

Student Union Advocacy Service Report

October - December 2012

Introduction

The service has continued to experience a steady increase in students requesting assistance throughout this period. The October-December Quarter is always a busy time for the service as it takes in an assessment period and the beginning of the Coursework Unsatisfactory Progress cycle.

Trends and Issues this Quarter

Special Consideration – the evidentiary burden and the Policy Gap

In the context of an increasingly competitive environment - where GPAs and average marks can make a profound difference in students' options and opportunities – many faculties and schools appear concerned that there has been an escalation in students practicing strategic behaviours.

We have been struck this quarter by an increase in disputes and appeals regarding the implementation of special consideration procedures. There is no doubt that those charged with the implementation of this complex process are attempting to balance the equally serious concerns of fairness, equity and the maintenance of academic integrity against students' legitimate expectation that unanticipated events out of their control will be taken into consideration where it has impacted severely on their academic performance. Unfortunately, regardless of the University's intentions, students (and their families) often experience the implementation of the special consideration system as punitive and lacking in compassion. This has been at issue this quarter in two particular circumstances.

Firstly problems have arisen where students deemed to have ongoing conditions are directed to apply for adjustments under the *Student Equitable Adjustment Procedures* (SEAP) and excluded from special consideration outcomes. A number of students who have fallen into the policy gap between the *Special Consideration Procedures* and the SEAP have presented this quarter.

As the SEAP requires a number of steps before it can be implemented and is aimed at preventative adjustment rather than accommodating impacts which have already occurred, students whose academic performance has been severely affected by circumstances out of their control are not being offered any accommodation of their disadvantage. This is not only potentially unfair, but it risks exposing the University to liability under disability and equal opportunity legislation.

We welcome the initiation of the SEAP working group and the service looks forward to the opportunity to participate in this group and address these concerns. Specifically it is our

view that university should 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.

Secondly some faculties and schools have applied an inappropriately high threshold for evidence required to support special consideration applications. Most students accept that they must document their claims appropriately. However there are a range of factors which can affect a student's ability to get the best documentation possible regarding their claim. For example, faculties insisting that students must produce documentation completed on the same day as the condition affected them do not take into account the difficulty some students experience in accessing a medical appointment quickly. It is arguable that - providing the student presents documentation within the allowed timelines pursuant to the procedures - all such evidence should be given the same weight.

Ultimately, the practice of second guessing medical opinion and/or distrusting any documentation which was not obtained on the same day has the undesirable effect of raising the evidentiary burden well above the required balance of probabilities.

Perhaps more importantly - these situations threaten to affect students' trust and confidence in the system. There are also material equity and fairness concerns with uneven application of the procedures between faculties and schools. We have also fielded a large volume of enquiries from very concerned parents who have advised that they believe the system has exacerbated their children's health problems.

There are currently several appeals from such decisions on foot. At the time of writing, the Appeal Committee had upheld the first of these appeals to be heard. I hope this will prompt a further consideration of how University-wide procedures are applied.

We will await the outcomes of the remaining appeals with interest.

Tension between University Timelines and Procedural Fairness

One of this service's fundamental concerns is to ensure that the University deals fairly and equitably with students. Axiomatic to this is compliance with the rules of procedural fairness. The obligation to provide procedural fairness is attracted when the university makes any decision which affects a student's rights, interests or legitimate expectations.

One aspect of the CUPC process which was extremely disappointing this quarter was a narrow interpretation of section 8.6 of the *Academic Progress Review Procedures* (MPF1025) by three faculties: Veterinary Science, Architecture, Building and Planning, and the School of Dentistry. These faculties refused to provide reports to students until they had actually lodged their appeal submission with the Academic Secretary. Fortunately all other Faculties provided the reports on request.

Historically students only obtained the report giving reasons for the CUPC's determination in their appeal papers a day or two prior to the hearing. Following negotiations with the Academic Secretary's office, the practice became that the student could write to the Academic Secretary stating their intention to appeal and the secretary to the appeal committee would duly request the report from the faculty and provide it the student prior to their deadline for appeal.

We have come to rely on these reports to provide appropriate advice to affected students. Additionally, the practice of supplying reasons for the decision being appealed ensures compliance with the principles of procedural fairness – specifically the right to be fully informed of the case to be met before submitting an appeal.

This quarter, the previous custom was discontinued by several schools and faculties who asserted that the wording of the procedure:

[w]here a student appeals conditions imposed by the CUPC, the student centre/graduate school will forward a report to the Academic Secretary outlining the CUPC's decision within 3 working days of receipt of the request from the Academic Secretary.

should be construed to mean that the student is required to draft and lodge their full appeal submission to meet this condition. I suggest that this construction is misconceived - as nowhere does the provision state that an *appeal submission* must be lodged. The Advocacy Service holds that it should be sufficient that a student evinces an intention to appeal by an email giving notice to the Academic Secretary.

