



# **ADVOCACY**

Service Report May - August 2020

## Introduction

Between 2012 and 2017 the Advocacy Service was funded by the University subject to a service contract. As part of the contractual reporting requirements, the Service produced a quarterly report to the University's Advocacy Service Reference Group (ASRG). Subsequent to the discontinuation of the separate Advocacy service contract with the University, after funding for the service was subsumed into the UMSU whole of organisation funding under the 2017 SSAF funding model, the ASRG was formally disbanded on 17 April 2018 at its final meeting.

Nevertheless, although the Quarterly Service Report was originally commissioned by the ASRG as an accountability measure, it has also served to ventilate student experiences of processes within the relevant parts of the University. Over time, the circulation of the Report grew to encompass a good cross section of the University Community, establishing strong communication channels for feedback and issues management between relevant stakeholders. We hope to continue to expand and consolidate these channels and invite interested University staff to contact the Service directly to collaborate on responses to the issues identified in the Report.

## Data and 'Anecdotal'

The data presented in this report is drawn from the statistics recorded in the Advocacy Service Case management database. It is not drawn from, nor is it correlated with University collected service data, to which we have no access. For this reason, it is important to interpret the data and analysis as pertaining solely to activities of the Advocacy Service. The Report statistics cannot be extrapolated to provide commentary on the performance of Faculties or Schools, unless specifically indicated in the commentary.

The 'Trends and Issues' identified in the report are based on both service statistics, and anecdotal observations and case studies. They are provided as insights into the student experience of University processes, or as potential indicators of systemic problems with administrative decision making and procedural fairness. These issues are not intended to reflect the totality of student experience, but rather those areas where the University needs to address potentially serious issues and risks.

The Service can generate drill down or other statistics on its activities, where these may be of interest to the University community, however due to relatively few resources, such requests need to be made with due notice.

## Trends and Issues

Typically, we would expect our casework this quarter predominantly to involve special consideration matters, assessment disputes, and academic misconduct allegations. These are the usual sorts of issues presenting at this time of year. As with the previous COVID Edition of the Service Report, we have continued to see COVID related matters outstripping the usual types of advocacy issues.

### **Please keep calm, your economic ambulance will be there in about six weeks**

In the last Service report, we rhetorically asked *when is an emergency not an emergency?* At the end of April we expressed cautious optimism that the turn-around times for the Emergency Support Fund (ESF) Grant would be shorter and more appropriate to an *emergency* support initiative.

During the last four months however, the Service has continued to field a volume of enquiries from students with outstanding Emergency Support Fund (ESF) applications, with 159 contacts this period related to ESF application issues. In the context of the overall number of applications for the grant, this represents only 1% who contacted the Service for assistance or escalation of their cases for resolution by Student and Scholarly Services (SASS). It was a significant aspect of our case load, nevertheless. It was necessary to follow up some of these matters several times, with the resources in SASS clearly beyond capacity and not coping with the volume of applications. Additionally, the whole process is set up in such a way that there appears to be a level of complexity and confusion for the students applying regarding how the categories actually work. This creates double and triple handling of applications it would seem. UMSU has repeatedly provided recommendations on a fairer and simpler method of allocating the grants, but this has not been taken up.

Consequently, despite the great promise of this initiative which we note is more generous in quantum than most other universities' financial assistance, the ESF ultimately also had the effect of exacerbating hardship in some cases. It has been very distressing to observe the significant deprivations many students have endured while waiting for assistance.

It is clear that the ESF is not being properly supported to ensure that students who are in financial crisis get the financial support they need as an *emergency* measure. So, while the University is keen to promote its "generous" approach to students, the implementation of the ESF suggests that it does not grasp the enormity of the situations that many

students face.

The ESF continues to lack clarity about an appeal or review process, and many negative outcomes do not provide a clear rationale for the decision that has been made, and how the quantum of the funds to be allocated has been determined. Students are simply informed of an outcome and then offered this amount on a take it or leave it basis.

Additionally, despite lengthy processing times, back payment of funds to offset hardship experienced prior to the announcement of the ESF and, presumably, during the period in which applications were being processed have been disallowed, despite it forming part of the initial information provided to students.

Unfortunately, the University has taken a very narrow view of financial hardship for students, and its own role in the financial circumstances of students. For example, students report that they have been denied access to the ESF on the basis that bank account balances have included funds earmarked for the next semester's course fees. Equally, the University has refused to acknowledge that the requirement to pay course fees contributes to a students' financial circumstances.

Several students whom the Service had been assisting ended up giving up when they could not get a grant in time and were forced to withdraw from study at this University in favour of universities in Canada.

**Recommendation:**

UMSU has made a number of recommendations to the University to address these issues and improve the efficacy of the ESF and mitigate student hardship more effectively, the Advocacy Service recommends that the University implement these recommendations as a priority.

## Online Assessment – the Computer Says No

In the lead up to the first all online final assessment period, UMSU raised a number of concerns with the University, based in part on the experiences presenting to the Service during the Mid-term Assessment period (MST). A number of students had issues with the implementation of Alternative Exam Arrangements (AEAs) based on their Assessment Action Plans (AAPs) developed and approved by Student Equity and Disability Services (SEDS).

