

Student Union Advocacy Service Report July - September 2014

Introduction

This quarter typically sees a high volume of appeals to the Academic Board from both CUPC decisions and Special Consideration determinations. Typically assistance for students wishing to lodge Academic Board appeals is quite intensive and this is reflected in the volume of contacts this quarter.

Programmes and Events this Quarter

Annual User Survey

The Advocacy Service conducts an annual survey of student users of the service and every two years we conduct a similar survey of key university staff who have direct dealings with the service.

This year the student survey is being conducted over the months of September and October. An invitation to complete the online survey was sent via email to just over 300 students who had indicated they were happy to be contacted for this purpose. A full account of the findings will be provided in the next report once the data is analysed.

CUPC Video Project

In June this year Senior Advocate Donna Markwell finalised a project brief and completed planning for a video walk-through of a 'typical' Course Unsatisfactory Progress Committee (CUPC) meeting. The resource - a short, stop motion, Point of View style video of a student attending a CUPC meeting - aims to familiarise affected students with the process of negotiating the CUPC process by way of a walkthrough of the meeting with helpful advice and instructions throughout.

The video was originally conceived after we noticed anecdotally that, even after obtaining advice from the Advocacy Service and/or their Student Centre, students frequently noted that they found facing an unknown committee daunting and the meeting process itself to be both surprising and at times confronting. This video aims to provide a level of familiarity with the process so students can feel more confident and better prepared to put their best foot forward.

The video focusses on procedure – and explains how it happens and aims to complement the information and advice provided via our website and appointments with advocates. The video also introduces the Peer Support Program for additional support. We hope this will also be a useful tool for Student Centres and other University departments and that it will materially improve students' confidence and reduce their anxiety and distress.

The video has been shot and is currently in post-production - we expect to launch it in time for second semester CUPC period by final release of results in semester two.

Peer Support Programme

This quarter 223 students were assisted by 41 peer support volunteers in 10 faculties and schools. The number of volunteers almost doubled this semester – continuing a trend of steady growth in the programme. The service experiences a consistently high demand for volunteering opportunities.

The PSP attracts volunteers via an advertising campaign using the Student Portal, posters, the Student Union web site and word of mouth. We train a cohort of between 20 and 40 volunteer students every semester. Only students in their second year or beyond are eligible. Training is compulsory and is conducted over a full day. The training provides the volunteers with a solid overview and context for the academic progress review procedures conducted across the University, including the requirements of procedural fairness and the statutory role of the support person in this process. Additionally the training informs the volunteers about the university's support services and provides practical experience and development of skills required to approach, support and interact with students who are very stressed or even distressed.

The PSP is coordinated by the Student Services Officer who manages the day-to-day rostering and support of volunteers. Generally peer volunteers do not work in faculties or schools in which they are enrolled. This semester over half of the volunteers were graduate students including two PhD candidates.

Trends and Issues this Quarter

Students at Risk of Unsatisfactory Progress – a mutual responsibility?

It is well established and codified in the *Responsible Conduct of Students Procedure (MPF1061)* that students bear the responsibility, among other things, to

be well informed about their course and course requirements, and plan their studies accordingly, attend classes and submit work in a timely manner, prepare for and actively participate in learning experiences such as discussion and debate and take joint responsibility for their learning and accept responsibility for moving towards intellectual independence.

It is uncontroversial to suggest that, where the very problems requiring students to seek special consideration or equitable adjustments also affect their ability to reach out for assistance or take action, and the University is aware of their condition, then the University has a duty of care to these students to provide *active* support rather than maintain that the burden of responsibility lies solely with the student.

In this context, we are encouraged by the Academic Board Appeal Committee recently taking the approach that the relevant faculty should account for what pro-active measures were in place to support students approved for equitable adjustments when determining decisions to terminate the student's enrolment.

Students, CUPC and Self Harm -when stress becomes extreme distress

In the context of duties of care owed to students, an incident during the most recent round of CUPC appeals where a student attempted suicide subsequent to having their appeal dismissed, has highlighted the vulnerability of some students who may be suffering extreme levels of

distress during the CUPC process. Although every semester a certain number of students have their enrolment terminated due to unsatisfactory progress without incident, the whole of the University community needs to be alive to the possibility that some students will experience this as a catastrophic event. Students with pre-existing conditions and/or a lack of support networks which increase their emotional vulnerability or decrease their resilience in this situation may be especially at risk.