Ultimately requiring the student to frame their appeal submission without access to the report compromises procedural fairness. Additionally it shifts the administrative burden to both the Advocacy Service and the Academic Board.

First and foremost, the Advocacy Service relies on these reports to advise students accurately whether they might have grounds for appeal. In the vast majority of cases where students wish to appeal conditions on their enrolment, the CUPC report confirms that the restriction has clearly been made in the student's best interests and does not disclose grounds for appeal. In such cases, the Advocacy Service will effectively discourage those students with no prospect of success from pursuing an appeal - saving unnecessary administration on the part of the Office of the Academic Secretary and the valuable time of the Academic Board Appeal Committees. Most importantly, students receive timely and accurate advice and are spared the anxiety and pointlessness of an appeal without merit.

It was most unfortunate that, due to the refusal of these faculties to produce the report prior to lodgement of appeal submissions, the Advocacy Service was required to deal with a large volume of sub-standard, incomplete or poorly conceived appeal submissions and a number of students missed out on accurate advice regarding their prospects or how best to frame their appeal.

Programmes this Quarter

Exam Support Stall at Royal Exhibition Building

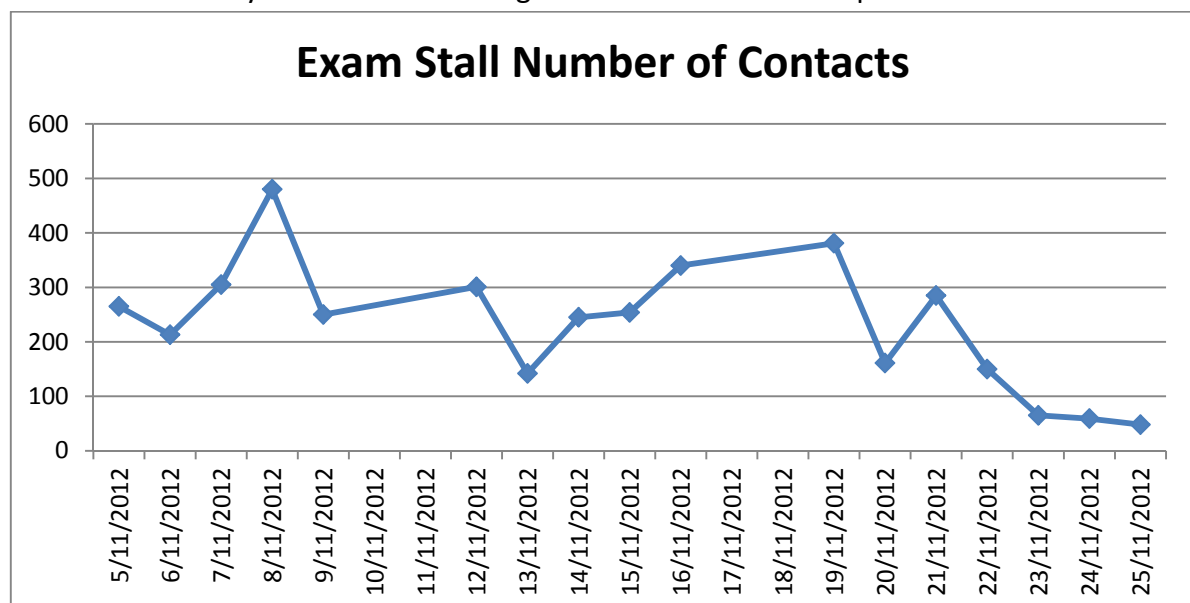
This valuable service started in 2006 when the then Education Office Bearers initiated a program to offer support to students who take exams at the Royal Exhibition Building in Parkville. Office bearers, student volunteers and UMSU staff worked together to provide on-site information, advice, referral and support to students who sit exams at the Royal Exhibition Building in Carlton during the exam period (2-3 weeks in both June and November). The stall sells water, assorted stationary, tissues and lollies for a nominal fee. Additionally students may borrow approved calculators and clear plastic bags for their pens etc. Signs are displayed reminding students not to inadvertently take their study notes or any unauthorised materials into the venue with them. The stall also has information about the Advocacy Service; an exam tips information card and information on other University services.

Volunteers do two hour shifts, and set up and put away the marquee and table every day. Equipment is stored in the Royal Exhibition Building.

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

3944 students accessed the services provided at the stall.

The Advocacy Service is grateful for the continued support of student administration and the staff at the Royal Exhibition Building who make this initiative possible.



