

Student Union Advocacy Service Report October - December 2015

Introduction

The October-December Quarter is extremely busy for the Service. In line with the University's coursework cycles, demand on the service typically peaks in this quarter as it takes in an assessment period involving special consideration applications, grade or assessment disputes and academic misconduct allegations, as well as the beginning of the Course Unsatisfactory Progress season.

Trends and Issues this Quarter

Turnitin – similarity indexes are not an index of plagiarism

Several cases have presented this quarter which involved errors in the analysis or interpretation of Turnitin reports. While we see fewer and fewer cases like this, it is a reminder that staff interpreting Turnitin Reports need appropriate training in the analysis of reports in order to avoid the trap of simply and uncritically correlating a high similarity index with a serious level of plagiarism. In these cases, the students experienced a considerable amount of stress and distress regarding the allegations, two of which progressed to formal hearings before being dismissed.

Recommendation

Staff with responsibility for reviewing Turnitin reports should undertake comprehensive training regarding the interpretation of results and interpretation should be independently checked before proceeding to a formal hearing on that evidence alone.

Special Consideration and the role of the CUPC

Continuing a theme of concerns with special consideration processes, this quarter we noted the reluctance of many CUPCs to consider outstanding or unresolved special consideration circumstances, despite the advice in the current guidelines:

Students wishing to apply [for special consideration] after a result has been certified and who are invited to a Progress hearing, may state their case at the Progress hearing.

We assisted in a number of matters where students had been unable to obtain special consideration outcomes in a timely way, either due to legitimate but late applications, or where a dispute was on foot regarding the outcome of applications. In these cases, students' attempts to raise special consideration related issues at the CUPC were mostly met with resistance or reluctance. This has the effect of precluding any accommodation or adjustment for those students with legitimate claims simply due to timing difficulties beyond their control.

Recommendation

CUPCs need to be more open to unresolved or outstanding special consideration circumstances, and open to broader adjustments in these situations.

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 3189 students accessed the services provided at the stall.

The Advocacy Service is ever grateful for the support of student administration and the staff at the Royal Exhibition Building who make this initiative possible. Above is a graph showing the pattern of access over the period.

Peer Support Programme at Course Unsatisfactory Progress Meetings

This quarter 170 students were assisted by 16 peer support volunteers.

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 15 and 20 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.

Student Governance Initiative - training for student members of University Committees

On 23 November 2015 the Service, in collaboration with the President of the Academic Board, the University Secretary and the Academic Secretary, delivered training to incoming 2016 UMSU and Graduate Student Association (GSA) student representatives participating in Academic Board and other central committees.

The Governance training covered topics including:

- Students' role in committees and maximising effectiveness;
- Professionalism;
- University governance; and
- Sources of support.

The training for student members on Discipline Committees covered a range of principles underpinning good administrative decision making in this context, including the requirements of procedural fairness, the principles of proportionality and consistency, and mitigating or aggravating factors in issuing penalties.

The training was supported by two handbooks - the Student Representatives' Handbook and the Handy Guide to Good Decision Making on Discipline Committees. Please get in touch with the service if you would like a hard copy. Electronic versions are available here:

<http://umsu.unimelb.edu.au/need-help/advocacy/research-publications/>

Statistics

Comparative data

This quarter 198 students were provided a service resulting in 867 contacts. In the same quarter last year, the service saw 240 students which resulted in 760 contacts with the service. The primary focus of casework at this time of year is coursework assessment and course unsatisfactory progress. It's not completely clear why the number of contacts this quarter is down from the same time last year, but it's possible that it is caused by a significant number of CUPC meeting held in the second round, putting them in next quarter's statistics. It will be interesting to see if the caseload over the two quarters combined accounts for this.

Additionally, the Advocacy website received 5421 unique page views this quarter. There were around 1200 unique views on CUPC and over 600 unique page views on special consideration among other things.

