



UMSU Submission

Green Paper Melbourne Student Experience Enhancement Project

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Purpose

UMSU has reviewed the University's Green Paper issued as part of the Melbourne Student Experience Enhancement Project (MSEEP) and this document will set out a range of issues, concerns and recommendations for the University to consider as part of this Project.

Introduction

In the first instance USMU supports the University's initiative to improve student experience in a planned and coordinated way.

UMSU has identified a number of conceptual issues associated with the way in which MSEPP has been framed which have a direct bearing on the range of outcomes and, ultimately, the quality of student experience.

UMSU has also identified a number of specific actions the University should consider taking to improve student experience.

Conceptual Basis

The MSEEP Green Paper approaches the question of improving student experience. It is apparent that concern in relation to the nature of student experience is based on the results of various survey instruments that indicate trends towards falling rates of student satisfaction.

The Green Paper is largely focused on student academic experience and this appears to be based, at least in part, on an assertion contained within the Background Paper that curriculum is the basis of shared student experience; or that it is something that students have in common.

UMSU contests this formulation of student experience as too narrowly cast; at the same time noting that there are alternative bases on which to consider and define student experience and, therefore, a broader series of ways in which student experience could be enhanced.

UMSU notes that the University has asked responses that identify specific actions that the University could consider as part of this project. While USMU acknowledges this request it also submits that the very way in which the University conceptualizes and defines student experience should be the first step the University takes to improving this experience.

The University of Melbourne is a body politic and corporate. The University's governing act of parliaments establishes that students are a defined constituency of the University. This, in turn, supports student representation in institutional governance. Students are members of the University, in the same way that staff and senior executives are, and they are equal participants in an academic and social community that depends on their engagement and participation.

UMSU submits that the notion of constituency is the thread that ties students together; constituents have rights and responsibilities associated with membership of the body politic and the legitimate expectation that their participation will be welcomed and encouraged. Importantly, this right to participate is unfettered – there is no role for other constituents of the University to limit or define the role of another unilaterally.

Why is this important?

1. In the first instance this notion of participation is significant as it requires students to be actively engaged in institutional discussions about student experience from the point of conception. Students have a legitimate expectation that when University management determines that it is necessary to act on improving student experience that the very first conversations are with students themselves. That as constituents of the body politic students must be included in discussions of what the term student experience means.

2. The conception of student experience as academic experience is not consistent with how students understand or think about their own experiences as a student. While it is true to say that all students experience curriculum this does not mean that students' experiences of curriculum, or the curricula themselves, are sufficiently uniform for this to be anything more than a truism.

How should we define student experience?

Student experience is broadly acknowledged to relate include all aspects of a student's interaction with an institution – that it is inclusive of the student's academic social and physical experiences.¹ Baird and Gordon define student experience as all experiences of an individual student, including wider life experiences, while in their identity as a 'student' that contribute to their personal development as learners, of facets of the institution experienced by an individual student and 'consumer' experiences of an individual student.²

Baird and Gordon note that student expectations of student experience are characterised by, "ideas of learning and being empowered to learn feature markedly, together with some sense that the student experience should also encompass the preconditions for this transformation (such as a supportive environment)".

De Silva and Garnaut argue that there are two components to student experience – the academic and the non-academic.³ In focusing on what they characterise as "non-academic student experience" De Silva and Garnaut highlight the ways in which universities can address the "social and emotional" needs of their students. There may be some benefits at an operational level from distinguishing between academic and non-academic student experience, however, there is a danger that the significance of student experience in supporting academic outcomes for students may be diminished. As De Silva and Garnaut note, "academic and non-academic student experiences are interdependent" and student experience should be approached from this perspective.

Universities have a significant opportunity to contribute to student persistence and success through understanding the nature and importance of student experience in its broadest sense.

Students consider student experience in the broadest possible terms, and in a way that is consistent with definitions considered in the Background Paper. That is student experience refers to all the things that happen to a student during the time in which they are enrolled as a student.

In this context it is important to note that distinctions between academic experience and other aspects of student experience are not made by students. Students view the University as a single entity and see its parts – academic and non-academic – as part of an integrated whole. For example, students are frustrated by the conception and operation of Special Consideration. This effects students' academic experience, students experience poor service delivery but, more importantly, students experience this process as an indication that they are viewed with suspicion by the University and that service delivery is managed on the basis that students are the enemy. This cannot be neatly compartmentalized as a non-academic issue and outside the scope of MSEEP, nor cannot it be addressed without radically reconceiving the way in which the University relates to its student constituents.