### That's the Technical Term

The introduction of a form of special consideration specifically for technical difficulties during online assessment was a welcome initiative. For many students suffering the vagaries of IT systems and a totally new and uncharted experience of assessment, Technical Consideration was a lifeline for many. Unfortunately, the one size fits all approach to outcomes let the side down a bit. It appears that, rather than tailor outcomes to students' specific circumstances, all eligible technical consideration applications were granted special exams. This led to some students sitting three exams for the same subject.

**Recommendation**

The Advocacy Service recommends that in future, eligible technical consideration applications will be treated as any other special consideration application and be provided appropriate adjustments relevant to the students' situation.

### No going back

A number of students in the Faculty of Science presented to the Service with concerns about the quiz design in their subjects. The problem arose in both the MSTs and during the end of semester assessment. The students advised that the subject coordinator in the respective subjects had opted to set up the MCQ part of the exams to disallow any backtracking to already answered questions – creating a sudden death scenario which is not part of the analogue MCQ experience. Students will not be able to review and revise their answers prior to submission.

After the Service raised the issue with SASS we were advised that while their recommendation to faculties was to set the exam to enable students to go back to answered questions to review, ultimately decisions about the exam format rested with the department and the Board of Examiners, consistent with the Assessment and Results policy.

**Recommendation:**

The Service notes that when it suits a faculty to try to replicate analogue exam conditions with regard to invigilation, the faculty will not hesitate to shift the burden to students (see next item), however where students have become accustomed to certain assessment design in MCQs for example, altering the methodology without reason appears to be arbitrary and capricious and against the interests of academic integrity. For this reason, online MCQs should be designed to reflect the usual conduct of that assessment.

## Of FVAS and AEs

The provisions in the *Assessment and Results* Policy ceding final say on the implementation Alternative Exam Arrangements (AEAs) to the Faculty has enabled a number of troubling situations where students who have been deemed eligible for adjustments by SEDS under their AAPs have been denied any adjustment. In the Faculty of Veterinary and Agricultural Sciences students who had been deemed eligible by SEDS for AAPs that provided for rest breaks during their examinations were advised two days before the exam that they would not be allowed any breaks.

Not surprisingly, the short notice caused enormous stress to those students, exacerbating the conditions that the AEs were intended to alleviate.

Some students who had been approved by SEDS for AEs were denied them by the Faculty on the basis that technology could not provide an exact replication of invigilated examination conditions, and therefore rest breaks could not be applied without providing extra writing time to the student. It was the view of the FVAS Boards of Examiners that this was inequitable.

The Advocacy Service raised this matter with SASS, noting the short notice and misconceived basis for the Faculty's decision. SEDS went into bat for the students recommending consistency of implementation of AEs across all faculties. When the Faculty was unmoved SEDS advised that the students could apply for Special Consideration, even though the criteria for special consideration would exclude such claims as the circumstances that required an adjustment were entirely anticipated.

Shifting the burden requiring an already disadvantaged student to apply a second time for an adjustment which has already been approved, is less than desirable. This kind of double handling puts a lot of strain on vulnerable students and is a frequent source of complaint.

These were some of the issues raised in UMSU's submission into the University's **Review of Assessment, Semester 1, 2020**, which is discussed further below. This submission provides a more comprehensive analysis of issues arising from the inaugural online assessment period in Semester 1 2020 and is worth reading if you would like to know more about the sorts of assessment issues arising from advocacy casework during this period.

Issues with AAP are not isolated to examinations or to FVAS, and already at the beginning of Semester 2, the Service has been alerted to the plight of a student in the Faculty of Business and Economics. The student has an AAP in place to address chronic health issues; however, the subject guides for all the student's subjects in Semester 2 indicate that there are absolutely no extensions allowed and that students must apply for Special Consideration. This follows on from the same experience in Semester 1, when the student's AAP was sent to subject coordinators, who refused to implement it even though it specifically stated that extensions of up to seven days should be granted.

### Recommendation:

The Service is of the view that

- The development and approval of an AAP is intended to mitigate the impacts of ongoing disadvantage and Special Consideration is intended to address acute events outside of the students' control.
- Requiring a student to apply for Special Consideration to potentially achieve the same outcomes as have been previously approved in AAP is inappropriate and places an additional and unreasonable burden on the student
- The blanket refusal to implement the recommendations of an AAP are potentially discriminatory

Accordingly, we recommend that the Assessment Work Group which has been convened to oversee the online exams with AAPs prioritise consistency across all faculties, review and redesign assessment for the online environment recognising that it is not possible to replicate in-person invigilated exam conditions, and to think beyond this past practice to create assessment that can be administered without discriminating against students with disabilities.

## Massive Misconduct Malaise

Like a hangover after the online assessment period, the wash up in terms of academic integrity matters was not pretty. There was an increase in academic misconduct allegations, with the epicentre in the Faculties of Science, MDHS and Engineering.

In the context of a totally new assessment environment, where the staff designing assessment are mostly as inexperienced in the context as the students undertaking it, we would have expected significant latitude in terms of the way suspected integrity issues were progressed. That is, in an environment where everyone needed to learn new approaches, a presumption for an educative response would have seemed appropriate.