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 2015

All Students			Graduate Coursework students			RHD students		
Course Unsatisfactory Progress	69	34.85%	Course Unsatisfactory Progress	32	42.67%	Supervision Problems	4	40.00%
Special Consideration	32	16.16%	Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	19	25.33%	Progress - HDR	3	30.00%
Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	29	14.65%	Special Consideration	9	12.00%	Student complaint about uni staff	1	10.00%
Assessment Dispute	21	10.61%	Vocational Placement Problems	3	4.00%	Scholarship Issues	1	10.00%
Academic Misconduct - Exam	10	5.05%	Student complaint about uni staff	3	4.00%	Course structure/changes	1	10.00%
Supervision Problems	6	3.03%	Assessment Dispute	3	4.00%			
Student complaint about uni staff	6	3.03%	Supervision Problems	2	2.67%			
General Misconduct	4	2.02%	Course structure/changes	1	1.33%			
Vocational Placement Problems	3	1.52%	Academic Misconduct - Falsified docs	1	1.33%			
Progress - HDR	3	1.52%	Academic Misconduct - Exam	1	1.33%			
Scholarship Issues	3	1.52%	Academic Misconduct - Collusion	1	1.33%			
Academic Misconduct - Falsified docs	3	1.52%						
Course structure/changes	2	1.01%						
Admission - Selection Appeal	2	1.01%						
Student Admin - Enrolment problems	2	1.01%						
Academic Misconduct - Collusion	1	0.51%						
Student Admin - Remission of Fees	1	0.51%						
Other	1	0.51%						

October–December 2014

All Students			Graduate Coursework students			RHD students		
Course Unsatisfactory Progress	107	42.29%	Course Unsatisfactory Progress	50	46.30%	Progress - HDR	5	31.25%
Special Consideration	34	13.44%	Special Consideration	14	12.96%	Scholarship Issues	3	18.75%
Assessment Dispute	28	11.07%	Assessment Dispute	13	12.04%	Supervision Problems	2	12.50%
Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	26	10.28%	Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	11	10.19%	Student complaint about uni staff	1	6.25%
Academic Misconduct - Collusion	12	4.74%	Academic Misconduct - Collusion	9	8.33%	Other	1	6.25%
Academic Misconduct - Exam	7	2.77%	Vocational Placement Problems	3	2.78%	Course Unsatisfactory Progress	1	6.25%
Scholarship Issues	5	1.98%	General Misconduct	2	1.85%	Academic Misconduct - Research	1	6.25%
Progress - HDR	5	1.98%	Course structure/changes	2	1.85%	Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	1	6.25%
General Misconduct	4	1.58%	Student complaint about uni staff	1	0.93%	Academic Misconduct - Collusion	1	6.25%
Student complaint about uni staff	4	1.58%	Student Admin - Graduation	1	0.93%			
Course structure/changes	3	1.19%	Equitable Accommodation (SEAP)	1	0.93%			
Equitable Accommodation (SEAP)	3	1.19%	Academic Misconduct - Exam	1	0.93%			
Vocational Placement Problems	3	1.19%						
Student Admin - Enrolment problems	3	1.19%						
Supervision Problems	2	0.79%						
Other	2	0.79%						
Cross-institutional enrolment denied	1	0.40%						
Student Admin - Remission of Fees	1	0.40%						
Advance Standing Credit/RPL	1	0.40%						
Academic Misconduct - Research	1	0.40%						
Student Admin - Graduation	1	0.40%						