Equally, students engage with the notion of constituency and citizenship by pursuing opportunities to participate independent of faculty or graduate school as they see the value of participation regardless of its link to formal curriculum.

¹ Elliott, K.M. and Healy, M.A., (2001) *Key Factors Influencing Student Satisfaction Related to Recruitment and Retention*, Journal of Marketing for Higher Education, Vol 10 (4)

² Baird, J, and Gordon, G.,(2009) *Systematic Quality Assurance for Diverse Student Experiences*, Paper presented at 2009 HERDSA Conference retrieved from http://www.auqa.edu.au/files/presentations/systematic_quality_assurance_for_diverse_student_experiences.pdf

³ De Silva, S and Garnaut, C., (2011), What is the Non-Academic Student Experience and Why it is Important?, *Journal of Institutional Research*, 16 (1)

Finally, this view is implicitly reflected by the University that, directly or indirectly, provides services and programs that meet the demands of the whole student in a way that is consistent with students' own understanding of their experience.

Understanding the relationship between defining student experience and measurements of student experience

UMSU notes that one of the issues identified in the Green Paper is falling ratings of student experience as measured in a range of survey instruments. It is critical to note that these surveys do not reflect objective measures of student experience; they are not measurements of performance against agreed or established standards. It is more accurate to understand these results as a measurement of university performance against student expectations of student experience.

While there are multiple variables that contribute to student expectations of student experience, and not all students have the same expectations, actions taken by the University that are not informed by these expectations and students' understanding of student experience will be less likely to be effective.

If, for example, the effectiveness of initiatives identified by MSEEP is measured by the same survey outcomes then initiatives that are not grounded in student expectations will not lead to improved survey outcomes.

The significance of this is twofold:

1. Students should have been engaged in MSEEP from the point of its conception to ground the project in students' experiences and to students' status as constituents of the University; and,
2. It is consistent with students' own understandings of student experience.

What does this all mean?

Students want the University to be actively engaged with their experience of higher education and in the broadest sense. To that extent UMSU welcomes MSEEP as a step towards improving student experience. However, for the University to make meaningful shifts in students' experiences of the institution a broader approach to the role and place of students must be taken.

Students will, of course, be critically engaged with curriculum and their academic experience and there are specific improvements that can be made to academic experience which will be detailed in this document.

UMSU will also identify other specific actions the University should take to address existing and, in some cases, longstanding deficits in student experience.

How to reimagine and redefine the role and place of students

In the first instance the absence of an overarching statement of what it means to be a student and the role of students at the University means that the University has not established a clear vision of what being a student looks like. Not only is this a missed opportunity to engage with students about what it means to be a constituent, and a member of an academic and social community, it means that the University does not signal to its staff – professional and academic – its aspirations for students throughout their enrolment.

A Vision for Student Experience

Currently the Student Charter appears to serve little purpose other than to state student rights and responsibilities. This is a narrow conception of the potential of a Student Charter – effectively sending students a message about compliance and not opportunity.

A Student Charter should be a document that sets out the University's aspirations for students as constituents, what the University will do to support students and the conceptual basis for the University's interactions with students. Effectively the Charter should be a commitment to the kind of student experience the University wants to support and should be developed in conjunction with students.

The Student Charter at Anglia Ruskin University⁴ is an example of this approach.

Academic/Student Advising

UMSU notes that the Green Paper raises questions in relation to the University's approach to Academic Advising. While UMSU welcomes a renewed focus on this issue the question of advising needs to be considered in the context of a broad view of student experience. This discussion is not a new one for the University of UMSU. UMSU has participated in a range of working groups and other University groupings convened to consider and discuss aspects of student advising since 2011.

UMSU has consistently supported University initiatives to broaden and deepen the role and nature of student advising as a critical component of improving student experience. Throughout this time there has been significant resistance from within the University to adopting approaches to student or academic advising more commonly found within universities in North America and where distinctions are not made between academic advising student advising.

UMSU notes that a renewed emphasis on improving the quality of "academic advising" runs the risk of creating multiple centres of advice for students in relation to overlapping and complementary subject matter. Students would be directed to different staff for the purposes of course advice, student advice and academic advice.