A large proportion of academic integrity breaches involved quizzes, where students were able to chat (collusion cases) and open book examinations where students were unaware that copying and pasting from open book sources could lead to an allegation of plagiarism. While we understand the need for robust measures to ensure academic integrity,

it is important to view academic integrity in a holistic manner and not just through the lens of student behaviour – this behaviour is also a reflection of the actions the University has taken, or not taken, prior to assessment tasks being completed.

The range of concerns with the misconduct processes during this period can be summarised into several main issues. Many allegations appear to have been *prima facie* appropriate for educative responses, as they were largely products of students' lack of familiarity with the conventions of online assessment, a lack of staff clarity on expectations, or both. We further note that many of these allegations were ultimately dismissed, which while appropriate, supports the view that these matters should not have been formalised, especially in the first semester of online assessment.

Additionally, there were a number of misconduct committees convened in the absence of direct evidence of wrongdoing, effectively reversing the burden of proof, requiring students to establish that they did not engage in academic misconduct, rather than proving the allegation on evidence.

Finally, it appears that the number of allegations overloaded the system such that many students faced a lengthy wait with a WAF (withheld) grade, some well into Semester 2. In some cases, the allegations were relatively minor and/or eventually dismissed, but the stress caused to these students was completely disproportionate. The most problematic cases involved students only receiving allegations after the last date to self-enrol in subjects, meaning their whole course plan was potentially affected and, even if exonerated, these students would be disadvantaged, and their graduations delayed.

### **Recommendations:**

In addressing increased rates of academic misconduct, the University should give due regard to:

- The impact of the pandemic on students and the link between this and increased rates of potential academic misconduct. Students are reporting higher levels of stress and anxiety, associated with the pandemic and the experience of remote learning.
- Students report a level of stress and anxiety associated with complying with the technical requirements of online assessment.
- Students report varied of experience of the University's communications with them about and during assessment tasks.

Specifically, we recommend that the University ensures that students in all subjects are provided with practice examinations for all subjects with online exam components, and that the University develops and implements academic integrity modules designed specifically to support students to meet the requirements of open book and online examinations.

UMSU notes that this in line with recommendations made by the Academic Board; however, as these recommendations cannot be enforced it does not provide the assurance that student need.

The Advocacy Service has noted on many occasions over many years that while student members on Misconduct committees receive extensive training to equip them for this role, staff in both administration of misconduct matters and members of committees appear to lack training and knowledge of the principles underpinning best practice. Bearing in mind what a stressful experience this is for students, many of whom have inadvertently committed the conduct alleged, it would be preferable to get these processes right the first time.

### **Special Consideration – academic judgement versus administrative decision**

During this period, the Service was advised of a "clarification" of policy (which amounted to a significant change of custom and practice) in relation to how special consideration disputes could be escalated. Specifically, the Academic Registrar advised that all disputes about the outcome of eligible special consideration applications would be excluded from investigation under the *Student Complaints and Grievances* policy, as they are classified as exercises of academic judgement. That is, while the determination of eligibility for special consideration remains a matter for the Academic Registrar, those disputes regarding the manner and form of academic adjustments determined by the relevant faculty can only be reviewed by the Academic Board.

Superficially, this may seem relatively uncontroversial, the reality is that the majority of outcome disputes will inevitably involve a mix of procedural and academic judgment matters. For example, we see many disputes arising where there has been an outcome determined by the academic division, but because the student remains affected by circumstances requiring further special consideration, the original adjustment is insufficient. While this may appear superficially to be a dispute about the outcome, it is, in fact, a request for further special consideration – which is an eligibility question and within the remit of the Academic Registrar.

Despite raising this issue, we were advised that "any matters to do with outcomes" should be escalated straight to the Academic Board on appeal. This advice was also being provided by Stop 1 and SEDS to students.

This was the case for a student who had had a very difficult time and was seeking late special consideration for issues that had affected her during a period of crisis in 2012. Her formal grievance was declined on the basis it was a dispute

about an outcome; however, the outcome was not recorded anywhere and effectively the formal grievance was a request for further special consideration (as opposed to her disputing the original academic outcome).

The student almost gave up at this point, as the rehashing of her experiences through the dispute process was profoundly re-traumatising and painful. She experienced the decision to refuse her grievance as a formal statement by the University that the ordeal she had suffered was of no consequence. Fortunately, she did rally and lodge an appeal, which was heard by the Academic Board Student Appeal Committee and upheld. Importantly, and frustratingly, it was indeed the administrative/procedural decision of SEDS which was interrogated and not the supposedly academic judgment of the faculty in question and ultimately the appeal committee found in favour of the student.

Curiously, despite this vindication of our position that the matter could and *should* have been decided at a formal grievance – the Student Appeal Committee in its outcome was at pains to state “please note that the panel found no procedural irregularity had occurred with the process or relating to the management of the grievance’.”

This may seem a trivial point, however the student’s significant trauma, and the sensitivity of the matters involved, made the protracted nature of this process particularly devastating. Initially she experienced the determination of the grievance as a message that the University did not care about her significant difficulties, and she had decided that going through an appeal hearing was too detrimental to her ongoing health to cope with. Fortunately, with support of the advocate managing the case, she rose to the occasion and was successful.