Peer Support Programme at Course Unsatisfactory Progress Meetings

The Peer Support programme commenced in 2005. In late 2004, due in particular to the prospect of the introduction of Voluntary Student Unionism legislation – it was determined that additional resources should be put in place by the Advocacy Service to support students called to meet with Course Unsatisfactory Progress Committees. The initiative - the Peer Support Program (PSP), was conducted as a pilot in the Science Faculty in 2005 after attracting support from the University's Access and Equity Committee.

Over time the programme has expanded to cover all faculties and schools and continues to provide a rich volunteering experience for students.

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. Last semester over half of the volunteers were graduate students including three PhD candidates.

Statistics

Comparative data

With the commencement of the SSAF funded Student Union Advocacy Service we moved to a new data collection and case management system. Consequently, while there are some areas where it is not possible to provide complete comparative data for the period, a table of general comparative data is provided below.

October–December 2012

301 students were provided a service resulting in 477 contacts with the service.¹

October–December 2011

274 students were provided a service resulting in 332 appointments at the service.²

Additionally, the Advocacy website received 5866 page views this quarter. There were 1603 page views on the Progress Committee page and other popular pages included information on study-tips, special-consideration, assessment-disputes, the exam-support-stall and volunteering opportunities.

Distribution by primary issue:

The primary issue is generally identified as the university process to which the student's main concern or problem relates. Data is classified in this way because it provides a standardised and more meaningful breakdown which may be useful for tracking policy trends amongst other things. Additionally this classification system aligns with the general methodology employed by the service in providing advice and problem solving support to students. Specifically while students may express their issues in a multitude of ways, the primary issue is identified according to the policy or procedure by which the University provides possible resolutions.

October–December 2012

Course Unsatisfactory Progress	212	69.28%
Special Consideration	25	8.17%
Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	16	5.23%
Assessment Dispute	12	3.92%
Other	7	2.29%
Not Specified	7	2.29%
Academic Misconduct - Exam	6	1.96%
Student Admin - Graduation	4	1.31%
Student Admin - Remission of Fees	4	1.31%
Student Admin - Enrolment problems	3	0.98%
Equitable Accommodation (SEAD)	2	0.65%
Incorrect Advice	2	0.65%
Vocational Placement Problems	2	0.65%
Scholarship Issues	2	0.65%
Supervision Problems	1	0.33%
Progress - HDR	1	0.33%

¹ A contact refers to face to face appointments, phone or email communication and attendance with students at meetings or formal hearings.

² An appointment is effectively the same as a contact however we prefer the term contact in the new data collection system as appointment has a more limited connotation.

October–December 2011

Under the old data collection system, primary issues were not defined in any consistent way and this often obscured the real issue. For example the use of ‘Grievances’, ‘Administration’ and ‘Academic Board Appeal’ does not disclose the particular problem the student presented with or the process by which it might be resolved.

CUPC	211	73.52%
Academic Misconduct	17	5.92%
Special Consideration	17	5.92%
Grievance	16	5.57%
Administration	13	4.53%
Course	8	2.79%
Other	3	1.05%
Academic Board Appeal	1	0.35%
General Misconduct	1	0.35%

Distribution by graduate/undergraduate status*October–December 2012*

Graduate	80	26.58%
Undergraduate	221	73.42%

October–December 2011

Graduate	55	20.22%
Undergraduate	217	79.78%

Distribution by International/Domestic Status*October–December 2012*

International	91	30.23%
Domestic	210	69.77%

October–December 2011

International	47	17.28%
Domestic	225	82.72%

Distribution of cases over all by Faculty/School – October–December 2012

Science	94	31.65%
Melbourne School of Engineering	47	15.82%
Business & Economics	36	12.12%
Arts	27	9.09%
Medicine, Dentistry & Health Sciences	22	7.41%
Architecture Building & Planning	17	5.72%
Melbourne Graduate School of Education	10	3.37%
Melbourne School of Land and Environment	10	3.37%
Melbourne Law School	7	2.36%
Graduate School of Business and Economics	7	2.36%
Veterinary Science	5	1.68%
Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences	5	1.68%
Melbourne Graduate School of Science	3	1.01%
VCA	2	0.67%
Melbourne Business School (MBS)	2	0.67%
Engineering (teach out)	1	0.34%

Melbourne School of Design	1	0.34%
Melbourne School of Information (IT)	1	0.34%

Commentary

The breakdown of graduate to undergraduate students was 80 to 221 (compared with 55 to 217 for the same period last year).

There were 210 domestic students and 91 international students seen in this period (compared with 225 to 47 in the same period last year). This is actually a substantial increase in international students as a proportion of all students accessing the service this quarter. Further breakdowns against presenting issues are detailed below.

The primary presenting issues overwhelmingly related to course unsatisfactory progress with special consideration, plagiarism and assessment disputes in far smaller proportions.

Consequently the report concentrates on these four issues; however, further breakdowns against other primary issues and against various demographics are available on request.