This type of demarcation between categories of advice not only leads to the greater potential for poor outcomes for students through conflicting or inaccurate advice but reflects a fragmented and uneven approach to student experience. The organisation of advising in a way that is not integrated and cohesive is more likely to be a reflection of internal institutional dynamics than a consistent approach to enhancing student experience.

UMSU notes that in 2011 the University defined Student Advising as:

"A university-wide, interactive activity that engages staff and students in ongoing conversations that support individual student learning, progress, engagement and success. Student advising embraces all aspects of a student's experience at the University that bear on and are affected by their engagement with our academic programs."

UMSU submits that this approach to student advising has not yet been realised and a critical component of MSEEP should be the development of a holistic and student-centred model of student advising that does not compartmentalise advising in ways that do not reflect student experience.

Curriculum and Engagement

Something that is touched on in the Green Paper is the adoption of transition and integration activities. While we agree that there needs to be more done surrounding how students transition into tertiary education, and support the ideas put forth, we believe that there needs to be further steps taken to reshape the curriculum with ideas that holistically consider the student experience in its totality.

Firstly, point 2 of the *Foundations and Belonging* section outlines the ways we can support students in the transition into the university classroom. We agree with the concept of more support in the transition into campus, and that orientation needs to embed in curriculum, and support a review into first year subjects that move towards this.

While a focus on academic standards and expectations is vital in preparing commencing students for academic success, there also needs to be a clear communication of other expectations of students as citizens of the campus body politic. A student's success in academia alone cannot be the sole measure of success in engaging

⁴ https://web.anglia.ac.uk/anet/student_services/public/student-charter-2019-2020.pdf

on campus; we need to be communicating to students more effectively that curriculum goes hand in hand with campus community building.

When looking at the compulsory workshops in the Arts Foundation courses, we can see a clear communication of the expectations of students in their assessments and study with skill building focus. These are currently under review by the University, but we believe that this format can be expanded to give way to discussion on the expectations of students at the University of Melbourne. This is an opportunity provided by the curriculum to talk to commencing students about their role in the campus community, their obligations in maintaining that the campus is safe and respectful, as well as introducing strategies for academic success and study. General workshops like this within disciplines would not only introduce students to discipline specific academic expectations, but also give students a broader idea of the services and opportunities the campus offers, presenting ideas of leadership, community and academia as intertwined from the beginning of their degree.

UMSU also propose the introduction of further modules and material subsequent to acceptance of offers that provide introductory insight to the social and academic culture, and opportunities that the University has to offer. This material, disseminated to students from the time of offer and before their commencement should cover areas of preparation for university life, what and how student services work, and provide information about community building initiatives, such as LICA, to commencing students. This will make the process of orientation less confronting, with students able to attend orientation with preparation and initial ideas of what they want their university experience to be. This is also an important step in fostering a relationship between the university and students, improving the onboarding process and establishing the university as an academic and social partner in a student degree.

Inclusive Learning Spaces for International Students

With the sharp increase in the number of International students commencing at the University of Melbourne in the past decade, there have been significant adjustment to both academia and student life on campus.

Bodies like UMSU International (UMSUI) have been made the transition to Australian tertiary education and the culture that surrounds easier to navigate. However, in surveys undertaken by UMSUI there are patterns of dissatisfaction and isolation that have continues to appear in within the international student cohort. For International student engagement in academic life to reach its potential, the University these issues need to be addressed. We understand that the University is in the process of creating a DVC International, however these are recommendations that we think should be at the forefront of the way we structure learning and citizenship at the University.

The main area of concern found by UMSUI is the accessibility of teaching spaces and assessment for students, many of whom, while proficient in English, experience significant cultural and language barriers in accessing their study. The understanding of course materials, lectures not being recorded, Australian learning standards and jargon, as well as issues of isolation due to large class and group sizes have been flagged as areas that need to be improved.⁵

To combat this issue, UMSU proposes the introduction of tutor training, focusing on cultural sensitivity, and changes in the curriculum to help address this. For international students to be engaged in the classroom, we need tutors to understand not only cultural and language sensibilities, but also how the way they present content to their students can isolate and impede on academic performance. Access to lecture notes, smaller groups, and a shift in curriculum towards more culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogical practices in curriculum are steps that can be taken to engage international students further into academia. The relationship between staff and student become especially more important when looking at International students. Unintentional plagiarism has been flagged as an ongoing issue for International students, and that a lack of

⁵ University of Melbourne Student Union International (2017). International Student Survey 2017. [online] Melbourne: UMSUI. Available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/14yWab0isp6WQ8ff7KAPLSSzDarI446I/view>

communication about assessment expectations (coupled with precarious financial and study situations) create a fear of errors that stop students from seeking help when needed.