Nevertheless, it has been particularly troubling to watch the way this student has suffered at the hands of this process, and given it would seem to have been capable of a determination at an earlier and less stressful point, it is hard to understand the University’s reluctance to accept this process was botched. A far more appropriate and compassionate response would have been to deal with at the grievance stage, where the student did not have to face an intimidating hearing and recount her story for the third time.

#### **Recommendation:**

We understand that there is work being undertaken currently with the Academic Secretary and faculties for a revised process for demarcation of administrative eligibility decisions and academic decisions on outcomes. We recommend that actual case studies are examined to get a greater understanding of the nuances and complexity of many of these situations, rather than attempting to apply a blanket formula which does not reflect reality.

### **No reasons for you! What can students reasonably expect from a Special Consideration Review?**

Dealing with the University is frequently like an episode of Seinfeld, but not nearly as funny as being denied a bowl of soup.<sup>1</sup> Generally, we expect review outcomes for Special Consideration matters to provide clearer statements of reasons than the original decision, and an adequate explanation of the basis for that decision. This is particularly important given the latest directions on the two-path dispute process described above (eligibility/procedural versus outcome/academic judgement). Given those processes require at least some grounds to be established in order to reconsider the decision, we believe a student is entitled to proper reasons for both the original decision and decision at review.

Accordingly, in accordance with reasonable decision-making principles we expect a review:

- to be completed by someone who is not already directly involved in the decision under review – i.e. at a senior tier of the area where the decision was made, who objectively examines decision and confirms or varies original decision; and
- gives reasons for the review decision which provide sufficient information for the student to lodge a formal grievance where they remain dissatisfied.

However, this does not seem to be the current practice. A stark example of this was a recent review outcome which was a simple copy and paste of the original outcome. When we requested proper reasons from SEDS as the reviewer of the original decision, we were advised that it was a faculty decision, SEDS could not explain the rationale, and would not request further reasons, nor relay our request for those reasons to the reviewer, advising "Unfortunately, I am unable to provide you with this information. The student will have the outcome review email and will have to go through the appropriate Appeal channel to resolve this matter, as previously advised." Our further request for proper reasons and evidence of the adequacy of the review were met with no response. The student subsequently lodged an appeal, which was then remitted to the Grievance process by the Academic Secretary in an apparent acknowledgement of our point above, that these matters seldom if ever form a clear demarcation between administrative and academic decisions.

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<sup>1</sup> Some years ago, in one of these reports, I referred to the special consideration processes as Kafkaesque – which caused a bit of an uproar among some in University middle management – is a Seinfeld reference a sign things have improved?

This approach gives rise to a situation where the University requires a student to be able to identify the grounds of an appeal or complaint, and where the University itself is not required to provide students with the information on which they can properly identify those grounds. This clearly frustrates the operation of the appeals and complaints processes.

**Recommendation:**

The Service recommends the urgent revisiting of both the process of review and escalation. This consideration of the current situation should have particular regard to the requirement for proper reasons to be provided – reasons which address the actual basis for the decision- and also contemplation of a revised process for demarcation of the administrative eligibility decision and the academic decision on outcome.

## **When a promise isn't. Offshore students affected by online teaching decisions**

As we approached, and then found ourselves, in semester 2, we began to hear from students raising concerns about a return to campus; from those stuck overseas who were being advised they must return or withdraw from subjects, to those who were concerned by the requirement to attend when they were at heightened risk from the pandemic. While some of these issues remain outstanding, including offshore students in practical programs who face major delays in graduation, others were resolved by virtue of the second lockdown stopping the entire return to campus plan in its tracks.

A stark example of the extent of the impact of the COVID restrictions on some students was the case of the offshore dentistry students who were bluntly advised via email that they would fail the entire year if they did not return to Australia by July 27, 2020.

The students who contacted us are offshore international students in 2nd year of the Doctor of Dental Surgery (DDS). In March 2020 when teaching and learning moved online these students had made the difficult decision to return to their home countries. At that time they were reassured by the Vice-Chancellor's undertaking that offshore students would be able to complete their studies this year online given the possible (and now certain) eventuation that international students would not be able to return this year to Australia. This commitment was reiterated in an email to students from the Provost on July 9, 2020 that stated that 'those of you who are overseas, interstate or in regional Victoria will be supported to progress through your degree with online study options'.

Other students who had returned home and become stuck offshore discovered they could not complete their major and would have to either delay graduation for up to a year or abandon that major. This was the case for students majoring in Chemistry who could not complete the core subject for the chemistry major because it required in lab attendance.

**Recommendation:**

While we acknowledge the primacy of professional registration requirements and other matters of inherent academic requirement which are no doubt informing the University's response in these cases, the significance of the students' reliance on a promise by the Vice Chancellor cannot be ignored. We recommend the University owes these students the maximum possible flexibility and compensation to minimise the detriment of their reliance on this promise.

## **WAM wobbles**

As the first semester drew to a close, and the Academic Board had not yet communicated its resolution on WAM adjustments (colloquially known as the WAMnesty) for Winter semester and semester 2 – increasing numbers of students began contacting the service wanting certainty on this issue.

Time rolled on, results were formalised, Winter semester came and went, and still the students waited for a sign. Then semester 2 begun, but still no one knew what was happening with their WAM calculations.

