

Internal Memo

To: UMSU Student Facing Areas
From: UMSU Advocacy Service
Date: 05 January 2026

Subject: Responding to students requesting assistance from the UMSU Advocacy Service

This memo provides background information and context on the Advocacy Service, our approach and ways all parts of UMSU can assist students in need of support.

You can contact us via email at suashelp@union.unimelb.edu.au or just knock on our office doors on level 2, Building 168 – we’re a friendly bunch!

Background Information

The UMSU Advocacy Service is an independent, free and confidential service assisting students to resolve issues within the University during their studies. We operate using an empowerment or strength-based approach, where we seek whenever possible to resource and equip students to deal with their matter themselves via the provision of policy and strategic advice. We also represent students in formal university processes such as Student Appeals, and in complaints to the National Student Ombudsman. You can read more about the Service, our Purpose, Vision and Charter [here](#).

In the last few years, the Advocacy Service has implemented significant changes in our service model and workflow to meet growing demand from students during a period where we were unable to increase staff numbers. For example, in the first two months of semester 2, 2025 (July-August) the Service had almost as many contacts as we did in the *first full six months* of the year – with a large upswing in undergraduate students. Over a quarter of referrals to the Service were from the University, including Stop 1.

Our service model refinements have also responded to external pressures, such as a changing tertiary sector landscape and the under-resourcing and subsequent breakdown of University of Melbourne complaint processes and student appeals. This continues to produce many complex and lengthy student cases, and drives the need to ensure we are responsive and able to meet an ever-increasing demand from students seeking advice and support for their individual advocacy matters.

Our main objective has always been to arm students with the right knowledge so they can redress the power imbalance present in their interactions with the University. Our central concern is: how can we maximise the Service’s outreach when the demand for service is so high?

Based on our collective experience working in the tertiary sector for a combined period of over seven decades, and with our discipline backgrounds in law, social work, and psychology — our approach to service maximisation has been thorough and reflective. We have developed our current model and practice through on-the-ground experience, discovery and exploration of best practice models in the sector, centring the students’ best interests in every way possible.

We are all motivated by a genuine desire to help as many students as we can to navigate complex and sometimes Kafkaesque systems. Problems with the University’s interactions with students are compounded by under-resourced university staff who have not received appropriate training in trauma-informed approaches and who frequently do not have sufficient organisational knowledge or the requisite authority to properly respond to students.

These sorts of interactions with the University will often see students presenting in person at UMSU in a distressed state looking for immediate support. We hope this memo will assist with a whole-of-organisation approach to students needing support that is both person-centred and trauma informed.

Who’s Who in the UMSU Advocacy Zoo

The UMSU Advocacy Service has 8 staff in total and is part of the Advocacy & Legal Division which also comprises the UMSU Legal Service (our legal eagles!) and the Sexual Harm Response Coordinators. Our advocacy staff includes:

Phoebe Churches Divisional Manager, Advocacy & Legal p.churches@union.unimelb.edu.au	Nadia McGregor (PT) Senior Advocate, Advocacy Service nadia.mcgregor@union.unimelb.edu.au
Paul Lewis-Hornsby (FT) Team Leader, Advocacy Service p.hornsby@union.unimelb.edu.au	Anna Black (FT) Senior Advocate, Advocacy Service anna.black.1@union.unimelb.edu.au
Michelle Almiron (FT) Project & Research Lead, Advocacy Service m.almiron@union.unimelb.edu.au	Eloise Lainson (FT) Senior Advocate, Advocacy Service eloise.lainson@union.unimelb.edu.au
Alanna Smith (FT) Senior Advocate, Advocacy Service aj.smith@union.unimelb.edu.au	Georgia Davies (FT) Assessment & Triage Coordinator Advocacy Service georgia.davies@union.unimelb.edu.au

From time to time, we also have the assistance of casuals during peak times and when budget allows.

As mentioned, the Service is co-located with the UMSU Legal Service and the Sexual Harm Response Coordinators (SHRC). The SHRCs undertake specialist advocacy casework where students present with matters that have elements of gender-based violence and/or sexual harm.

Because we are co-located, and from time-to-time work on cases in tandem (depending on the type of matter), the Advocacy Service is a good place to start if you don’t know who is best placed to assist the student. We can provide this advice to you in order to refer the student appropriately, or we can refer the matter to the relevant area ourselves. While The Advocacy Service is the right first port of call for any student looking for assistance at UMSU – it is vital you help manage expectations by saying “the Advocacy Service will know who can help” rather than “the Advocacy Service will help you”.