Ongoing staff training and professional development within faculties is vital. There is strong evidence that suggests that there is a need to support learner-centric, culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms for International students, and that student-teacher relationships and the addressing of language and cultural barriers need to occur in the creation of an inviting learning environment.⁶

Peer-to-Peer Learning

Peer-to-peer study is a huge factor in navigating student success. Peer-to-peer independent learning opportunities are a possibility to increase confidence in learning, as well as a way to engage students in their degree through the fostering of social and academic relationships.

UMSU suggests a review into Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS). Programs like PASS not only give space to peer assisted learning by the university but have the potential to have multi-faceted benefits to both instructors and students alike.

UMSU propose that this program is expanded across faculties, and that its practice and features are reviewed to investigate ways we can enhance peer-led study and integrate more structured mentorship systems between older and commencing students. While we support the idea of non-compulsory study groups being a part of student timetables, we think that this can be integrated into the already existing PASS program. Expanding the program to include a group study aspect, as well as creating more of a leadership and mentoring role with PASS tutors means that we are able to localise opportunities of peer-assisted mentored learning into discipline focused learning and social interaction.

There are benefits of the PASS system to not only students engaging independent study, but those facilitating and the culture of campus as a whole. Student tutors are not only further engaged in the academic aspect of their education, but they are able to gain more social connections with the student body and become further integrated into their degree and the campus away from formal teaching spaces. Creating more opportunities for student-led learning also lends itself to people exploring their discipline further and creating more connections with their contemporaries.

Discipline identity and the Melbourne Model

UMSU notes the University's concern around a lack of discipline identity, the role of discipline-based clubs and societies, and the impact on student experience.

It is important to note that students do already choose to participate in and join discipline-based clubs and societies and that there are currently 56 of these clubs affiliated to UMSU. For a club to be affiliated to UMSU it must demonstrate sufficient support from students, and must continue to do so to maintain its affiliation. Cumulatively these clubs and societies clearly account for a significant aspect of student engagement activity fostering the kind of social connections that support student success.

It is important to interrogate why emphasis is placed on the value of a discipline experience, particularly in the context of the Melbourne Model and the impact that this has on student experience. The impact of breadth on undergraduate enrolment has the effect of diluting the notion of a discipline-based cohort. A lack of discipline identity for students should be seen as an endorsement for the Melbourne Model.

UMSU would also suggest that if students do share an experience in relation to curriculum then it is a shared experience of the Melbourne Model and seeking to build up discipline-based identity and experience is

⁶ MacGregor, A. and Folinazzo, G. (2017). Best Practices in Teaching International Students in Higher Education: Issues and Strategies. *Australian Social Work*, 2(72), 323-325.

counterposed to the notion of a shared experience. UMSU also notes that while the Green Paper relates to undergraduate students only the notion of student experience is not neatly divisible by status as a graduate or an undergraduate.

UMSU does not believe it is in the interest of the Union, the University, or the student body to manufacture and manage social cohesion within clubs for multiple reasons. Clubs and societies are autonomous bodies that are usually affiliated to UMSU, but have absolute control over their activities (within reason and regulation). More so, increased visibility of the influence of UMSU and/or the University may have negative impacts to the involvement of students, based on their locus of control and attributional inclinations. UMSU notes that these clubs are student-created, and student-led initiatives.

It is also significant to note that the current strength of discipline-based student grouping is but a part of a broader and thriving range of student engagement activities that occur without the formal involvement of the University and which are driven entirely by demand from students. The total number of clubs and societies affiliated to UMSU is expected to reach 240 during 2019 and is already the single largest area of student participation and engagement outside the classroom. That UMSU received almost 40 applications for the affiliation of new clubs and societies in 2019 indicates that students are engaged with each other and the processes which support this peer engagement.

When coupled with the range of student-led volunteer programs and student participation in UMSU's creative and performing arts programs it is clear that students do participate and engage on a large scale in activities which are of interest to students. The value of this participation and engagement is not given appropriate weight by the Green Paper. Equally, the lack of acknowledgement of student-led engagement is consistent with the limited and flawed approach to the idea of student experience set out in the Green Paper.