Students in irregular subjects (that is semester long subjects with different assessment dates) reported being told they were not eligible for the WAM adjustment. This was resolved after we raised the issue with SASS and it was corrected.

In late June the Academic Board met and considered the issue relating to the treatment of WAM for University of Melbourne students applying for entry to courses in the Faculty of Medicine Dentistry and Health Sciences. A motion to overturn the University's previous decision lost narrowly (39-33), leaving UMSU to consider how this matter can be raised at University Council.

Eventually, after being advised that an announcement of the Academic Board's Resolution on WAM calculations for the remainder of 2020 was imminent

– for several weeks – UMSU launched another petition. The response was immediate, and phenomenal. Abundantly proving how central the issue of WAM and academic impacts are to students. A whopping 17,000 students signed the petition in under three weeks.

While the Service welcomed the eventual extension of the Academic Board's WAM resolution to Semester 2, some

students continued to raise anomalous outcomes from the arrangement. One issue was raised by those who found their summer subjects were not counted in their WAM benchmark, meaning they could not benefit from good results in some first semester subjects (this matter is subject to a formal grievance currently), and we also sought clarification from the President of the Academic Board regarding as to why the WAM benchmark for Semester 2 subjects remains based on pre-2020 WAM, rather than the cumulative WAM including Sem 1 results. Students who have improved their WAM as a result of Semester 1 are concerned their WAM may drop if they get marks in Semester 2 which lie above their pre-2020 Benchmark but below their current WAM. The underwhelming explanation was that the “decision was taken to continue the WAM calculation as previously agreed. It is standardised for all students, simpler and fairer”. Right.

## Programmes and Initiatives

### Student members on Misconduct Committee Training

#### Misconduct Committee member Training

The Advocacy Service is charged with the responsibility to train student members of Misconduct Committees, subject to ss. 5.10(d) and 5.32 of the *Student Conduct* and *Student Academic Integrity* Policies respectively. Normally the training is held over a half day each quarter, however due to COVID restrictions, this training for the First time was run entirely online. Training was provided to 13 students- seven undergraduate and six graduate students. A Canvas based module covering a range of fundamental principles which underpin good decision making and ensure a thorough grounding in procedural fairness and best practice in this area. After trainees completed the online theory component, the training culminated in a 90-minute group workshop to consider case studies.

We are pleased that we received overwhelmingly positive feedback, and we will do it again soon. Students wishing to be considered for this important volunteer work, can register their interest here:

<https://umsu.unimelb.edu.au/support/advocacy/aca-misc-vol/>

### Submissions to the University

This was a busy period for submissions to policy and other reviews.

The Service contributed to the UMSU Submission for the **University's Graduate Student Experience paper** – noting

The full submission is here: <https://umsu.unimelb.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/UMSU-Submission-Graduate-Student-Experience.pdf>

The Service also provided input into the University's **Review of Assessment, Semester 1, 2020**; observing among other things, that the majority of issues identified by UMSU in the Review had been flagged by UMSU prior to the assessment period as being potential problems.

The full submission is here: <https://umsu.unimelb.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/UMSU-Submission-Review-of-Assessment-Semester-1-2020.pdf>

The Service contributed to the UMSU Submission to Policy Consultation on yet more uncalled for changes to **Special Consideration provisions of the *Assessment and Results Policy***. In summary, UMSU submitted that

- The proposed changes will make it possible for a faculty to deny students an opportunity for special assessment if they remain too sick to sit further assessment until the commencement of the next semester. The Dean of the Faculty can elect to allow special assessment after semester begins, but only if it is convenient for the Faculty and not based on the specifics of the students' circumstances.
- If this happens the student is automatically withdrawn from the subject but won't then get the chance to pass the subject – so, ultimately, the process that is supposed to give students the chance to complete subjects if they are unwell is the same process that will prevent them from doing this. Not to mention the impact this will have on study plans and academic progress.
- To make the whole ordeal even more tricky, students would also need to decide whether they are going to sit special assessment without knowing if they need to or not – and if they chose to sit it then whatever they get in the special automatically replaces the original mark no matter what.
- And the bizarre twist of the knife- the proposed changes introduce a potential loophole for the University to wriggle out of making adjustments for affected students! Now the University wants to be able to deny students special consideration if it could somehow be called unfair to other students. That is – saying being fair to a disadvantaged student might somehow be unfair to other unaffected students. This suggests the University's approach to special consideration is completely upside down – the whole point is to provide support to students who are unable to complete assessment to the best of their ability because of their circumstances, which has nothing to do with other students.

The full submission is available here: <https://umsu.unimelb.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/UMSU-Submission-SCPpolicyChangesAug2020-1.pdf>

Finally, the Service, in collaboration with the UMSU Legal Service, also made a submission to the Policy Network consultation on the DRAFT ***Intellectual Property Policy***, which resulted in some very good changes which will strengthen protection and provide greater clarity and certainty in the process for students, which should especially benefit **Research Higher Degree Students**.

## Advocacy Service Statistics

### Comparative data – May - August 2020

This period 1014 students were provided a service resulting in 2767 contacts. In the same period last year, the service saw 922 students resulting in 2391 contacts. This is an increase of 10% over the same time last year, which represents a stabilising of the casework increase since the first report, but an increase, nonetheless.