For this reason, all staff at the Advocacy service undertake Mental Health First Aid training every two years. This training helps to sensitise staff to warning signs that students are not coping and enhance our capacity to provide early intervention strategies where there may be a risk of self-harming behaviour. Given not all students in this situation will seek or receive support from this service however, it is recommended that university staff involved in the CUPC process, including CUPC and CUPC Appeal Committee chairs also undertake appropriate training to assist in early intervention where appropriate.

CUPC Decisions withdrawn and the re-made when appeal on foot

From time to time faculties and schools, presented with new information arising from a student's CUPC appeal submission will, prior to the appeal, withdraw a previous decision to terminate that student's enrolment. Naturally this Service is always happy to see such decisions appropriately made and at the earliest opportunity. The lengthy period between notice of the CUPC decision to terminate enrolment and an appeal hearing is extremely difficult for many students. Early withdrawal of decisions to terminate enrolment serve to minimise the extreme stress such decisions generally apply to affected students.

However there was an instance this quarter which highlighted the necessity for faculties and schools to consider the requirements of procedural fairness when reconsidering CUPC outcomes once an appeal is on foot. In this case the faculty withdrew its decision to terminate the student's enrolment after the student supplied further particulars of their situation in support of their appeal. However the faculty then effectively remitted the decision to the original CUPC which reconvened to reconsider the outcome, substituting a semester long suspension for the original decision. The new decision came after the student had already submitted assessment and consequently the student also wished to dispute this outcome. With the original appeal cancelled, the student was required to submit a new appeal which has drawn out the process even further. It may be prudent in situations such as this for the original appeal to be heard and determined by the Appeal Committee as final and binding, rather than start a new process so late in the semester.

Changes to Academic rehabilitation and re-admission of students provisions of the Academic Progress Review Procedure

This Service was alerted to recent changes to the *Academic Progress Review Procedure* (MPF1025) in the September policy bulletin. The Service is unaware whether the proposed changes were previously circulated for feedback prior to approval as they were not available via the usual policy network consultation process.

The change of concern to us is to the provisions regarding academic rehabilitation and re-admission of students subsequent to their enrolment being terminated due to unsatisfactory

progress. Specifically the changes have added a requirement for students applying for readmission to be subject to a competitive selection process which may require application through VTAC, whereas previously students were able to apply directly to the faculty/graduate school, having demonstrated academic rehabilitation by successfully completing at least four tertiary level subjects in a related discipline to that of the course being studied.

We believe that raising the threshold of academic rehabilitation to include competitive selection across the student's whole tertiary results will effectively render 'academic rehabilitation' an impossibility.

Advocacy Service Statistics

Comparative data – July - September 2014

This quarter 305 students were provided a service resulting in 705 contacts. In the same quarter last year, the service saw 426 students which resulted in 886 contacts with the service. A large volume of these matters concerned assessment and course unsatisfactory progress as will be seen below. The reduced number of students seen this quarter compared to the same quarter last year is likely to be a consequence of changes to the Academic progress policy last semester which raised the threshold of unsatisfactory progress for coursework masters students resulting in fewer students attending CUPC.

There were 38 graduate coursework students assisted in relation to CUPC this quarter, compared to 104 in the same quarter last year – reflecting a significant decrease due to the policy change.

Additionally, the Advocacy website received over 4500 page views this quarter. More than 1100 of these were on the CUPC page. Other popular pages included information on study tips, assessment disputes 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. 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 generally identified according to the policy or procedure by which the University provides possible resolutions.

