ADVOCACY

Service Report January - April 2021

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Introduction

The Advocacy Service Report was originally commissioned by the University's Advocacy Service Reference Group (ASRG) – a group set up to oversee the service contract via which the Service was funded between 2012 and 2017. The Quarterly Report was originally an accountability measure under the funding contract, but it also served to ventilate student experiences of various processes within the relevant parts of the University. Over time, the circulation of the Report grew to encompass a 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

Typically, we would expect our casework during this period predominantly to involve appeals to the Academic Board from Course Academic Progress Committee (CAPC) decisions, Assessment Disputes, and appeals regarding Special Consideration determinations. The changes to the CAPC process, specifically a change to having students complete an online form rather than inviting them to write a submission to the CAPC appears to have led to far fewer students accessing the Service for advice and support in this process from end to end.

A Note on Service Demand, Service Models and Capacity

An examination of our Advocacy Service Reports for close to a decade would disclose a broken record- and record-breaking inventory of the growth in demand for advocacy services over the period, year in year out. Apart from a modest increase in staffing in 2013, we have been able to accommodate the growth in demand for individual advocacy support while providing training, guidance, and advice for our student representatives **without *ever* requiring a waiting list**. We have been proud to offer a response of no more than two working days with very few exceptions to our enquiries. The Service has achieved this by constantly reviewing our operating model and adjusting our triaging and case management of matters to ensure we can, and do, meet demand.

I wanted to expressly note this. We have consciously avoided the reductionist response of suggesting we need more staff in the area to meet the increase in demand. While increased resources would undoubtedly alleviate some of the pressure of very busy periods, we recognise that there is also a diminishing return for the extra expenditure. As a student organisation, wholly funded by Student Services and Amenities Fees (AKA student dollars), we are acutely conscious of the importance of accountability and maximising the effectiveness of our resources. For this reason, we will continue to work hard (and triage cleverly) to meet demand without needing to increase resources.

Challenging times

I often write these reports over several weeks, in snatched moments between my other duties. I sometimes come back to something I had written earlier, perhaps on a particularly disappointing day. This time I came back to finish this section of the report to find I had made a heading entitled "Being hit on the head lessons". Of course, you might recognise this as a Monty Python reference,[1] but even if you don't – it speaks for itself regarding how many of us are feeling at the moment.

I have been reflecting on the impacts of prolonged lockdown, the depersonalisation and isolation many of us have experienced, and the consequences of this we have seen in many of the students accessing our service currently. It does not need saying, these have been, and remain extremely challenging times- for students and staff alike. The whole University community has experienced profound dislocation, uncertainty, and some degree of isolation. The Service is seeing students who have experienced university life remotely for the entirety of their enrolment. The University is in a state of churn, caused and amplified by the pandemic, and of course these things affect students in a multitude of ways.

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[1] See: *The Argument Clinic* at 3:58 - https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2hwqn9

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Students are struggling with the cumulative effect of restructures, new modes of learning and assessment, and various austerity measures. I feel we are yet to see just how profoundly students have been affected by all of this. I think we will find that the whole is ultimately more than the sum of its parts. Right now, we are noticing that some students are struggling more than usual with communication. It's easy to forget how to interact positively when you have little opportunity to do so on the day-to-day. Deskilling is a real risk in this context – for example diminished social skills- and we need to remind ourselves how to stay human, and combat depersonalisation. To this end, the Service has been attempting to meet face to face (in person or on Zoom), use phone appointments and other personal methods of transacting with our service users in preference to electronic only means of service delivery.

Programmes and Initiatives

Training for Student members in University Governance and Misconduct Committees

University Student Governance Training

The University's 2013 *Review of the Student Lifecycle* identified a requirement for the University to become more "student-centric" in its communications with students and in its service provision to students. As part of the University's efforts to become more student-centred a key aspect for consideration was the ways in which the views of students are collected, considered and included in University decision-making processes. Out of this, in 2014 was born an annual training programme for student representatives who are members on University governance bodies. The training is now delivered via a Canvas module, digital resources including several purpose-written handbooks and a case study based workshop. Students who have played key roles in University governance, such as the student representative on University Council and student members of the Academic Board attend to share their experiences and provide mentoring to the newer representatives. Additionally, senior academic leaders and secretariat staff present insights into the structures, alongside tips for maximising effectiveness on these committees.

This year 15 students from UMSU and the GSA completed the Advocacy Service's *Student Governance Training* in March.

