

## Student Union Advocacy Service Report April - June 2014

### Introduction

This quarter is typically a bit quieter for case work and is generally dominated by one of the volunteer programs run by the service: the exam support stall. The period to the end of June is also characterised by problems with special consideration and other assessment related issues including allegations of plagiarism and examination misconduct.

### Trends and Issues this Quarter

#### Health Assessments – who says?

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

Unsurprisingly, such students frequently show up in the ranks of those asked to face the Course Unsatisfactory Progress Committees. From time to time the faculty's assessment appears to override those of the health professionals who supply supporting documentation for those students. We saw several cases this quarter where students faced protracted CUPC appeals and special consideration disputes in relation to mental health issues. In one of these cases where the student's enrolment was terminated despite a positive mental health assessment from the student's treating psychiatrist, the wording of the CUPC report appeared to be a *de facto* mental health assessment directly contradicting the evidence of the students' treating mental health professional. The student's appeal from the termination of enrolment in this instance was upheld by the Academic Board; however we remain concerned that in some cases the CUPC may be substituting its own assessment for those of the relevant health professional.

#### Positive Outcomes – Good administrative decision making and non-adversarial advocacy

While this part of the Report is frequently dominated by the identification of negative issues, I would like to take the opportunity to highlight a very positive student experience of efficient and fair administrative decision making. I think this is also a positive example of the non-adversarial, empowerment approach of the Advocacy Service.

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

The student presented at the service with a conflict around an exchange opportunity to study at Oxford University in the UK. The student had been approved by Global Mobility to do the exchange at Oxford, however the Student Centre at the Science Faculty advised that the timing of the exchange was problematic as it required the student to miss the first three weeks of classes in the subsequent semester. Ultimately this meant that the Faculty could not approve the exchange.

The student presented to us, clearly disappointed and concerned that there was an inconsistency between Global Mobility and the Faculty's approval processes. Students are frequently confused when an administrative part of the University approves a course of action on one basis however the academic case for approval has not been made out. In this instance we were able to explain that there was not an inconsistency, but rather there were several levels of approval required and her application failed to clear the academic hurdle.

Ultimately the service assisted the student to draft a letter for the Associate Dean (Undergraduate Programs) requesting her approval for the exchange on the basis that the student was a high achiever with an H1 average and she would undertake to keep up with the missed lectures and assignments online and was prepared to take full responsibility if something was to go wrong.

After careful consideration and a detailed response the Associate Dean denied the request based on the fact that the course coordinators did not accept that the student could complete the subject having missed three workshops. However, in her response the Associate Dean provided alternative options in terms of the student's subject selection and the possibility of changing major. The student accepted the Associate Dean's response, worked with a student adviser, changed major and chose subjects that did not have a workshop requirement. On this basis she was able to gain approval from the subject coordinators to miss the first three weeks and she is now on her way to Oxford.

Certainly this was not an overly complicated case; however it is a great example of how an extremely frustrated student was able to work together with the Faculty on the best viable options and some responsive administrative decision making which looked at alternatives to achieve the desired outcome. It also highlights the Service's style of non-adversarial advocacy as well as our practice of empowering students to take ownership of their own issues.

### **Business Improvement Program and the Advocacy Service**

While the impacts and uncertainties of BIP are not nearly as immediate for us in the Student Union, it is certainly on our radar. We are particularly interested in how BIP may impact on the student experience. For example we are completely reliant on the Melbourne Policy Bulletin for notice of changes to University policy and procedure. However, perhaps due to the current policy freeze in furtherance of the work of the Business Improvement Program Policy Consolidation Workstream – we were totally caught off-guard with the implementation of changes to the exams procedure regarding reading times. The changes were advised to students via direct email – leaving us with misinformation on our website and the Melbourne Policy Network none the wiser.

## **Policy Consolidation Work Stream**

We were very pleased to meet recently with Gloris Willoughby during her consultations around the proposed overhaul of the Special Consideration procedures and other policies related to adjustments for factors impeding academic performance. Regular readers of this report will no doubt be familiar with the dominance of special consideration related matters in the “issues” section. We have definitely experienced the worst aspects of the current regime for students and we are really gratified to see many of our concerns will be addressed by the proposed new policy and procedures.