Additionally, the Advocacy website received over 23 000 page views this period, almost twice the number in the first part of the year. While unsurprising in the context of remote communications, this is nevertheless a clear indicator of the students' reliance on UMSU generally and the Service specifically, for information and support. It is a 30% increase over the same period last year, with the most popular pages featuring information on academic misconduct and special consideration.

### Increase in case work for the year to date

During this year to date – the Service has assisted 1580 individual students with 4379 contacts, compared to the equivalent period in 2019 where 1254 students were assisted in 3633 contacts. This is a 26% increase in casework in the year to date overall.

Notably, there was no “Show Cause” process for the first half year 2020, as it was replaced with an intervention involving fewer students and with no one at risk of suspension or termination. In this context, the Service did not run its usual Peer Support program, and we might have expected our data to show a decrease during this normally busy time. However, if we apply our own WAM adjustment – the *Weighted Advocacy Margin* and normalise for the lack of the usual peak involving the Peer Support Programme, this is a **59% increase** in casework presentations. That is, in this period last year there were **991** presentations to the service but **1580** this year.

### 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.

Previously, the majority of our casework presented via either our contact form or through our drop-in service. However due to the shift to remote service delivery, students have found us through a variety of other sources, many of which are not optimised to collect the usual base data which is routinely collected via our contact form or drop-in service. This includes data on students' faculty, award level (including graduate or undergraduate status) and whether they are a domestic or International student. We have done our best to collect these demographics wherever possible, however the sheer volume and urgency of many contacts has meant that our demographic data is in many cases not as detailed as usual. We have also taken advantage of the reach of our social media channels to provide advice and these contacts may also be lacking in the usual detail. This makes reporting along on graduate/undergraduate and domestic/international lines problematic in this report.

## May- August 2020

All Students			Graduate Coursework students			RHD students		
COVID-19	381	37.76%	COVID-19	122	38.61%	Progress - HDR	5	26.32%
Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	129	12.78%	Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	45	14.24%	COVID-19	5	26.32%
Special Consideration	108	10.70%	Special Consideration	39	12.34%	Supervision Problems	4	21.05%
Assessment Dispute	77	7.63%	Assessment Dispute	22	6.96%	Not Specified	2	10.53%
Academic Misconduct - Collusion	65	6.44%	Academic Misconduct - Collusion	18	5.70%	Remission of Fees	1	5.26%
Academic Misconduct - Exam	47	4.66%	Academic Misconduct - Exam	15	4.75%	Enrolment problems	1	5.26%
Enrolment problems	22	2.18%	Not Specified	8	2.53%	Assessment Dispute	1	5.26%
Not Specified	22	2.18%	Course Academic Progress Committee	7	2.22%			
Student Admin - Remission of Fees	21	2.08%	Enrolment problems	7	2.22%			
Selection Appeal	17	1.68%	Other	5	1.58%			
Academic Misconduct - Other	16	1.59%	Vocational Placement Problems	5	1.58%			
Course Academic Progress Committee	15	1.49%	Academic Misconduct - Other	5	1.58%			
Other	14	1.39%	Remission of Fees	4	1.27%			
Advance Standing Credit/RPL	13	1.29%	General Misconduct	2	0.63%			
Student complaint about uni staff	11	1.09%	Selection Appeal	2	0.63%			
General Misconduct	8	0.79%	Advance Standing Credit/RPL	2	0.63%			
Incorrect Advice	6	0.59%	Academic Misconduct - Falsified docs	2	0.63%			
Supervision Problems	6	0.59%	Student complaint about uni staff	2	0.63%			
Vocational Placement Problems	5	0.50%	Bullying	1	0.32%			
Progress - HDR	5	0.50%	Exchange	1	0.32%			
Course structure/changes	4	0.40%	Supervision Problems	1	0.32%			
Quality Teaching	3	0.30%	Special Consideration - ongoing	1	0.32%			
Scholarship Issues	3	0.30%						
Exchange	3	0.30%						
Bullying	2	0.20%						
Academic Misconduct - Falsified docs	2	0.20%						
Special Consideration - ongoing	2	0.20%						
Discrimination	1	0.10%						
Graduation	1	0.10%						