Student members on Misconduct Committee Training

The Advocacy Service is charged with the responsibility to train student members of Misconduct Committees, subject to ss. 5.10(d) and 5.32 of the *Student Conduct* and *Student Academic Integrity Policies* respectively. In past years the training had been held over a half day each quarter, however due to COVID restrictions last year, this training was moved to an online delivery via Canvas and Zoom workshop for the first time. In March 2021, the training again ran in this mode, with 18 students completing the Canvas module and attending the scenario-based workshop. The Canvas module covers the fundamental principles which underpin good administrative decision making and ensure a thorough grounding in procedural fairness and good practice in this area. After trainees completed the online theory component, the training culminates in a 90-minute group workshop to consider case studies.

We are pleased that we received overwhelmingly positive feedback, and we will do it again soon. Students wishing to be considered for this important volunteer work, can register their interest here:
https://umsu.unimelb.edu.au/support/advocacy/aca-misc-vol/

In a very welcome recognition of the good work these volunteer committee members perform, we were delighted to receive a letter from Professor Moira O'Bryan, the Dean of the Faculty of Science thanking these students for their efforts. She writes:

> *Following the move to virtual exams in 2020, Science experienced a significant increase in the number of misconduct cases that were to be heard. This resulted in shifting timelines as we responded to the need to hold many more meetings than anticipated – 95 just for the Semester 2 period.*
>
> *We sincerely appreciate the efforts of the 11 student volunteers who participated in these meetings. They were well prepared and acted professionally in what were sometimes difficult meetings.*

We were pleased to be able to share this letter with this group of students.

Advocacy Service Statistics

Comparative data – January - April 2021

During this period 427 students were provided a service resulting in 1330 contacts. In the same period last year, the service saw 646 students in 1602 contacts. We have previously noted this extraordinary period which took place in the first stage of the global pandemic. However, while significantly less than last year, the numbers this year remain higher than the same time in 2019 where we saw 355 students which resulted in 1242 contacts with the service. In our view this is a pertinent demonstration that reductions in student enrolments should not be used as a proxy for reduced demand for student-facing services.

Additionally, the Advocacy website received almost 10 000 page views this period (about 1000 fewer than the same time last year), with the most popular pages being our contact page, assessment dispute guidance, misconduct information 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. This time we have introduced a new classification of COVID-19 to indicate any type of issue which would not have presented but for the changes associated with COVID-19 disruptions. These are further segregated into the particular issues to do with the COVID-19 state of affairs at the University. For this reason, the usual longitudinal comparators are not available, and I have broken the data down in slightly different ways this time, to drill down into more detail about how COVID-19 has impacted on presentations to the service.

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January - April 2021

All Students			Graduate Coursework students			RHD students*		
Special Consideration	59	13.82%	Special Consideration	42	21.76%	Progress - HDR	4	30.77%
Assessment Dispute	48	11.24%	Assessment Dispute	27	13.99%	Supervision Problems	3	23.08%
COVID-19	46	10.77%	Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	23	11.92%	Enrolment problems	1	7.69%
Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	45	10.54%	Course Academic Progress Committee	15	7.77%	Special Consideration	1	7.69%
Course Academic Progress Committee	38	8.90%	COVID-19	14	7.25%	Selection Appeal	1	7.69%
Student Admin - Enrolment problems	25	5.85%	Academic Misconduct - Collusion	12	6.22%	Scholarship Issues	1	7.69%
Academic Misconduct - Exam	23	5.39%	Student Admin - Enrolment problems	10	5.18%	COVID-19	1	7.69%
Academic Misconduct - Collusion	22	5.15%	Academic Misconduct - Exam	8	4.15%	Course structure/changes	1	7.69%
Selection Appeal	20	4.68%	Selection Appeal	7	3.63%			
Remission of Fees	16	3.75%	Other	6	3.11%			
Other	15	3.51%	Vocational Placement Problems	5	2.59%			
Incorrect Advice	10	2.34%	Remission of Fees	4	2.07%			
Student complaint about uni staff	7	1.64%	Incorrect Advice	4	2.07%			
Advance Standing Credit/RPL	7	1.64%	Student complaint about uni staff	2	1.04%			
Vocational Placement Problems	6	1.41%	Supervision Problems	2	1.04%			
Exchange	5	1.17%	Fitness to Practice (FTP)	1	0.52%			
Supervision Problems	5	1.17%	Academic Misconduct - Other	1	0.52%			
Progress - HDR	4	0.94%	Advance Standing Credit/RPL	1	0.52%			
Course structure/changes	4	0.94%	Bullying	1	0.52%			
Academic Misconduct - Other	3	0.70%	Course structure/changes	1	0.52%			
General Misconduct	3	0.70%	Cross-institutional enrolment denied	1	0.52%			
Quality Teaching	3	0.70%	Not Specified	1	0.52%			
Special Consideration - ongoing	2	0.47%	Special Consideration - ongoing	1	0.52%			
Bullying	2	0.47%	General Misconduct	1	0.52%			
Scholarship Issues	2	0.47%	Quality Teaching	1	0.52%			
Student complaint about another student	2	0.47%	Exchange	1	0.52%			
Cross-institutional enrolment denied	1	0.23%	Discrimination	1	0.52%			
Discrimination	1	0.23%						
Student Admin - Graduation	1	0.23%						
Academic Misconduct - Falsified docs	1	0.23%						
Fitness to Practice (FTP)	1	0.23%						