Presenting students came from 18 schools and faculties. Science was the most frequently represented faculty with almost twice as many Science students presenting compared to the next most common school - the Melbourne School of Engineering. Course Unsatisfactory Progress matters were primarily responsible for the large numbers of students from Science. Business & Economics, Arts and Medicine, Dentistry & Health Sciences were the next most represented faculties.

Special consideration matters centred on the faculties of Science and Business and Economics and the Melbourne School of Engineering. The majority of plagiarism allegations came from the Melbourne School of Engineering, followed by the faculty of Arts and Melbourne Graduate School of Education. Assessment disputes are those matters arising where a student is not satisfied with the grade they have received for assessment. University policy expressly excludes any such dispute based solely on a question of academic judgement. Consequently much of the advice provided to students centres on ensuring they have received adequate feedback about how their marks were derived and ensuring the assessment process has been transparent and fair. These disputes were relatively evenly spread across faculties and schools with a slight concentration in the Melbourne School of Engineering, the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences and the faculties of Business & Economics and Architecture Building & Planning.

Course Unsatisfactory progress - By Faculty/School

Science	83	39.15%
Business & Economics	28	13.21%
Melbourne School of Engineering	25	11.79%
Arts	15	7.08%
Medicine, Dentistry & Health Sciences	15	7.08%
Architecture Building & Planning	13	6.13%
Melbourne Graduate School of Education	7	3.30%
Graduate School of Business and Economics	5	2.36%
Melbourne Law School	5	2.36%
Melbourne School of Land and Environment	5	2.36%

Veterinary Science	3	1.42%
Melbourne Graduate School of Science	3	1.42%
Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences	1	0.47%
Melbourne Business School (MBS)	1	0.47%
Melbourne School of Design	1	0.47%
Melbourne School of Information (IT)	1	0.47%
VCA	1	0.47%

Course Unsatisfactory progress – by Graduate/Undergraduate

Undergraduate	165	77.83%
Graduate	47	22.17%

Course Unsatisfactory progress – by International/Domestic

Domestic	152	71.70%
International	60	28.30%

Special Consideration - By Faculty/School

Science	5	20.00%
Melbourne School of Engineering	5	20.00%
Business & Economics	4	16.00%
Arts	2	8.00%
Architecture Building & Planning	2	8.00%
Veterinary Science	1	4.00%
Melbourne School of Land and	1	4.00%
Melbourne Law School	1	4.00%
Melbourne Business School (MBS)	1	4.00%
Medicine, Dentistry & Health	1	4.00%
Engineering (teach out)	1	4.00%
Melbourne Law School	1	4.00%

Special Consideration – by Graduate/Undergraduate

Undergraduate	22	88.00%
Graduate	3	12.00%

Special Consideration – by International/Domestic

Domestic	17	68.00%
International	8	32.00%

Plagiarism Allegations - By Faculty/School

Melbourne School of Engineering	6	37.50%
Arts	3	18.75%
Melbourne Graduate School of Education	2	12.50%
Business & Economics	2	12.50%
Medicine, Dentistry & Health Sciences	1	6.25%
Graduate School of Business and Economics	1	6.25%
Melbourne Law School	1	6.25%

Plagiarism Allegations – by Graduate/Undergraduate

Graduate	9	56.25%
Undergraduate	7	43.75%

Plagiarism Allegations – by International/Domestic

Domestic	7	43.75%
International	9	56.25%

Assessment Disputes - By Faculty/School

Melbourne School of Engineering	2	16.67%
Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences	2	16.67%
Business & Economics	2	16.67%
Architecture Building & Planning	2	16.67%
VCA	1	8.33%
Science	1	8.33%
Melbourne School of Land and Environment	1	8.33%
Melbourne Graduate School of Education	1	8.33%

Assessment Disputes – by Graduate/Undergraduate

Graduate	6	50.00%
Undergraduate	6	50.00%

Assessment Disputes – by International/Domestic

Domestic	7	58.33%
International	5	41.67%

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:

1/10/2012	VCAM Student Centre Southbank	Presentation on the Advocacy Service to VCAM Student Centre staff
2/10/2012	VCAM Student Centre Southbank	Presentation on the Advocacy Service VCAM Students in forum during common lunch hour
10/10/2012	Eastern Precinct Student Centre	Presentation on the Advocacy Service to the combined staff meeting of Faculty of Science Student Advisors
25/10/2012	Contact Centre Lincoln Square	Presentation on the Advocacy Service to the staff of the 13MELB Contact Centre
12/12/2012	Science Student Centre	Presentation to staff undertaking training for their role on the Faculty's Course Unsatisfactory Progress Committees

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

The next Advocacy Service report will cover the quarter January to March 2013 and will be available in early April 2013.