May- August 2019

All Students			Graduate Coursework students			RHD students		
Course Academic Progress Committee	404	43.82%	Course Academic Progress Committee	183	47.16%	Supervision Problems	6	33.33%
Special Consideration	133	14.43%	Special Consideration	47	12.11%	Progress - HDR	9	22.22%
Assessment Dispute	94	10.20%	Assessment Dispute	43	11.08%	Special Consideration	3	11.11%
Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	51	5.53%	Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism	27	6.96%	Scholarship Issues	3	11.11%
Academic Misconduct - Collusion	26	2.82%	Academic Misconduct - Collusion	15	3.87%	Student complaint about uni staff	2	7.41%
Student complaint about uni staff	21	2.28%	Academic Misconduct - Exam	9	2.32%	Incorrect Advice	2	7.41%
Academic Misconduct - Exam	20	2.17%	Academic Misconduct - Falsified docs	8	2.06%	Assessment Dispute	1	3.70%
Incorrect Advice	19	2.06%	Remission of Fees	7	1.80%	Not Specified	1	3.70%
Academic Misconduct - Falsified docs	19	2.06%	Student complaint about uni staff	6	1.55%			
Not Specified	17	1.84%	Enrolment problems	6	1.55%			
Other	16	1.74%	Not Specified	6	1.55%			
Remission of Fees	16	1.74%	General Misconduct	5	1.29%			
Student Admin - Enrolment problems	15	1.63%	Vocational Placement Problems	5	1.29%			
Selection Appeal	9	0.98%	Incorrect Advice	4	1.03%			
Supervision Problems	9	0.98%	Other	4	1.03%			
Student complaint about another student	9	0.98%	Advance Standing	2	0.52%			
General Misconduct	8	0.87%	Selection Appeal	2	0.52%			
Vocational Placement Problems	6	0.65%	Student complaint about another student	2	0.52%			
Progress - HDR	6	0.65%	Special Consideration - ongoing	2	0.52%			
Advance Standing Credit/RPL	6	0.65%	Course structure/changes	1	0.26%			
Special Consideration - ongoing	4	0.43%	Bullying	1	0.26%			
Scholarship Issues	4	0.43%	Quality Teaching	1	0.26%			
Quality Teaching	3	0.33%	Sexual Harassment	1	0.26%			
Bullying	2	0.22%	Graduation	1	0.26%			
Exchange	1	0.11%						
Graduation	1	0.11%						
Discrimination	1	0.11%						
Sexual Harassment	1	0.11%						
Course changes	1	0.11%						

## Distribution by graduate/undergraduate status

May- August 2020\*

Graduate	381	37.57%	51.70%
Undergraduate	356	35.11%	48.30%
Not specified	277	27.32%	

\*This report is missing over a quarter of the data – however the final column shows the adjusted statistics based on information recorded.

May- August 2019

Graduate	440	47.77%	
Undergraduate	481	52.23%	

## Distribution by International/Domestic Status

May- August 2020\*

Domestic	394	38.86%	55.26 %
International	319	31.46%	44.74%
Not specified	301	29.68%	

\*As above with respect to missing data.

May- August 2019

Domestic	478	51.90%	
International	443	48.10%	

## Commentary

The adjusted proportion of graduate to undergraduate students was 51.70% to 48.3% (compared with 52.23% to 47.77% for the same period last year). This continues to be a stable reflection of enrolment load. Similarly, there is a consistent result for proportions of international and domestic students during this period with 55.26% domestic and 44.74% international students presented to the service, last year in the equivalent quarter we saw 51.90% domestic students to 48.10% international students.

The primary presenting issue overall this period- representing just under 40% of all matters- were issues related to the impacts of COVID-19. While in the first reporting period to April, more than a quarter of the COVID-19 related matters concerned requests for fee relief, during this period fee discounting requests account for under 8% of all COVID related matters. The most commonly presenting issue in this period involved students' problems accessing outcomes for the Emergency Support Fund Grant applications. These enquiries made up over 40% of COVID related matters, with many desperate students waiting weeks for assistance.

The next most common issue related to problems with and concerns about online examinations. This was closely followed by enquiries from students concerned about the impact of the disruptions on their grades – and particularly their WAM.

After COVID related matters, the most highly represented matters were plagiarism allegations – a significant proportion of which related to online assessment, Special Consideration issues, and assessment disputes.

Special Consideration matters predominantly involved assistance with advice on late applications and applications declined due to students being deemed ineligible. Disputes over outcomes predominantly concerned late applications, and those deemed to have insufficient evidence. We continue to see an increasing number of presentations where students have been given granted eligibility, but where they remain dissatisfied with the outcome offered. For example, students provided with late withdrawals who wished to sit further special assessment. The majority of Special Consideration related matters involved students enrolled in the Faculties of Science and Arts.

Almost two thirds of assessment disputes involved informal assessment reviews with the examiner for reasons including allegations of examiner bias, administrative errors to do with lost assessment submissions, and cases where the student simply could not reconcile their result with the effort they had put in. Most notable was an increase in the numbers of students presenting citing deficiencies with the conduct of assessment. The majority of these matters concerned complaints related to problems with the design of online assessment, and arguments that there has been

a failure to provide summative feedback across the semester, perhaps amplified by the change to remote teaching and learning. There were also a number of presentations related to formal requests to the Head of Department for re-marking on similar bases, and procedural grievances regarding alleged breaches of the *Assessment and Results Policy*. The majority of Assessment Disputes arose in the Faculties of Science and Arts, followed by Business and Economics, ABP and MDHS. Unusually, there were more disputes from undergraduate students than graduates this time. Many undergraduate students remain extremely concerned at their competitiveness for graduate programs, even with the current Academic Board WAM Resolution. Consistent with previous periods, domestic students were represented three times more than international students in assessment disputes.