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All Students			Graduate Coursework students*			RHD students*		
COVID-19	260	40.25%	COVID-19	68	34.69%	Supervision Problems	6	30.00%
Course Academic Progress Committee	124	19.20%	Course Academic Progress Committee	50	25.51%	Progress - HDR	6	30.00%
Special Consideration	58	8.98%	Special Consideration	14	7.14%	COVID-19	3	15.00%
Assessment Dispute	35	5.42%	Assessment Dispute	14	7.14%	Scholarship Issues	1	5.00%
Other	17	2.63%	Student Admin - Enrolment problems	7	3.57%	General Misconduct	1	5.00%
Student Admin - Enrolment problems	16	2.48%	Other	6	3.06%	Bullying	1	5.00%
Student Admin - Remission of Fees	15	2.32%	Selection Appeal	6	3.06%	Assessment Dispute	1	5.00%
Academic Misconduct - Collusion	14	2.17%	Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	6	3.06%	Not Specified	1	5.00%
Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	13	2.01%	Student complaint about uni staff	4	2.04%			
Selection Appeal	13	2.01%	Vocational Placement Problems	3	1.53%			
Not Specified	10	1.55%	Academic Misconduct - Collusion	3	1.53%			
Incorrect Advice	9	1.39%	Student Admin - Remission of Fees	3	1.53%			
Student complaint about uni staff	7	1.08%	Incorrect Advice	2	1.02%			
Academic Misconduct - Falsified docs	7	1.08%	Not Specified	2	1.02%			
General Misconduct	6	0.93%	Course structure/changes	2	1.02%			
Progress - HDR	6	0.93%	Academic Misconduct - Falsified docs	1	0.51%			
Supervision Problems	6	0.93%	Advance Standing Credit/RPL	1	0.51%			
Academic Misconduct - Exam	5	0.77%	General Misconduct	1	0.51%			
Course structure/changes	4	0.62%	Scholarship Issues	1	0.51%			
Vocational Placement Problems	3	0.46%	Student Admin - Exchange	1	0.51%			
Discrimination	3	0.46%	Discrimination	1	0.51%			
Scholarship Issues	3	0.46%						
Student Admin - Exchange	3	0.46%						
Student Admin - Graduation	2	0.31%						
Student complaint about another student	2	0.31%						
Sexual Harassment	1	0.15%						
Bullying	1	0.15%						
Advance Standing Credit/RPL	1	0.15%						
Academic Misconduct - Other	1	0.15%						
Special Consideration (Ongoing)	1	0.15%						

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Distribution by graduate/undergraduate status

January – April 2021

Graduate	206	48.24%
Undergraduate	221	51.76%

January – April 2020

Graduate	241	37.36%	50.31%
Undergraduate	238	36.90%	49.69%
Not specified	166	25.74%	

Distribution by International/Domestic Status

January – April 2021

Domestic	192	44.96%
International	235	55.04%

January – April 2020

Domestic	200	31.01%	41.15%
International	286	44.34%	58.85%
Not specified	159	24.65%	

Commentary

The proportion of graduate to undergraduate students was 48.24% to 51.76% (compared with 50.31% to 49.69% the same period last year). This represents steady pattern in the proportion of graduate students this quarter, with the majority of presentations being graduate students as usual.

During this period 44.96% domestic and 55.04% international students presented to the service, continuing a significant over-representation of international students, who make up around 40% of enrolled students. International students continue to be significantly overrepresented in the COVID-19 related matters, which is unsurprising given the massive impacts of travel restrictions and the financial burden on international students caused by the crisis. There were approximately 3 times the proportion of international students to domestic students citing COVID-related issues. International students were otherwise on or under proportion in all other matters, despite being overrepresented overall.