July - September 2014

All Students			Graduate Coursework students			RHD students		
Course Unsatisfactory Progress	218	68.99%	Course Unsatisfactory Progress	38	57.58%	Progress - HDR	7	35.00%
Special Consideration	24	7.59%	Assessment Dispute	9	13.64%	Supervision Problems	5	25.00%
Assessment Dispute	18	5.70%	Special Consideration	6	9.09%	Course Unsatisfactory Progress	4	20.00%
Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	9	2.85%	Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	3	4.55%	Student complaint about uni staff	1	5.00%
Student Admin - Enrolment problems	8	2.53%	Student Admin - Enrolment problems	2	3.03%	Scholarship Issues	1	5.00%
Progress - HDR	7	2.22%	Not Specified	2	3.03%	Intellectual Property Dispute	1	5.00%
Supervision Problems	6	1.90%	Student complaint about uni staff	1	1.52%	General Misconduct	1	5.00%
Academic Misconduct - Falsified docs	4	1.27%	Incorrect Advice	1	1.52%			
Admission - Selection Appeal	4	1.27%	General Misconduct	1	1.52%			
Student complaint about uni staff	3	0.95%	Equitable Accommodation (SEAD)	1	1.52%			
Not Specified	3	0.95%	Advance Standing Credit/RPL	1	1.52%			
Academic Misconduct - Collusion	2	0.63%	Academic Misconduct - Falsified docs	1	1.52%			
Advance Standing Credit/RPL	2	0.63%						
General Misconduct	2	0.63%						
Vocational Placement Problems	1	0.32%						
Incorrect Advice	1	0.32%						
Intellectual Property Dispute	1	0.32%						
Academic Misconduct - Exam	1	0.32%						
Scholarship Issues	1	0.32%						
Equitable Accommodation (SEAD)	1	0.32%						

July - September 2013

All Students			Graduate Coursework students			RHD students		
Course Unsatisfactory Progress	333	75.51%	Course Unsatisfactory Progress	104	74.29%	Progress - HDR	5	29.41%
Assessment Dispute	22	4.99%	Assessment Dispute	12	8.57%	Supervision Problems	2	11.76%
Special Consideration	20	4.54%	Special Consideration	6	4.29%	Student complaint about uni staff	2	11.76%
Academic Misconduct - Exam	12	2.72%	Student complaint about uni staff	4	2.86%	Vocational Placement Problems	1	5.88%
Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	8	1.81%	Course structure/changes	3	2.14%	Research Ethics	1	5.88%
Supervision Problems	5	1.13%	Student Admin - Enrolment problems	2	1.43%	Intellectual Property Dispute	1	5.88%
Course structure/changes	5	1.13%	Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	2	1.43%	General Misconduct	1	5.88%
Incorrect Advice	4	0.91%	Vocational Placement Problems	1	0.71%	Course Unsatisfactory Progress	1	5.88%
General Misconduct	4	0.91%	Student Admin - Remission of Fees	1	0.71%	Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	1	5.88%
Progress - HDR	4	0.91%	Quality Teaching	1	0.71%	Academic Misconduct - Exam	1	5.88%
Student Admin - Enrolment problems	4	0.91%	Other	1	0.71%	Not Specified	1	5.88%
Student Admin - Remission of Fees	4	0.91%	General Misconduct	1	0.71%			
Student complaint about uni staff	4	0.91%	Equitable Accommodation (SEAD)	1	0.71%			
Admission - Selection Appeal	3	0.68%	Academic Misconduct - Research	1	0.71%			
Vocational Placement Problems	2	0.45%						
Other	1	0.23%						
Academic Misconduct - Collusion	1	0.23%						
Equitable Accommodation (SEAD)	1	0.23%						
Quality Teaching	1	0.23%						
Research Ethics	1	0.23%						
Academic Misconduct - Research	1	0.23%						
Intellectual Property Dispute	1	0.23%						

Distribution by graduate/undergraduate status

July - September 2014

Graduate	105	34.43%
Undergraduate	200	65.57%

July - September 2013

Graduate	159	37.24%
Undergraduate	268	62.76%

Distribution by International/Domestic Status

July - September 2014

Domestic	234	76.72%
International	71	23.28%

July - September 2013

Domestic	308	72.13%
International	119	27.87%

Distribution of cases over all by Faculty/School – July - September 2014

In order to make the following data more meaningful the relative weighting of faculties by enrolment has been included. Currently this is based on approximate data sourced from University Careers and Employment. This allows a more accurate comparison of how faculties are represented by issues presenting to the service. It is also relevant to note that it is not possible to draw from this data why faculties may be over or under represented. For example, high representation may reflect an active referral policy within that faculty or it may disclose certain procedural issues.