While the Advocacy Service plays a number of roles in the organisation, casework is our bread and butter, and everyone is involved. Both the Team Leader and the Projects & Research Lead are also caseworkers in addition to their leadership duties in the areas of individual and structural advocacy respectively. Over time as we have developed and refined our self-help materials, this has shifted our focus to high stakes and often complex matters which disproportionately impact vulnerable students.

Complex matters involving vulnerable students are those which may involve a number of different

stakeholders or parties, multiple processes and or delays, high conflict disputes, and supporting students living with mental health challenges. Consequently, we need as many experienced case workers as possible. Much of our casework involves a rotation of 15 – 30 cases per advocate at any one time (and higher when demand is at its peak) and cases can take months and even years to resolve. The University's systems are often complex and unyielding, frequently making them user-hostile as opposed to user-friendly.

How students find their way to the UMSU Advocacy Service

The best way for students to contact the Advocacy Service is through our [contact form](#). The contact form has been designed specifically to elicit the information we need to be able to triage and allocate student cases as fast and effectively as humanly possible.

The triage process begins with an assessment of risk (including safety issues) and priority based on known deadlines or limitation periods. In some cases, once we have sufficient background, we can provide preliminary, general advice to students which will help them access self-help resources to self-advocate or even resolve their issue quickly. However, for more involved issues, we require students to provide a range of documents before we can provide tailored support. Relevant documentation may include university notices (such as misconduct allegations, or Show Cause notices), correspondence with university staff about an assessment dispute, or other documentary evidence related to the matter so we can fully understand the status of the matter and the case history. To provide advice without understanding the full situation accurately is negligent and could potentially result in us providing incorrect advice to a student's detriment. The stakes are usually high for students in advocacy work, so even a small error in advice can have catastrophic consequences. We want to be part of the solution, not make more problems for students seeking help.

For example, we may need to see and take time to read and understand the following pieces of information: a student who is involved in a lockstep complaint process will need to provide us information regarding the previous steps they have taken, students facing misconduct allegations will need to provide the allegation notice and evidence, students wishing to appeal a decision will need to provide the relevant documents related to the original decision.

Importantly, as a fully independent service, we do not have access to students' university records or correspondence they have had with the University and so we need the student to be in a place where they can engage with us to provide all relevant information before we can deliver our advice and assistance.

Another complication in our casework delivery is that the University will often change its application or interpretation of policy without notice. Consequently, we are often trying to piece together novel understandings of how the University is likely to respond in any given situation. Advocacy advice is a dynamic space, and it requires that we assist the student in not only responding appropriately and formally to the University, but in managing expectations in the art of the possible.

Student distress and frustration

Students can find this process extraordinarily frustrating which is understandable considering the impact some of these decisions will have on their future studies and chosen career. Many can experience intense distress or emotional crisis while trying to deal with an unyielding university process.

Sometimes this distress can be equated with urgency for a student. While some issues will undoubtedly be urgent as they concern a hearing date, hard deadline or limitation period, many students present with issues which are not about deadlines but are also not capable of being resolved quickly or easily.

For example, a student may only have a few days to apply for an appeal against the termination of their enrolment at the University. *This is urgent*. Whereas other students may be distressed because they've

received an academic misconduct allegation, but they have ample time to get advice and respond in a measured way.

A student who is distressed will have an understandable sense of urgency because they want urgent relief from feeling so distressed. Unfortunately, advocacy casework is predominantly a long game, taking weeks, months and even longer to resolve. We also need to be honest with students about the merits of their issue and the chances of resolution.

In other words, the UMSU Advocacy Service is not a crisis service. Crisis support should be provided by specialists with the requisite expertise and resources to assist rapidly. Moreover, we cannot help students with their advocacy matters while they are experiencing an emotional crisis, because our casework requires them to be in a place where they can take advice and act on it. This is why we provide preliminary advice via email in writing and predominantly see students on an appointment basis in person, on zoom or by phone—so we can provide them with meaningful and accurate advice on their matter, and they are in a position to take it in and then act on it.

For all these reasons, students in an immediate state of distress are best referred to the 24/7 Mental Health Crisis Line managed by the University. The Crisis Line is staffed by trained counsellors who can co-regulate with students and work through any emotional distress they may be feeling. While advocates must be honest and ethical in their appraisal of successful case resolution, counsellors can genuinely offer existential comfort, so this is the best place for students needing reassurance to be supported.