#### COVID-19 related matters by Reason

Emergency Support Fund	159	41.73%
Online examination issues	48	12.60%
WAM concerns	39	10.24%
Online teaching quality	37	9.71%
Fee discounting	28	7.35%
Return to Campus	14	3.67%
Tenancy / Legal referral	11	2.89%
Semester 2 impacts	11	2.89%
Technical Consideration	8	2.10%
Materials Required	6	1.57%
LOA/Student Visa	4	1.05%
Special Consideration	4	1.05%
Travel Restrictions	3	0.79%
Classes in non-teaching period/MSB	2	0.52%
Zoom or Internet problems	1	0.26%
Graduation delay	1	0.26%
Exchange/study abroad Interrupted	1	0.26%
Enrolment Problem	1	0.26%
Centrelink Stimulus Payments	1	0.26%
Assessment due dates	1	0.26%
Non-standard census dates	1	0.26%
	<b>381</b>	

#### Distribution of COVID matters by graduate/undergraduate status

May- August 2020\*

Graduate	142	37.27%	40.34%
Undergraduate	210	55.12%	59.66%
Not specified	29	7.61%	

#### Distribution COVID matters by International/Domestic Status

May- August 2020\*

Domestic	176	46.19%	50.00%
International	176	46.19%	50.00%
Not specified	29	7.61%	

### Plagiarism – Contacts by Stage of process

STAGE	REASON	Total
Formal/Committee Hearing	Deliberate	60
	Inadvertent	12
		<b>72</b>
Informal/Educative	Inadvertent	47
Academic Board Appeal	Excessive Penalty	10
Total Plagiarism Related Matters		<b>129</b>

### Plagiarism – by Faculty

Faculty of Science	32	24.81%
Melbourne School of Engineering	23	17.83%
Faculty of Arts	17	13.18%
Faculty of MDHS	13	10.08%
Faculty of Business and Economics	13	10.08%
Unspecified	8	6.20%
Melbourne Business School (MBS)	7	5.43%
Melbourne Law School	5	3.88%
Faculty of Veterinary and Agricultural Sciences	5	3.88%
Melbourne School of Design (AB&P)	3	2.33%
Melbourne Graduate School of Education	3	2.33%

### Plagiarism – by Graduate/Undergraduate

Graduate	61	47.29%	<b>50.41%</b>
Undergraduate	60	46.51%	<b>49.59%</b>
Unspecified	8	6.20%	

### Plagiarism – by International/Domestic

Domestic	64	49.61%	<b>52.89%</b>
International	57	44.19%	<b>47.11%</b>
Unspecified	8	6.20%	

### Special Consideration – Contacts by Stage of Process

STAGE	REASON	Total
Application	Late Application	35
	Deemed Insufficient Grounds	24
	Unhappy with outcome provided	24
		59
Internal Review	Unhappy with outcome provided	18
	Late Application	5
	Deemed Insufficient Grounds	4
	Deemed No Appropriate Outcome	1
	<b>28</b>	
Formal Grievance	Late Application	8
	Deemed Insufficient Grounds	3
	Deemed No Appropriate Outcome	2
	<b>13</b>	
Appeal	Unhappy with outcome provided	6
	Deemed No Appropriate Outcome	1
	Late Application	1
		<b>8</b>
Total Special Consideration Matters		<b>108</b>

### Special Consideration – by Faculty

<b>Faculty of Arts</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>19.44%</b>
<b>Faculty of Science</b>	21	19.44%
<b>Faculty of Business and Economics</b>	15	13.89%
<b>Faculty of MDHS</b>	13	12.04%
<b>Melbourne Law School</b>	11	10.19%
<b>Melbourne School of Engineering</b>	8	7.41%
<b>Melbourne School of Design (AB&amp;P)</b>	8	7.41%
<b>Melbourne Business School (MBS)</b>	4	3.70%
<b>VCA &amp; Music</b>	3	2.78%
<b>Melbourne Graduate School of Education</b>	2	1.85%
<b>Faculty of Veterinary and Agricultural Sciences</b>	2	1.85%

### Special Consideration – by Graduate/Undergraduate

Undergraduate	55	50.93%
Graduate	53	49.07%

### Special Consideration – by International/Domestic

Domestic	70	64.81%
International	38	35.19%

### Assessment Disputes – Contacts by Stage of Process

STAGE	REASON	Total
Informal/assessment review with examiner	Conduct of Assessment	26
	Procedural Issue/policy breach	15
	Admin Error	3
	Allegation of Examiner Bias	1
		<b>45</b>
Formal request for remark	Conduct of Assessment	26
	Allegation of Examiner Bias	1
		<b>27</b>
Formal Grievance	Procedural Issue/policy breach	4
Academic Board Appeal	Conduct of Assessment	5
Total Assessment Dispute Related Matters		<b>77</b>

### Assessment Disputes – by Faculty

Faculty of Science	18	23.38%
Faculty of Arts	15	19.48%
Faculty of Business and Economics	14	18.18%
Faculty of MDHS	11	14.29%
Melbourne School of Design (AB&P)	8	10.39%
Melbourne Law School	4	5.19%
Faculty of Veterinary and Agricultural Sciences	3	3.90%
Melbourne School of Engineering	2	2.60%
Melbourne Graduate School of Education	2	2.60%

### Assessment Disputes – by Graduate/Undergraduate

Graduate	31	40.26%
Undergraduate	46	59.74%

### Assessment Disputes – by International/Domestic

Domestic	55	71.43%
International	22	28.57%

The next Advocacy Service report will cover the quarter September to December 2020 and will be available in early 2021.

Phoebe Churches

Manager, Advocacy & Legal

September 2020