

Student Union Advocacy Service Report October - December 2013

Introduction

The October-December Quarter is always very busy. In line with the University's cycles, demand on the service typically peaks in this quarter as it takes in an assessment period and the beginning of the Coursework Unsatisfactory Progress season.

Trends and Issues this Quarter

Desperate measures – foolishness, fraud and HPR form forgery

In the context of an increasingly competitive environment - where GPAs and average marks can make a profound difference in students' options and opportunities – we are seeing evidence of students practicing increasingly desperate strategic behaviours.

Specifically this quarter we have assisted several students who were caught fabricating evidence to support their special consideration applications. Unquestionably this is very disturbing, as it represents an aggravated form of academic misconduct with potentially catastrophic ramifications for the student. Fraud and forgery are also major threats to the integrity of the special consideration system and potentially a blight on graduate attributes for the University. The following students received advice and assistance with their allegations.

Three international students from the Faculty of Business & Economics independently faced allegations that they had falsified their HPR forms. These students separately advised that they had purchased the document online through a website which they usually accessed to buy second hand text books, find rental accommodation and other University related resources.

One of the students told us that during a state of emotional crisis she accessed the website looking for advice on how to cope and that she frequently sought advice from peers on this site. At that time someone approached her with an offer to sell her an HPR form. The person told the student that they were alumni of Melbourne University and that – for a fee of \$200 – they would provide a fraudulent HPR form. The student advises that - although she knew it was wrong – in the context of the website where she had commonly accessed support and legitimate university resources – she decided to go ahead with it.

Another of the students who was in his first semester of study, realised his error after submitting the HPR form to the Faculty and tried – unsuccessfully - to withdraw his application for Special Consideration.

Another student advised that she had found a message on the website which claimed that after receiving a student's name, they would take it to a doctor who would then issue a "real" Medical Certificate/HPR form. Of course the HPR form would not be 'real' as it was obtained under false pretences. In any event, this was obviously a story to entice vulnerable or naïve students into thinking it was less than falsification. However a comparison between the different forgeries shows that they were a cut and paste of the same. It became apparent that

these were not isolated incidents when yet another student presented with the same falsified HPR form but with a different medical practitioner stamp.

Another student had clearly forged a doctor's signature on their HPR form.

At the time of writing this report, all but one of the students had had their enrolments terminated by the Vice Chancellor for academic misconduct. The other student was suspended, probably on the basis of a compelling letter from a psychiatrist.

There is little doubt all of these students knew that their actions were wrong. It was equally clear to us however, that none of them had a full appreciation of just how serious their actions were and the ultimate consequences appeared to come as a shock to all of them.

It is worth noting that all of these students were really vulnerable and/or naïve in their own ways. Their vulnerability was compounded by the fact that these forged documents are for sale in plain view of a website – the seemingly common practice obscuring the seriousness and criminality of the trade.

Without in any way trivialising the students' responsibility for their own actions, it is hard not to speculate that the extremely high threshold the University sets for acceptable documentary evidence for special consideration may be in part responsible for the surge in this practice. It has been noted in previous quarterly reports that in some faculties it appears that the standard of proof for evidentiary material is higher than that required in a criminal court.

Some faculty special consideration committees maintain a list of unofficially 'black banned' medical practitioners. Students who provide an HPR form signed by these doctors are denied special consideration on the basis of 'insufficient evidence'. Additionally we have noticed an insistence by some special consideration committees that only HPR forms obtained on the same day that the student claims to have been affected by the condition will be accepted as evidence. For many students, this is simply an impossible standard to meet.

Recommendation

Any review of the special consideration process must take into account the difficulties students face in obtaining medical documentation which meets the threshold required by faculty special consideration committees. Critical evaluation of whether the threshold is too onerous is warranted.

Where there are genuine suspicions that medical practitioners are unethical in their preparation of HPR forms, they should be reported to the Health Services Commissioner rather than informally black banned.

Programmes this Quarter

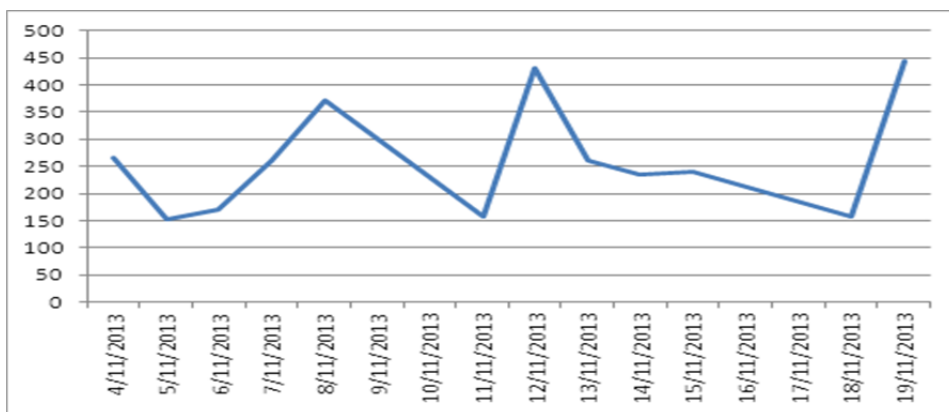
Exam Support Stall at Royal Exhibition Building

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, answering a range of questions, providing directions on the location of facilities, and referral to discuss issues such as special consideration and academic misconduct.