We are also looking forward to an opportunity to participate in the upcoming consultations regarding policy redevelopments arising from the BIP Policy Consolidation Workstream to collaborate on changes which will enhance the student experience of matters administrative and academic.

## **Implications for our Student Booking System**

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

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

Possible solutions at this stage include:

- The Student Union IT is briefed and can take over hosting and support functions – this would still be reliant on regular student data being populated by the University;

- The University continues to host and support the SBS post BIP with student data populated and updated regularly; or
- The SBS functions are integrated into our current casework management system – and a method for populating it with student data will be necessary.

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

## **Programmes this Quarter**

### ***Exam Support Stall***

Training was provided to 31 volunteers who staffed the examination support stalls during the examination period. A total of 2701 students received a service from the stall over the three weeks of exams. Volunteers do two hour shifts, and set up and put away the marquee and table every day. Equipment is stored in the Royal Exhibition Building.

Volunteers answer a range of questions; provide directions on the location of facilities, and referral to discuss issues such as special consideration and academic misconduct. Those involved report that students appreciate the programme - at a time when many students need extra support because they are stressed and anxious.

The volunteers at the stall provide on-site information, advice, referral and support to students who sit exams at the Royal Exhibition Building in Carlton during the exam period (2-3 weeks in both June and November). The stall gives away water and sells assorted stationary, tissues and lollies for a nominal fee. Unfortunately the stall unexpectedly ran out of water in the second week and this is reflected in the significant dip in the graph above. Given the water is the single most requested item at the stall, we have been working on a way to provide water in reusable clear containers. However negotiations with the Royal Exhibition Building to allow a water cart on site have not been fruitful so far. Additionally students may borrow approved calculators and clear plastic bags for their pens etc. Signs are displayed reminding students not to inadvertently take their study notes or any unauthorised materials into the venue with them. The stall also has information about the Advocacy Service; an exam tips information card and information on other University services.

## **Statistics**

### ***April-June 2014***

124 students were provided a service resulting in 266 contacts with the service.

### ***April-June 2013***

80 students were provided a service resulting in 243 appointments at the service.

Additionally, the Advocacy website received 3768 page views this quarter. There were over 1000 page views on the Exam Tips page and other popular pages included information on grievances and complaints, special consideration, assessment disputes and misconduct.

### ***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. Additionally this classification system aligns with the general methodology employed by the service in providing advice and problem solving support to students. Specifically while students may express their issues in a multitude of ways, the primary issue is identified according to the policy or procedure by which the University provides possible resolutions.

As the Graduate Student Association has now discontinued its Advocacy Service, we have provided further specific breakdowns of graduate coursework and research higher degree students. We hope this will support the GSA students' council and office bearers to access data which may assist in planning and evaluation. Further breakdowns or specific drill-down reports are available on request.

**April-June 2014**

All Students			Graduate Coursework students			RHD students		
Special Consideration	19	15.20%	Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	10	22.22%	Supervision Problems	8	72.73%
Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	13	10.40%	Vocational Placement Problems	7	15.56%	General Misconduct	2	18.18%
Quality Teaching	12	9.60%	Special Consideration	7	15.56%	Intellectual Property Dispute	1	9.09%
Assessment Dispute	10	8.00%	Scholarship Issues	5	11.11%			
Supervision Problems	8	6.40%	Assessment Dispute	5	11.11%			
Vocational Placement Problems	8	6.40%	Course Unsatisfactory Progress	4	8.89%			
Not Specified	7	5.60%	Academic Misconduct - Exam	3	6.67%			
Academic Misconduct - Exam	6	4.80%	Student complaint about uni staff	1	2.22%			
Scholarship Issues	5	4.00%	Student Admin - Enrolment problems	1	2.22%			
Other	5	4.00%	General Misconduct	1	2.22%			
Course Unsatisfactory Progress	5	4.00%	Equitable Accommodation (SEAD)	1	2.22%			
Equitable Accommodation (SEAD)	4	3.20%						
Course structure/changes	4	3.20%						
General Misconduct	3	2.40%						
Student Admin - Enrolment problems	3	2.40%						
Student complaint about uni staff	3	2.40%						
Advance Standing Credit/RPL	2	1.60%						
Student Admin - Remission of Fees	2	1.60%						
Incorrect Advice	2	1.60%						
Intellectual Property Dispute	1	0.80%						
Admission - Selection Appeal	1	0.80%						
Academic Misconduct - Falsified docs	1	0.80%						
Academic Misconduct - Collusion	1	0.80%						