UMSU recommends that the University engage in educating faculties' engagement teams on the concept of student unionism and how to effectively engage students in academic and social connections through these clubs. Primarily, it would be expected that faculty and schools would invite connection and support, but discipline-based clubs would continue to be student-led and separate to the faculty and its staff. It would be expected that through this connection, the faculty would become aware of how and why clubs operate and provide important opportunities for academic and professional development. Through the increase of faculty involvement and visibility in clubs, students may conceptualise the cultural and social capital from these groups. And potentially, orientate these concepts toward their employability.

Employability and Readiness for Next Steps

In engaging and discussing graduate employability and a student's next steps, UMSU notes that employment and graduate expectations differ vastly and fluctuate throughout the student journey. When interrogating employability and career advice, UMSU encourages the University to help students explore all versions of their possible selves. By possible selves we mean the conceptualisation students may have of themselves in the future. For some students these possible selves may be well developed, others less so; they might relate to various aspects of their life including their career, education, or health. They may be experienced in isolation or dynamically. The Green Paper sets out multiple options for preparing students for next steps, and UMSU supports these initiatives.

However, some options should be available to students prior to their third year of study. Both second- and third-year students are given the opportunity to engage in alumni mentoring. Much like mentoring, research opportunities and experiences ought to be promoted to students earlier on in their study than their third year. Inquiry- and research-based instructional approaches are seen as offering rich opportunities to improve student engagement and learning in all disciplines, as well as fostering attitudes and skills relevant equally to research careers, many other careers based on knowledge work, and engaged citizenship in and outside of the university

community. Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University in 1998 recommended that students should engage in inquiry and research environment to further augment their education.⁷

Eagerness to engage in research-based learning (and inevitably the publishing of research) is not an empty-handed gesture at the University of Melbourne. Many programs already exist to celebrate the work of undergraduate students, including the Melbourne Arts Student Society “Writing Competition” and the University of Melbourne Arts Journal.

Embedding research experiences and employability into curriculum may also increase mentoring opportunities that exist on campus.

Service Delivery and Application of Policy and Procedure

UMSU has made regular and often repeated representations regarding actions required to address various aspects of University service delivery which impact student experience. This includes:

- The Advocacy Service’s Quarterly Reports
- UMSU submissions, written and verbal, to University processes including:
 - The Phillips KPA Review of Student Services (2011)
 - The Student Lifecycle Review (2013)
 - The Business Improvement Project (2014)
- Participation in a variety of University working groups in relation to the content and application of University policy and procedure.

The Student Union Advocacy Service commenced operation as the “single advocacy service” on May 1, 2012. Since that time, the Advocacy Service has produced a Quarterly Report documenting the sorts of problems students routinely face with the University’s support services.

Since that first quarter of 2012 Special Consideration and student support related matters, and assessment disputes have consistently comprised around 40% of all casework presentations.

University’s culture as a barrier to effective support

The Quarterly Reports also document a persistent pre-occupation among University staff that the incidence of students practicing “strategic behaviours” to gain unfair advantages in their studies has escalated. This culture of distrust and moral panic forms a backdrop across the seven years of these reports, although there is neither research that provides evidence to support this approach, nor anecdotal evidence of this type. This is another example of a disjunction between actual student experience and the University’s approach, and one which we believe would be improved by active engagement with students as constituents.

In this context, successive Quarterly Reports observe that frequently students (and their families) experience the implementation of the special consideration system as punitive and lacking in compassion. It appears that one reason for this is a degree of compassion fatigue among staff as a result of the under resourcing of areas dealing with students experiencing equity and disability related issues.

Lack of wellbeing support and academic misconduct

In 2014 and again in 2018, the Advocacy Service noted an increase in students facing allegations of misconduct for submitting fraudulent documentation to support special consideration applications. We noted that many of the students who had purchased falsified documents present as immature and naïve, emotionally vulnerable,

⁷ Kenny, S. S., Alberts, B., Booth, W. C., Glaser, M., Glassick, C. E., Ikenberry, S. O., ... & Yang, C. N. (1998). Boyer Commission on educating undergraduates in the research university. *Reinventing undergraduate education: A blueprint for America’s research universities*.

and some had documented mental health problems, including anxiety and depression. In all finalised cases of which we were aware, the penalty was termination of enrolment, which especially for International students is a penalty with a significant and ongoing impact. It is also an outcome which affects not only the students, but also their families well into the future. A number of the students expressed suicidal thoughts and were subject to emergency counselling assessment and regular welfare checks.