This quarter 3143 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. Below is a graph showing the pattern of access over the period.



Peer Support Programme at Course Unsatisfactory Progress Meetings

This quarter 252 students were assisted by 23 peer support volunteers in nine faculties and schools.

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.

Statistics

Comparative data

This quarter 392 students were provided a service resulting in 789 contacts. In the same quarter last year, the service saw 298 students which resulted in 483 contacts with the service. The primary focus of casework at this time of year is coursework assessment and course unsatisfactory progress.

Additionally, the Advocacy website received 6215 unique page views this quarter. There were around 1200 unique views on study tips and over 1000 unique page views on our volunteering opportunities page. Other popular pages included information on CUPC, 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.

October–December 2013

Course Unsatisfactory Progress	270	65.53%
Assessment Dispute	31	7.52%
Special Consideration	27	6.55%
Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	24	5.83%
Academic Misconduct - Collusion	11	2.67%
Not Specified	9	2.18%
Academic Misconduct - Exam	7	1.70%
Progress - HDR	6	1.46%
Admission - Selection Appeal	6	1.46%
Other	4	0.97%
Academic Misconduct - Falsified docs	3	0.73%
General Misconduct	3	0.73%
Vocational Placement Problems	3	0.73%
Course structure/changes	2	0.49%
Student Admin - Enrolment problems	2	0.49%
Advance Standing Credit/RPL	1	0.24%
Student Admin - Graduation	1	0.24%
Supervision Problems	1	0.24%
Equitable Accommodation (SEAP)	1	0.24%

October–December 2012

Course Unsatisfactory Progress	212	66.67%
Special Consideration	27	8.49%
Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	17	5.35%
Assessment Dispute	15	4.72%
Other	8	2.52%
Academic Misconduct - Exam	6	1.89%
Student Admin - Remission of Fees	5	1.57%
Not Specified	5	1.57%
Student Admin - Graduation	4	1.26%
Student Admin - Enrolment problems	4	1.26%
Progress - HDR	3	0.94%
Equitable Accommodation (SEAD)	3	0.94%
Incorrect Advice	2	0.63%
Vocational Placement Problems	2	0.63%
Scholarship Issues	2	0.63%
Admission - Selection Appeal	1	0.31%
Supervision Problems	1	0.31%
General Misconduct	1	0.31%

Distribution by graduate/undergraduate status*October–December 2013*

Graduate	155	39.54%
Undergraduate	237	60.46%

University load status – Graduate 39.24% & Undergraduate – 60.76%

October–December 2012

Graduate	79	26.51%
Undergraduate	219	73.49%

Distribution by International/Domestic Status*October–December 2013*

Domestic	265	67.60%
International	127	32.40%

October–December 2012

Domestic	209	70.13%
International	89	29.87%

Distribution of cases over all by Faculty/School – October - December 2013

In order to make the following data more meaningful the relative weighting of faculties by enrolment has been included. 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
Faculty of Science (UG)	90	23.75%	8.65%	>>>
Graduate School of Engineering (HDCW & HDR)	84	22.16%	4.18%	>>>
Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning (UG)	26	6.86%	2.61%	>>
School of Design (HDCW & HDR)	18	4.75%	2.48%	>
School of Land and Environment (HDCW & HDR)	12	3.17%	1.34%	>
Graduate School of Education (HDCW)	9	2.37%	6.58%	<<
Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences (HDCW & HDR)	8	2.11%	4.23%	<<
Engineering (UG)	1	0.26%	4.61%	<<
Faculty of Arts (UG)	36	9.50%	13.60%	<
Faculty of MDHS (HDCW & HDR)	29	7.65%	9.46%	<
Faculty of Business and Economics (UG)	28	7.39%	11.61%	<
Graduate School of Business and Economics (HDCW)	8	2.11%	3.98%	<
VCA & Music (UG)	8	2.11%	4.20%	<
Law School (HDCW & HDR)	5	1.32%	3.05%	<
Graduate School of Science (HDCW & HDR)	6	1.58%	2.30%	=
Faculty of Veterinary Science (HDCW & HDR)	1	0.26%	0.66%	=
Melbourne School of Information (IT)	2	0.53%	-	-
Melbourne Business School (MBS)	8	2.11%	-	-

Commentary

The breakdown of graduate to undergraduate students was 155 to 237 (compared with 79 to 219 for the same period last year). This now aligned almost exactly with the breakdown of student enrolment at large.

