

**UMSU Briefing Paper:**



**Student Placements Working Group – Better support for students on professional placements**

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**Background**

At the beginning of 2024 the Office of the Academic Registrar established the Student Placement Working Group, following a recommendation from a review into Student Placements conducted in 2023 by SASS and the Office of the Provost.

The Working Group is chaired by Lyn McColl (Deputy Academic Registrar), and in July, Lyn requested a report from Umsu outlining the types of issues that students experience on placement.

Through our casework and collaboration with OB's, the Umsu Advocacy Service is well placed to provide this report.

This paper identifies four key areas where improvement is required in relation to support for students on placements.

**1. Reliability of Providers**

The Advocacy Service commonly receives requests for assistance from students who are frustrated and stressed by delays in the process of allocating placements.

In some instances, students have waited for months before learning the details of their placement, and they are then given very short notice for commencement. We understand that there are certain logistical difficulties in working with external organisations, but the commonality of this problem, and the fact that it is often the same providers involved, suggests that the University needs to consider the reliability of the external organisations that it partners with.

**Recommendations**

Faculties should look at the suitability of their placement partners in terms of how well prepared they are to facilitate placements, both in the planning stage and integration.

## **2. Support when complaints are made**

One of the more common issues that students present to us with concerns the process that is put in place when a complaint has been made against the student on placement.

One of the objectives of the Student Fitness to Practice Policy is to “*provide a framework for the management of risks and issues related to students undertaking professional practice activities, including placement, experiential learning or clinical work prior to, or during, a student’s enrolment in a course or subject.*” Unfortunately, however, we often see instances where risks and issues are not managed efficiently or effectively.

In one case earlier this year, after a complaint was made against a student from the Dental School, they received a SMS from their course coordinator in the morning to inform them that they were summarily removed from the placement. No further information was provided, and then later that afternoon they were notified via email by the Academic Programs Manager that the matter had been referred to the Academic Registrar for consideration under the Student Conduct Policy.

The student tried to find out more information regarding the nature of the complaint and the timeframe for an investigation, but was unable to get any further details.

It was not until 2 weeks later that the student received an invitation to a meeting with the Faculty Fitness to Practice Officer, after the Academic Registrar had referred the matter back to the Faculty for consideration under the Student Fitness to Practice Policy. The meeting was described as informal, with the purpose of informally discussing and addressing the issues (complaints) that had been raised and to create a learning plan to address the professional behaviours of concern.

The meeting occurred two and a half weeks after the student had been removed from placement, and it was then a further wait of over a week to receive follow-up advice. By the time the process had been completed, the student had missed four weeks of placement for conduct concerns that were deemed minor enough to be dealt with informally.

We understand that the necessity to provide a trauma-informed and victim-centric approach means when complaints are made about a student’s conduct on placement, it is often imperative to remove the student from the placement immediately while an investigation can take place. However, once the student has been removed from the placement, they need to be supported while the investigation is conducted.

### **Recommendations**

It is critical to have robust and efficient processes in place to deal with any issues that arise on a placement. This should involve clear timeframes for progressing an investigation, and where possible, early identification of the severity of the incident(s).

## **3. Support when there are Unsatisfactory Progress concerns**

We have over the years observed many inconsistencies in the process for dealing with students on placement who have been flagged for unsatisfactory progress. In some cases, the issues are brought to the attention of the student, a document is created which highlights the areas where improvement is required, a timeframe for showing adequate improvement is put in place, and the student receives proper support during this time to maximise their chances of meeting expectations. That is the ideal scenario.

Unfortunately, however, we also see many cases where the intervention is not handled efficiently or supportively, and the student is not given the best opportunity to get their performance up to the level required. In these cases, it is common to see that no clear plan is put in place, the student feels unsupported and confused by what they need to do and how best to do it, and then the placement is unexpectedly cancelled before they have had a chance to meet expectations.

### **Recommendations**

It should be mandatory for Faculties to have a clear and consistent, properly documented process in place for managing progress concerns, so that the student is notified as early as possible, is clear on where they need to improve, understands the timeframe they have to meet expectations, and gets properly supported by staff from their Faculty in collaboration with the provider.

#### ***4. Support and options for students when placement is cancelled by the provider***

We understand that placement providers will always retain the authority to cancel a placement at any time for any reason, but we believe the University can do more for students in these situations.

Based on the experiences of the students who seek assistance from our service, the usual practice when a provider cancels a placement is that the student will be invited to attend a meeting with the Placement Coordinator and/or Course Coordinator, where they will be offered support (most commonly by way of referrals to University support services) and also advised that they will be receiving a fail grade for the subject and a Show Cause notice with an invitation to meet with a Course Academic Progress Committee (CAPC).

Under normal circumstances, a CAPC meets to discuss a student's progress based on the results that have been recorded, and they have no authority to consider arguments by a student that the grades in question are unfair. However, when it comes to placements, in many instances, students will feel as though the cancellation of their placement was unfair, unreasonable, or due to circumstances that were not entirely within their control - and in many instances, they have a very reasonable argument on one or more of those grounds. It is unfortunate that there is no scope for a student to have these matters considered by a CAPC, and the only option they have is to pursue an assessment dispute (which are practically impossible to succeed with in a placement setting).

### **Recommendations**

The University should look at the option of empowering CAPC's to consider a student's arguments that the cancellation of the placement was not partially or wholly their responsibility, and to have the authority to rescind or withhold the failed grade (and approve a further attempt at the placement) if they find that the student's position is reasonable.