**April-June 2013**

All Students			Graduate Coursework students			RHD students		
Special Consideration	19	19.39%	Course Unsatisfactory Progress	4	21.05%	Scholarship Issues	2	66.67%
Assessment Dispute	14	14.29%	Assessment Dispute	4	21.05%	Intellectual Property Dispute	1	33.33%
General Misconduct	12	12.24%	Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	4	21.05%			
Course Unsatisfactory Progress	11	11.22%	Special Consideration	2	10.53%			
Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	9	9.18%	Vocational Placement Problems	1	5.26%			
Student Admin - Enrolment problems	5	5.10%	Student Admin - Remission of Fees	1	5.26%			
Scholarship Issues	4	4.08%	Student Admin - Enrolment problems	1	5.26%			
Incorrect Advice	3	3.06%	Quality Teaching	1	5.26%			
Student complaint about uni staff	3	3.06%	Advance Standing Credit/RPL	1	5.26%			
Course structure/changes	2	2.04%						
Admission - Selection Appeal	2	2.04%						
Supervision Problems	2	2.04%						
Academic Misconduct - Collusion	2	2.04%						
Equitable Accommodation (SEAD)	2	2.04%						
Other	1	1.02%						
Intellectual Property Dispute	1	1.02%						
Vocational Placement Problems	1	1.02%						
Quality Teaching	1	1.02%						
Not Specified	1	1.02%						
Student Admin - Remission of Fees	1	1.02%						
Advance Standing Credit/RPL	1	1.02%						
Academic Misconduct - Exam	1	1.02%						

**Distribution by graduate/undergraduate status**

*April-June 2014*

Graduate	64	51.61%
Undergraduate	60	48.39%

*April-June 2013*

Graduate	37	46.25%
Undergraduate	43	53.75%

### **Distribution by International/Domestic Status**

April-June 2014

Domestic	96	77.42%
International	28	22.58%

April-June 2013

Domestic	68	85.00%
International	12	15.00%

### **Distribution of cases over all by Faculty/School – April-June 2014**

In order to make the following data more meaningful the relative weighting of faculties by enrolment has been included. While this is useful in partially normalising the data - it is not possible to draw conclusions as to *why certain* faculties may be over or under represented in presentations to this service. For example, high representation may reflect an active referral policy within that faculty or it may disclose certain procedural issues in that area.

	Number of cases and as a proportion of all cases.		Enrolments in the faculty as a proportion of students enrolled at university	Indication of relative representation in Advocacy casework
Arts	19	15.97%	13.60%	>
Medicine, Dentistry & Health Sciences	17	14.29%	19.31%	<<
Melbourne Graduate School of Education	15	12.61%	7.24%	>>
Melbourne Conservatorium of Music (MCM)	12	10.08%	5.28%	>>>
Science	12	10.08%	10.95%	==
Architecture Building & Planning	8	6.72%	2.61%	>>>
Melbourne School of Engineering	7	5.88%	4.18%	<
Business & Economics	6	5.04%	11.61%	<<<
Melbourne School of Design	5	4.20%	2.48%	>>
Melbourne School of Land and Environment	4	3.36%	3.81%	=
Melbourne Business School (MBS)	3	2.52%	/	/
Melbourne Law School	2	1.68%	3.05%	<
Veterinary Science	2	1.68%	1.61%	=
Not Yet Admitted	2	1.68%	/	/
Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences	2	1.68%	4.23%	<<
VCA	2	1.68%	/	/
Engineering (teach out)	1	0.84%	2.47%	<<

### **Commentary**

The proportion of graduate students this quarter exceeded the proportion of undergraduates. This indicates that graduate students continue to find and accessing this service in numbers which exceed their proportion of enrolments at the University.