Distribution by graduate/undergraduate status

October–December 2015

Graduate	89	47.85%
Undergraduate	97	52.15%

October–December 2014

Graduate	121	50.42%
Undergraduate	119	49.58%

Distribution by International/Domestic Status

October–December 2015

Domestic	119	63.98%
International	67	36.02%

October–December 2014

Domestic	138	57.50%
International	102	42.50%

Distribution of cases over all by Faculty/School – October - December 2015

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
Melbourne School of Design (HDCW & HDR)	9	5.39%	2.52%	>>>
Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning (UG)	9	5.39%	2.23%	>>>
School of Land and Environment (HDCW & HDR)	2	1.20%	0.09%	>>>
Melbourne Graduate School of Education (HDCW & HDR)	15	8.98%	5.85%	>>
Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences (HDCW & HDR)	11	6.59%	4.65%	>>
School of Land and Environment (UG)	4	2.40%	0.32%	>>
Faculty of MDHS (UG)	6	3.59%	7.06%	<<<
Faculty of MDHS (HDCW & HDR)	15	8.98%	13.33%	<<
VCA & Music (UG)	3	1.80%	4.83%	<<
Law School (HDCW & HDR)	2	1.20%	3.39%	<<
Graduate School of Science (HDCW & HDR)	3	1.80%	3.15%	<<
Law School (UG)	1	0.60%	1.48%	<<
Faculty of Business and Economics (UG)	15	8.98%	10.12%	<
Graduate School of Business and Economics (HDCW & HDR)	6	3.59%	4.59%	<
Engineering (UG)	5	2.99%	3.06%	<
Faculty of Veterinary and Agricultural Sciences (HDCW & HDR)	2	1.20%	2.09%	<
Faculty of Arts (UG)	19	11.38%	10.97%	=
Faculty of Science (UG)	17	10.18%	9.47%	=
Melbourne School of Engineering (HDCW & HDR)	10	5.99%	6.31%	=
VCA & Music (HDCW & HDR)	3	1.80%	1.45%	=
Melbourne Conservatorium of Music (MCM)	1	0.60%	-	-
Melbourne Business School (MBS)	6	3.59%	-	-

Commentary

The breakdown of graduate to undergraduate students was 89 to 97 (compared with 121 to 119 for the same period last year).

There were 138 domestic students and 102 international students seen in this period (compared with 265 to 127 in the same period last year). Further breakdowns against presenting issues are detailed below.

The primary presenting issues overwhelmingly related to course unsatisfactory progress which represented over 42% of the case work. Special consideration, assessment disputes and plagiarism were the next most common issues. It is worthy of note that plagiarism case work has doubled this quarter compared to the same quarter last year. This indicates that a proactive educational strategy, similar to the one initiated for the falsified documentation issue last year should be planned.

Presenting students came from 22 schools and faculties with undergraduate students from the Faculty of Arts the most frequently represented. Undergraduate students from the Faculty of Science were the next most frequent users of the service. Course Unsatisfactory Progress matters were primarily responsible for the large numbers of students from these faculties. Graduate students from the Melbourne School of Engineering and the Melbourne Graduate School of Education were also well represented.

Special consideration matters centred on the Faculties of Arts and Science, followed closely by students from the Melbourne School of Design and Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences. The majority of plagiarism allegations came from the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, Melbourne Business School, and the Faculty of Business and Economics. Interestingly, three quarters of these students were from graduate programmes.

Assessment disputes were concentrated in the faculties of Science, Medicine, Dentistry & Health Sciences and Arts. Assessment disputes came overwhelmingly from undergraduate students.

Course Unsatisfactory progress - By Faculty/School

Melbourne School of Engineering (HDCW & HDR)	8	11.59%
Faculty of Arts (UG)	8	11.59%
Melbourne Graduate School of Education (HDCW & HDR)	7	10.14%
Faculty of MDHS (HDCW & HDR)	6	8.70%
Faculty of Science (UG)	6	8.70%
Melbourne School of Design (HDCW & HDR)	4	5.80%
Faculty of Business and Economics (UG)	4	5.80%
Unknown	4	5.80%
School of Land and Environment (UG)	3	4.35%
Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning (UG)	3	4.35%
Graduate School of Science (HDCW & HDR)	2	2.90%
Graduate School of Business and Economics (HDCW & HDR)	2	2.90%
Law School (HDCW & HDR)	2	2.90%
Melbourne Business School (MBS)	2	2.90%
School of Land and Environment (HDCW & HDR)	2	2.90%
Faculty of Veterinary and Agricultural Sciences (HDCW & HDR)	1	1.45%
VCA & Music (HDCW & HDR)	1	1.45%
Faculty of MDHS (UG)	1	1.45%
Melbourne Graduate School of Science (HDCW & HDR)	1	1.45%
Faculty of Engineering (UG)	1	1.45%
Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences (HDCW & HDR)	1	1.45%