The spread of presenting matters during this period was much flatter than has been the case recently. The top four issues were only separated by 2% or less proportionately. The primary presenting issue overall this period- representing just under 14 % of all matters - were issues related to Special Consideration.

The proportion of students presenting with special consideration issues increased over the same period last year, which is likely to be a consequence of last year's relaxation of evidentiary requirements, and other concessions such as the WAMnesty being prematurely removed. The majority of these matters involved students requesting assistance to lodge out of time applications, with more than three quarters of the students undergraduates.

After Special Consideration related matters, COVID-related issues, Assessment Disputes and Plagiarism were the next most common presenting issues.

About a fifth of the COVID-19 related matters concerned the continued impacts of travel restrictions on offshore students. This was closely followed by concerns with online teaching quality and difficulties with the University's discontinuation of more relaxed criteria and evidentiary requirements for international students needing a leave of absence.

Half of all assessment disputes involved formal requests for review of results with the Head of Department predominantly due to alleged issues with the conduct of assessment. There were also a number of presentations related to informal reviews of assessment with the examiner, for predominantly the same reasons. Slightly more graduates than undergraduates presented with these issues, and marginally more domestic than international students presented.

The preponderance of plagiarism related matters involved inadvertent plagiarism, and three quarters of the students presenting with this issue were international students – suggesting this remains an area of concern which may need further attention by the University.

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Presentations by Faculty

Faculty of Science	104	24.36%
Faculty of Arts	65	15.22%
Faculty of MDHS	63	14.75%
Faculty of Business and Economics	60	14.05%
Melbourne School of Engineering	42	9.84%
VCA & Music	24	5.62%
Melbourne School of Design (AB&P)	21	4.92%
Melbourne Graduate School of Education	13	3.04%
Faculty of Veterinary and Agricultural Sciences	11	2.58%
Unknown	8	1.87%
Melbourne Law School	8	1.87%
Melbourne Business School (MBS)	6	1.41%
Not Yet Admitted	2	0.47%

COVID-19 related matters by Reason

Travel Restrictions	9	19.57%
Online teaching quality	8	17.39%
LOA/Student Visa	6	13.04%
WAM concerns	5	10.87%
Technical Consideration	4	8.70%
Return to Campus	4	8.70%
Fee discounting	4	8.70%
Special Consideration	2	4.35%
Emergency Support Fund	1	2.17%
Online examination issues	1	2.17%
Graduation delay	1	2.17%
Exchange/study abroad Interrupted	1	2.17%

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Special Consideration - By Stage of Process

STAGE	REASON	Total
Application	Late Application	26
	Unhappy with particular outcome	2
		28
Internal Review	Late Application	6
	Unhappy with particular outcome	5
	Deemed insufficient grounds	1
		12
Formal Grievance	Late Application	6
	Deemed insufficient grounds	5
	Unhappy with particular outcome	4
		15
Appeal	Unhappy with particular outcome	3
	Late Application	1
		4
Total Special Consideration Matters		**59**

Special Consideration – by Graduate/Undergraduate

Undergraduate	46	77.97%
Graduate	13	22.03%

Special Consideration – by International/Domestic

Domestic	33	55.93%
International	26	44.07%

Assessment Disputes- By Stage of Process

STAGE	REASON	Total
Informal/assessment review with examiner	Conduct of Assessment	12
	Procedural Irregularity	3
	Administrative Error	1
	Allegation of Examiner Bias	1
		17
Formal request for remark	Conduct of Assessment	19
	Procedural Irregularity	4
	Allegation of Examiner Bias	1
		24
Formal Grievance	Procedural Irregularity	4
	Conduct of Assessment	2
Total Assessment Dispute Related Matters		**48**

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Assessment Disputes – by Graduate/Undergraduate

Graduate	26	54.17%
Undergraduate	22	45.83%

Assessment Disputes – by International/Domestic

Domestic	27	56.25%
International	21	43.75%

Academic Misconduct – Plagiarism - By Stage of process

STAGE	REASON	Total
Informal/Educative	Inadvertent	15
Formal/Committee Hearing	Inadvertent	19
	Admitted	5
		24
Academic Board Appeal	Inadvertent	3
	Admitted	3
		6
Total Plagiarism Related Matters		45

Academic Misconduct – Plagiarism– by Graduate/Undergraduate

Undergraduate	20	44.44%
Graduate	25	55.56%

Academic Misconduct – Plagiarism – by International/Domestic

Domestic	11	24.44%
International	34	75.56%

The next Advocacy Service report will cover the quarter May to July 2021 and will be available in mid-August 2021.

Phoebe Churches

Manager, Advocacy & Legal

June 2021