There were 265 domestic students and 127 international students seen in this period (compared with 209 to 89 in the same period last year). 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 with undergraduate students from the Faculty of Science the most frequently represented. Graduate students from the Melbourne School of Engineering were the next most frequent users of the service. Course Unsatisfactory Progress matters were primarily responsible for the large numbers of students from Science. Undergraduate students from the faculties of Arts and Architecture and Business and Economics and students from the Faculty of MDHS were also well represented this quarter.

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 minor concentration in the faculties of Medicine, Dentistry & Health Sciences and Arts and the schools of Engineering and Design. Graduate and undergraduate students were roughly equally represented.

Special consideration matters centred on the faculties of Science and Arts and the Melbourne Schools of Engineering and Design respectively. The majority of plagiarism allegations came from the Melbourne School of Engineering, followed by the faculties of Arts and Melbourne Graduate School of Education.

Course Unsatisfactory progress - By Faculty/School

Science	75	27.78%
Melbourne School of Engineering	66	24.44%
Arts	18	6.67%
Business & Economics	17	6.30%
Architecture Building & Planning	16	5.93%
Melbourne School of Design	12	4.44%
Medicine, Dentistry & Health Sciences	9	3.33%
Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences	8	2.96%
Melbourne Conservatorium of Music (MCM)	6	2.22%
Melbourne Business School (MBS)	6	2.22%
Melbourne School of Land and Environment	6	2.22%
Melbourne Graduate School of Science	5	1.85%
Graduate School of Business and Economics	4	1.48%
Melbourne Law School	4	1.48%
Melbourne Graduate School of Education	3	1.11%
Melbourne School of Information (IT)	2	0.74%
VCA	1	0.37%
Engineering (UG)	1	0.37%

Course Unsatisfactory progress – by Graduate/Undergraduate

Undergraduate	173	64.07%
Graduate	97	35.93%

Course Unsatisfactory progress – by International/Domestic

Domestic	191	70.74%
International	79	29.26%

Assessment Disputes - By Faculty/School

Medicine, Dentistry & Health Sciences	5	16.13%
Arts	5	16.13%
Melbourne School of Engineering	4	12.90%
Melbourne School of Design	4	12.90%
Architecture Building & Planning	3	9.68%
Science (UG)	2	6.45%
Melbourne Graduate School of Education	2	6.45%
VCA	1	3.23%
Melbourne School of Land and Environment	1	3.23%
Melbourne Graduate School of Science	1	3.23%
Melbourne Business School (MBS)	1	3.23%
Graduate School of Business and Economics	1	3.23%
Business & Economics (UG)	1	3.23%

Assessment Disputes – by Graduate/Undergraduate

Graduate	16	51.61%
Undergraduate	15	48.39%

Assessment Disputes – by International/Domestic

Domestic	20	64.52%
International	11	35.48%

Special Consideration - By Faculty/School

Science	8	29.63%
Arts	6	22.22%
Melbourne School of Engineering	3	11.11%
Melbourne School of Design	3	11.11%
Medicine, Dentistry & Health Sciences	2	7.41%
Architecture Building & Planning (UG)	2	7.41%
Melbourne School of Land and Environment	1	3.70%
Graduate School of Business and Economics	1	3.70%
Business & Economics (UG)	1	3.70%

Special Consideration – by Graduate/Undergraduate

Undergraduate	16	59.26%
Graduate	11	40.74%

Special Consideration – by International/Domestic

Domestic	18	66.67%
International	9	33.33%

Plagiarism Allegations - By Faculty/School

Melbourne School of Engineering	6	25.00%
Melbourne Graduate School of Education	4	16.67%
Arts	4	16.67%
Business & Economics	3	12.50%
Melbourne School of Land and Environment	2	8.33%
Medicine, Dentistry & Health Sciences	2	8.33%
Science	1	4.17%
Melbourne Law School	1	4.17%
Architecture Building & Planning	1	4.17%

Plagiarism Allegations – by Graduate/Undergraduate

Graduate	13	54.17%
Undergraduate	11	45.83%

Plagiarism Allegations – by International/Domestic

Domestic	11	45.83%
International	13	54.17%

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:

21-Oct-13	CUPC coordinators network meeting	Level 1 Conference Room, Raymond Priestley
11-Nov-13	Meeting with Kylie Gould at University Legal services regarding misconduct penalties	University Legal Services
19-Nov-13	Visit from staff from Flinders Uni Advocacy and Financial Aid service.	Advocacy Service
20-Nov-13	Meeting with new advocacy staff from Flinders University	Advocacy Service

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.

Summary of Recommendations

Any review of the special consideration process must take into account the difficulties students face in obtaining medical documentation which meets the threshold required by faculty special consideration committees. Critical evaluation of whether the threshold is too onerous is warranted.

Where there are genuine suspicions that medical practitioners are unethical in their preparation of HPR forms, they should be reported to the Health Services Commissioner rather than informally black banned.

The next Advocacy Service report will cover the quarter January to March 2014 and will be available in early April 2014.

Phoebe Churches

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January 2014