The University provides a **24/7 Mental Health Crisis Support Service** which is a great resource for students who are in distress. The service can be reached via phone and text:

Phone: 1300 219 459

Text: 0480 079 188

A counsellor can help students to identify coping strategies and explore options for longer-term support. When students call the service, they will hear a short, automated message before being connected with a counsellor. They may be placed on a brief hold, but they won't need to choose from any menu options.

The nature of University of Melbourne process deadlines

Generally, the following processes have deadlines students will need to meet, these include:

- General misconduct matters
- Academic or research misconduct matters
- Academic progress matters
- Special consideration matters
- Matters at the appeal stage

If a student is worried about any deadlines associated with their matter, the best thing they can do is to complete our contact form and note the deadline in the relevant part of the form for our attention.

Generally, however, we are seldom able to resolve student matters within a day or so, no matter how quickly we respond to the student. It is important to help students understand that university processes as well as complaints and disputes can take a long time to resolve and that the best thing they can do is to complete

the contact form as soon as they can so we can get about triage, preliminary advice and allocation.

The UMSU's Advocacy Service Triage Model

Once a matter appears in our system because a student has completed the contact form, both our Team Leader and the Assessment & Triage Coordinator will prioritise and allocate the matter according to:

- Urgency of matter
- Complexity of matter
- Level of student distress
- Advocacy case load

The allocation process can take anywhere from 24-72 hours and once the matter is allocated, it can take another 24-48 hours for advocates to respond depending on caseloads.

The UMSU Advocacy's Phone Service

Sometimes students worry that their form hasn't gone through, or they have come upon new information that should be included in their case. In such cases, the student can ring the UMSU Advocacy's Phone Service and leave a message explaining what the issue is. They should only use this service once they have completed the contact form.

Once a student completes the UMSU Advocacy contact form, if they have any further documents they wish to add or want to check that their documents have uploaded, they can leave a message on the UMSU Advocacy Phone:

UMSU Advocacy Phone Service: 03 9035 5793

We will be able to respond to students within 24-48 hours.

The UMSU Advocacy's Info Desk Hotline

We have set up a hotline between the new Student Drop-in Service, Advocacy, Legal and the SHRC on Teams. If you think we should set up a hotline between your department and Advocacy/Legal/SHRC to communicate about any students you come across in person and need to refer, please let us know!

The UMSU Advocacy/Legal/SHRC Internal Data Collection

It's important that we understand how many students contact Advocacy/Legal/SHRC through channels outside the contact form to better inform how we organise ourselves in future.

If a student contacts you for Advocacy/Legal/SHRC either in person, by phone, through the socials or by email, please take a moment to fill in the data collection survey:

[General | Advocacy/Legal/SHRC internal data collection | Microsoft Teams](#)

Please let the staff of the new Student Drop-in Service know if you are having trouble accessing the form.

Self-help materials

One of the ways we provide our services to a large number of students is to keep our website offerings extensive and up to date. Thousands of students access our comprehensive self-help materials that talk them through the various University of Melbourne processes. If you haven't looked at our website, we highly recommend that you do. Click [here](#). Below is a screenshot of the first page. As you can see, we have refined and user tested the information architecture to maximise accessibility. The tiles are divided by issue for students to quickly identify what information is relevant to them.

Advocacy

What is the Umsu Advocacy Service?

Who is the Umsu Advocacy Service?

How can the Umsu Advocacy Service help me?

Current Issues
[Academic Scams](#)
[Safe Student Activism on Campus](#)
[Uni Wireless & Your Privacy](#)

Academic Progress	Academic Misconduct	Assessment Disputes	Appeals to the Academic Board
Bullying, Discrimination & Sexual Harassment	Complaints & Grievances	External Referrals	Fee Remission in Special Circumstances
General Misconduct	Graduate Research Students	How to: Student	National Student Ombudsman (NSO)
SEDS & Ongoing Support	Selection & Admission Appeals	Special Consideration	Why is the University so complicated?

Contact the Umsu Advocacy Service

Got feedback? Let us know

Reports & Publications

Examples of how students may present to UMSU

The following are some examples to help you work through how best to respond to students. If you have any examples you would like to work through, feel free to contact us. We're happy to advise on any scenarios you would like our advice on!