Course Unsatisfactory progress – by Graduate/Undergraduate

Undergraduate	31	55.07%
Graduate	38	44.93%

Course Unsatisfactory progress – by International/Domestic

Domestic	39	56.52%
International	30	43.48%

Special Consideration - By Faculty/School

Faculty of Arts (UG)	6	18.75%
Faculty of Science (UG)	5	15.63%
Melbourne School of Design (HDCW & HDR)	4	12.50%
Faculty of MDHS (HDCW & HDR)	4	12.50%
Melbourne Graduate School of Education (HDCW & HDR)	3	9.38%
Unreported	3	9.38%
Faculty of Veterinary Science (HDCW & HDR)	2	6.25%
VCA & Music (HDCW & HDR)	1	3.13%
Melbourne School of Engineering (HDCW & HDR)	1	3.13%
Faculty of MDHS (UG)	1	3.13%
Faculty of Business and Economics (UG)	1	3.13%
Engineering (UG)	1	3.13%

Special Consideration – by Graduate/Undergraduate

Undergraduate	19	59.38%
Graduate	13	40.63%

Special Consideration – by International/Domestic

Domestic	26	81.25%
International	6	18.75%

Plagiarism Allegations - By Faculty/School

Melbourne Graduate School of Education (HDCW & HDR)	5	17.24%
Melbourne Business School (MBS)	4	13.79%
Faculty of Business and Economics (UG)	4	13.79%
Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences (HDCW & HDR)	3	10.34%
Graduate School of Business and Economics (HDCW & HDR)	3	10.34%
Melbourne School of Engineering (HDCW & HDR)	2	6.90%
Faculty of Science (UG)	2	6.90%
Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning (UG)	2	6.90%
VCA & Music (HDCW & HDR)	1	3.45%
Melbourne School of Design (HDCW & HDR)	1	3.45%
Melbourne Graduate School of Science (HDCW & HDR)	1	3.45%
Faculty of Arts (UG)	1	3.45%

Plagiarism Allegations – by Graduate/Undergraduate

Graduate	22	75.86%
Undergraduate	7	21.14%

Plagiarism Allegations – by International/Domestic

Domestic	15	51.72%
International	14	48.28%

Assessment Disputes - By Faculty/School

Faculty of Science (UG)	4	19.05%
Faculty of MDHS (UG)	3	14.29%
Faculty of Arts (UG)	3	14.29%
VCA & Music (UG)	2	9.52%
Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences (HDCW & HDR)	2	9.52%
Engineering (UG)	2	9.52%
School of Land and Environment (UG)	1	4.76%
Melbourne School of Design (HDCW & HDR)	1	4.76%
Melbourne Graduate School of Education (HDCW & HDR)	1	4.76%
Melbourne Conservatorium of Music (MCM)	1	4.76%
Unknown	1	4.76%

Assessment Disputes – by Graduate/Undergraduate

Graduate	18	85.71%
Undergraduate	3	14.29%

Assessment Disputes – by International/Domestic

Domestic	15	71.43%
International	6	28.57%

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:

26-Oct-15	Graduate Research Supervision Panel organised by GSA Policy Coordinator. 30+ attendees	Gryphon Gallery, 1888
23-Nov-15	Student Governance Training – training for members of Student Representative Network for University Committee membership	Gryphon Gallery, 1888
23-Nov-15	Student Discipline Committee Training – training for student members of University Misconduct Committee membership	Gryphon Gallery, 1888

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 2016 and will be available in early April 2016.

Phoebe Churches
Manager, Advocacy & Legal
January 2016