	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
Science	101	33.55%	8.65%	>>>
Melbourne School of Engineering	28	9.30%	4.18%	>>
Melbourne School of Land and Environment	19	6.31%	3.81%	>>
Architecture Building & Planning	18	5.98%	2.61%	>>
Melbourne School of Design	11	3.65%	2.48%	>
Business & Economics	24	7.97%	11.61%	<
Melbourne Law School	12	3.99%	4.52%	<
Medicine, Dentistry & Health Sciences	22	7.31%	19.31%	<<
Melbourne Graduate School of Education	7	2.33%	6.58%	<<
Melbourne Graduate School of Science	2	0.66%	2.30%	<<<
Veterinary Science	1	0.33%	1.61%	<<<
Graduate School of Business and Economics	10	3.32%	3.98%	==
Arts	40	13.29%	13.60%	==
Melbourne Business School (MBS)	4	1.33%		-
Not Yet Admitted	1	0.33%		-

Commentary

The proportion of graduate to undergraduate students was 34.43% to 65.57% (compared with 37.24% to 62.76% for the same period last year).

This quarter there were 76.72% domestic students to 23.28% international students presenting to the service, this compares closely with the same quarter last year where the breakdown was 72.13% to 27.87% and which is aligned with the proportion of domestic to international students enrolled at the University.

The primary presenting issue this quarter was course unsatisfactory progress. Students from the Faculty of Science represented over a third of all those presenting for assistance with Course Unsatisfactory Progress. This was followed by students from the Faculties of Arts and Business and Economics. Special Consideration and Assessment disputes were the next most common issues in roughly equal numbers. Special Consideration issues were concentrated in Science, Business & Economics and Arts. As usual, the report concentrates on the top four issues for the quarter; however, further breakdowns against other primary issues and against various demographics are available on request.

Overall, presenting students came from 14 schools and faculties. Science was the most frequently represented faculty followed by the Schools of Engineering and Land and Environments respectively.

Course Unsatisfactory Progress - By Faculty/School

Science	85	38.99%
Arts	24	11.01%
Business & Economics	19	8.72%
Melbourne School of Land and Environment	17	7.80%
Melbourne School of Engineering	16	7.34%
Architecture Building & Planning	16	7.34%
Medicine, Dentistry & Health Sciences	12	5.50%
Graduate School of Business and Economics	9	4.13%
Melbourne Law School	6	2.75%
Melbourne School of Design	5	2.29%
Melbourne Graduate School of Education	4	1.83%
Melbourne Graduate School of Science	2	0.92%
Unknown	2	0.92%
Melbourne Business School (MBS)	1	0.46%

Course Unsatisfactory Progress – by Graduate/Undergraduate

Undergraduate	156	71.56%
Graduate	62	28.44%

Course Unsatisfactory Progress – by International/Domestic

Domestic	171	78.44%
International	47	21.56%

Special Consideration - By Faculty/School

Science	7	29.17%
Business & Economics	4	16.67%
Arts	4	16.67%
Melbourne School of Engineering	3	12.50%
Medicine, Dentistry & Health Sciences	3	12.50%
Melbourne School of Design	1	4.17%
Melbourne Graduate School of Education	1	4.17%
Melbourne Business School (MBS)	1	4.17%

Special Consideration – by Graduate/Undergraduate

Undergraduate	16	66.67%
Graduate	8	33.33%

Special Consideration – by International/Domestic

Domestic	16	66.67%
International	8	33.33%

Assessment Disputes - By Faculty/School

Melbourne School of Design	4	22.22%
Melbourne School of Engineering	3	16.67%
Arts	3	16.67%
Medicine, Dentistry & Health Sciences	2	11.11%
Not recorded	2	11.11%
VCA	1	5.56%
Science	1	5.56%
Melbourne Business School (MBS)	1	5.56%
Business & Economics	1	5.56%

Assessment Disputes – by Graduate/Undergraduate

Graduate	10	55.56%
Undergraduate	8	44.44%

Assessment Disputes – by International/Domestic

Domestic	14	77.78%
International	4	22.22%

Academic Misconduct – Plagiarism - By Faculty/School

Melbourne Law School	5	55.56%
Arts	3	33.33%
Melbourne School of Engineering	1	11.11%

Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism – by Graduate/Undergraduate

Graduate	6	66.67%
Undergraduate	3	33.33%

Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism – by International/Domestic

Domestic	7	77.78%
International	2	22.22%

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:

24-Jul-14	Mid Year O Week - Student Services Fair. Made contact with 91 students.	North Court, Union House
20-Aug-14	Special Consideration Workshop for Commerce for Women Week	Joe Nap A/B

The next Advocacy Service report will cover the quarter October to December 2014 and will be available in January 2015.

Phoebe Churches
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October 2014