of Engineering	13	14.94%
Faculty of Business and Economics	11	12.64%
Faculty of MDHS	10	11.49%
Melbourne School of Design (AB&P)	7	8.05%
Faculty of Veterinary and Agricultural Sciences	6	6.90%

Plagiarism – by Graduate/Undergraduate

Graduate	31	**33.33%**
Undergraduate	62	**66.67%**

Plagiarism – by International/Domestic

Domestic	25	26.88%
International	68	73.12%

The next Advocacy Service report will cover the quarter September to December 2022 and should be available around March/April 2023.

Paul Lewis-Hornsby

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