In short, the generally impetuous, obviously reckless, and always desperate decision to buy these documents unleashed an unmitigated nightmare for these students. While no one would argue that the students are not responsible for their decisions, and that fraud is a serious and aggravated form of misconduct, the University continues to owe a duty of care to these students by considering its role in creating the conditions where students felt that obtaining fraudulent documents was a viable option.

What is the University climate which creates a market for the scammers producing the falsified documents? We are concerned that the demand is increased by a context in which some students have become so desperate they will risk everything, just to get an extension for an assignment, or an opportunity to re-sit their examination. Even the basic economics of the situation make the problem clear. Where an International student will need to pay between \$70 and \$100 to see a doctor and have them complete an HPR form for Special Consideration, the online scammers will produce one for the equivalent of \$20.

Reactive rather than pro-active approach to mental health issues

In the middle of 2014, the Advocacy Service began highlighting the over representation of students suffering mental health problems in Course Unsatisfactory Progress (as it then was) processes, noting that a large number of university students fall into in the age group featuring the highest proportion of those who suffer mental illness.⁸ The Advocacy Service noted that it frequently sees students who have been struggling to keep up with their studies due to problems with their mental health and those 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. In 2019 the Service continues to see the same or greater volume of these mental health related issues as it had five years previously.

University restructures and the impacts on student support

After the first semester of the new Melbourne Operating Model the Service reported an increase in the presentation of students seeking advice and support on issues of discrimination, harassment or bullying. This had resulted from a change in the availability of support for students wishing to report or seek support on these matters after the disestablishment of the University Advisors Network.

We also noted an increase in students with disabilities approaching the Service for assistance liaising with academic staff subsequent to the downsizing and restructure of the Disability Liaison Unit, a deficit which remains today. There is limited or no active support available from the Student Equity and Disability Service where the student is in dispute over the implementation of adjustments with academic staff.

Other University restructures during 2015 created gaps in support and service delivery for students including the full devolution of administrative responsibility for graduate research to the faculties and graduate schools subsequent to the disestablishment of the Melbourne School of Graduate Research. This resulted in many matters arising with higher degree research students where their complaints have effectively 'fallen between the cracks.' That is – no one seemed to have or recognise responsibility for investigation and resolution of those grievances. This means some serious issues remained unaddressed for a lengthy period while responsibility for

⁸ That is – between 16 and 25 years old. *The Mentally Ill Students' Guide for Academics*
<<https://www.unimelb.edu.au/accessibility/guides/mental-illness>>

their resolution continued to be unsettled. The system remains fragmented and offers a patchwork and uneven experience across faculties.

Adequate resources for sound administrative decision making

The identification of a policy gap between Special Consideration Procedures and support for chronic conditions eventually lead to the establishment of a working group to address the concerns. Specifically, UMSU advocated for a process whereby the university would accept applications for 'adjustment' generally and then determine the relevant procedure to apply - rather than requiring students to determine which procedure is appropriate to their application.

One of the issues UMSU has most frequently raised with University student support has been its lack of capacity to deal with complex matters. We have consistently highlighted examples of complex cases where the original decision makers fetter their discretion by rigid adherence to special consideration policy. We note that policies should be 'sufficiently flexible to allow individual cases to be considered on their own merits',⁹ and that these sorts of poor decision-making practices have a detrimental impact on both the integrity of assessment, and the student experience, and seem to run counter to the University's support objectives.

Increased support for vulnerable students with complex needs

Throughout 2015 to date, we have regularly raised serious problems with the lack of case management available to students with complex needs. We have noted consistently that the sort of decision making in this area must be both nuanced and responsive to the student's reality, balancing regard for academic integrity with compassion to make logical determinations based on all of the circumstances. We noted in 2015 that the Student Lifecycle Review of 2013 identified Special Consideration as a significant "pain point" for students and recommended that the University take action to address in both the operation of the process and the way in which it has been conceived. Since 2013 Special Consideration policy and procedure has been subject to almost constant review and change; however, for many students the issues that gave rise to the 2013 recommendations remain or have become worse. At one point we referred to the Kafkaesque quality of the experience for many students, their families and their health care practitioners; and by this we meant the process remains both opaque and characterised by an extreme asymmetry of information and power.