The relative proportion of domestic to international students continues to reflect the corresponding enrolment loads.



The primary issue across all students this quarter was special consideration, followed by plagiarism issues and other assessment disputes. Interestingly quality of teaching complaints were highly represented this quarter. This was due to a group complaint – 12 students from the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music accessing this Service with respect to sudden cancellation of classes.

Among graduate coursework students, plagiarism allegations represented over 20% of the presenting issues, followed by vocational placement problems and issues with special consideration making up another 30% of matters. Vocational placement problems typically feature issues arising from the breakdown in the relationship between the student on placement and their placement supervisor, often resulting in the failure of the placement. They can be especially difficult to resolve due to the tripartite nature of the arrangement between the university, the student and an external organisation.

For research higher degree students the majority of matters concerned supervision issues.

Presenting students came from 17 schools and faculties. Arts was the most frequently represented faculty, followed closely by Medicine, Dentistry & Health Sciences), and the Melbourne Graduate School of Education.

The majority of special consideration matters came from the Faculty of Science. There were almost twice as many undergraduates than graduates having issues with special consideration this quarter, and slightly more domestic students than international students seeking assistance.

#### ***Special Consideration - By Faculty/School***

Science	5	26.32%
Business & Economics	3	15.79%
Melbourne School of Land and Environment	2	10.53%
Melbourne School of Engineering	2	10.53%
Arts	2	10.53%
Melbourne School of Design	1	5.26%
Melbourne Business School (MBS)	1	5.26%
Medicine, Dentistry & Health Sciences	1	5.26%
Architecture Building & Planning	1	5.26%
Unknown	1	5.26%

#### ***Special Consideration – by Graduate/Undergraduate***

Undergraduate	12	63.16%
Graduate	7	36.84%

#### ***Special Consideration – by International/Domestic***

Domestic	11	57.89%
International	8	42.11%

#### ***Academic Misconduct- Plagiarism - By Faculty/School***

Melbourne Graduate School of Education	5	38.46%
Architecture Building & Planning	4	30.77%
Arts	2	15.38%
Melbourne School of Design	1	7.69%
Music	1	7.69%

**Academic Misconduct- Plagiarism – by Graduate/Undergraduate**

Graduate	10	76.92%
Undergraduate	3	23.08%

**Academic Misconduct- Plagiarism – by International/Domestic**

Domestic	11	91.67%
International	1	8.33%

**Assessment Disputes - By Faculty/School**

Arts	4	40.00%
Medicine, Dentistry & Health Sciences	2	20.00%
VCA	1	10.00%
Melbourne School of Engineering	1	10.00%
Melbourne School of Design	1	10.00%
Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences	1	10.00%

**Assessment Disputes – by Graduate/Undergraduate**

Graduate	6	60.00%
Undergraduate	4	40.00%

**Assessment Disputes – by International/Domestic**

Domestic	9	90.00%
International	1	10.00%

**Liaisons and involvement with the University Community**

The service is always keen for opportunities to speak to staff at the University to demystify our role and explain the services we provide and how we can work together to further student interests.

Staff in the Advocacy Service liaised with the University Community in the following ways over the period:

05-May-14	International Students Wellbeing Panel - for wellness week	Gryphon Gallery, 1888 Building
08-May-14	Wellness workshop for wellness Week	Union House

If you would like to arrange a time for Advocacy staff to speak at your staff meeting or other liaison opportunity, please get in touch.

The next Advocacy Service report will cover the quarter July to September 2014. However I will be on leave until in October, so it may not be available until the end of that month.

Phoebe Churches  
**Manager, Advocacy & Legal**