Case study 1 – Student presenting with high levels of distress

Tania has just received an academic misconduct allegation telling her she's accused of using AI to complete her assignment. She's tried to talk to her tutor to explain that this is not the case, but they've told her they can't speak to her about the matter while there is an investigation in place.

She tried Stop 1 but they referred her to the new Student Drop-in Service. Tania can feel her heart racing and just wants some help. She's supposed to graduate at the end of the year, and her parents are coming over from overseas to attend the ceremony. She's been told that this allegation is likely to delay her graduation.

She presents at the new Student Drop-in Service asking for advice and wanting to speak to someone now.

How to Respond:

It's completely understandable that Tania is distressed about this and wants urgent help. She may be a good candidate for the University Counselling Service's crisis line to help her manage her anxiety and distress. From an advocacy perspective, misconduct allegations follow a lock-step process that can't be fast tracked--so the best thing Tania can do is complete the UMSU Advocacy contact form and specify when her deadline to respond is. Tania can be advised that the Advocacy Service will respond to her ASAP to inform her of her rights and how best to frame her response.

In situations such as this, a timely referral to the University of Melbourne's 24/7 Mental Health Crisis Support Service can really assist Tania to prepare to engage with the next steps of the process with Advocacy support. The counsellors there will be able to support Tania emotionally, so she is able to engage with the substantive aspects of her case. Sometimes, these matters cannot be resolved in time for graduation and so Tania will need the support of a counsellor to be able to work through her feelings of frustration and anguish.

Case study 2 – Student presenting as not being able to contact UMSU Advocacy

Abdul wants to speak to an advocate now. Yesterday he received his fourth academic progress show cause notice and knows he is likely to be terminated from the University. He completed the UMSU Advocacy contact form last night (he is familiar with the Service as he has used it in the past) and filled out another one again this morning. He wants to know whether he’s likely to be terminated this time and feels dread at the prospect. He presents to the new Student Drop-in Service and says he hasn’t received a response yet from the Advocacy Service.

How to Respond:

Ask Abdul if he has submitted a contact form and when. Once Abdul has communicated this information, you can let him know that the advocacy inbox is monitored daily and matters are prioritised according to urgency.

If Abdul has more information that he would like to provide, he should be directed to the UMSU Advocacy Phone Service and be assured that he should receive a response within 24-72 hours (excluding weekends).

Abdul should also be reassured that these University of Melbourne processes are not resolved quickly and the best thing to do is to wait for an advocate to contact him. If Abdul continues to be distressed, he would really benefit from a referral to the University of Melbourne 24/7 Mental Health Crisis Support Service which can support him to process his feelings of distress so he can then practically engage with the advice provided to him by the advocate.

Case study 3 – Student familiar with the UMSU Advocacy Service

Casey has had issues with the University for the past year which include matters relating to special consideration, academic progress and an assessment dispute. Casey has contacted the Advocacy Service and is well known to the Service. She has been working with an advocate for the past year and has contacted the Service many times during her undergraduate degree.

When particularly anxious, Casey sends multiple emails during the day and expects her advocate to respond immediately. She also gets impatient with the University taking so long to deal with her matter and wishes her advocate could just take charge of it and throw the book at the University. Casey also wishes her advocate could force the University to resolve her matter the way she thinks it should be sorted.

Casey presents to one of the Office Bearer’s officers crying and asks to speak to an advocate now.

How to Respond:

Ask Casey if she’s okay to chat and accompany her to the new Student Drop-in Service. Once at the new Student Drop-in Service, the staff at the Drop-in Service should ask if she has contacted the Advocacy Service before. Specifically, it’s always good to ask if she has been allocated an advocate or caseworker. This lets you know that Casey’s matter has already passed through the triage and allocation process and that her case is being attended to by an advocate already.

It’s important to reassure Casey that although the advocates are in high demand, that they are well experienced in these matters and that she is in good hands. Ask Casey for her name and student number and let her know that you’ll also alert the Advocacy service that you have spoken to her. If Casey continues to be distressed, then it is important that you refer her to the University of Melbourne’s 24/7 Mental Health Crisis Support Service. Let her know that they will be best placed to provide her with the emotional support she needs so she is able to engage with the practical advice that her advocate provides her with.

What to do if a student presents in distress

Please feel free to contact us if you wish to work through any scenarios or have any questions about the chart or the case studies.