Quarterly Reports have made recommendations regarding case management of students with complex needs dozens of times since then. Repeatedly noting that the University needs to ensure there are sufficient resources to enable sensitive and appropriate decision making with respect to special consideration specifically, and student support more broadly. Additionally, we have consistently recommended a review of the assumptions underpinning the approach to these students, and particularly, aside from proper case management, that, in the absence of evidence that students are actively attempting to abuse the process to obtain an unfair advantage, the process should be based on a good faith relationship with students. There seems to be a double standard, when it comes to accepting documentary evidence from students compared to the process for staff sick leave, where presumably health practitioner statements are accepted in good faith. This unequal approach might also be addressed by regarding students as constituents of the University.

Ultimately, despite some promising early discussions and plans discussed by the Special Consideration Working Group in 2012-2013, six years later, we are no closer to a properly resourced, case-managed process for very sick and vulnerable students.

Additionally, students with complex needs have negligible support in a range of important areas which are generally outside of the Advocacy Service's charter. This extends from simple administrative queries, requests for help filling out special consideration applications or enrolment and course related forms; and extends to very complex matters involving advocacy-related issues interwoven with more general support needs.

⁹ Mark Aronson, Bruce Dyer and Matthew Groves, *Judicial Review of Administrative Action* (4th Ed, 2009) at p. 311.

We believe that many of these issues were previously accommodated by local staff in Student Centres who were able to provide this level of direct assistance. Many tertiary advocacy services include a welfare component which offers well-being services and support to students in addition to advocacy functions. The UMSU Advocacy Service has structured its service model having regard to the supports for students purportedly offered by the University. We have consciously sought to avoid duplication of existing services for students and focussed our charter on providing independent, expert advocacy on academic and administrative matters. Accordingly, the Service does not offer counselling or general emotional/psychological support. The Service is also unable to access student records, the SAS or other university administrative tools, and does not provide any form of course advising.

Students report that they approach the Advocacy Service with matters outside our ambit for a range of reasons, including a greater awareness and profile of the Advocacy Service's support compared to University support options, the relative ease with which students can make direct contact with the Service via phone or drop in without lengthy waits; the change from the smaller local student centres, and shift from the comprehensive disability support at the erstwhile Disability Liaison Unit to the stripped down support offered under the centralised Stop 1 service model.

It is simply not enough to provide a single access point with too few staff to manage the volume of transactions. The result has been to reduce complex discretionary decision making to formulaic, rigid rule-based approaches which have no regard to evidence or specific circumstances, let alone the University's duty of care. Over the last decade or more, this has effectively shifted the burden to the Advocacy Service, and in turn, put greater than necessary pressure on the central complaints process and ultimately the Academic Board Appeal process. It is a matter of human rights that students with disabilities are provided with reasonable adjustments and accommodation of their circumstances.

UMSU does not advocate for a return to localised student centres; however, there is a clear need to ensure that the University provides a comprehensive range of properly resourced support services to students that supports their enrolments.

Increasing assessment disputes

The volume and frequency of assessment dispute related presentations to the Advocacy Service has also grown steadily over the last decade. Concurrently students have reported a number of factors affecting their experience of assessment at the University, and in particular the transparency of assessment practices, and support in relation to their assessment.

Students consistently report problems accessing academic staff in relation to guidance on assessment prior to submission, and feedback on assessment post grading. Additionally, some students with particular learning disabilities and other support needs report that the level of support provided for them at the Academic Skills Unit is insufficient, and in some cases significantly inferior to offerings at other Universities where they have previously studied.

Opportunity to have a significant impact on student experience of service delivery and the application of policy and procedure

There are a number of significant improvements the University could make to its approach to service delivery and student support that would have a positive impact on student experience. Accordingly, the University should consider:

- Situating service delivery to students within the broader context of an institutional approach to student experience and the role of the student within the University as a body politic.

- investing significant resources in this area and commit to a proper case managed approach to vulnerable complex needs students.
- Addressing the University's role in contributing to circumstances where some students find it easier to obtain or submit fraudulent documents than seek assistance within the institution.
- Strengthening administrative decision-making processes to ensure the proper exercise of discretion and to ensure the application of principles of procedural fairness.
- Providing greater clarity and transparency to students in relation to assessment.