

MGA 2025 Semester 1 APC Feedback

Background

MGA student advocates play a student support role throughout the APC process. In particular, where student details are provided to us, we will proactively reach out to students via email and phone to:

- Alert them to the fact they have triggered the process
- Explain the nature (and seriousness) of the process
- Help students prepare for their hearing, including:
 - Meetings and correspondence to discuss with them their reasons for failing and helping to identify triggers and solutions
 - Guidance and feedback on preparing a written statement
 - Guidance on preparing supporting documentation
 - Supporting the student during the hearing itself, including attending with the student as a support person
 - Explaining processes for appeal, and providing similar support as above through the appeals process

Students who trigger the APC process are often already deeply disengaged with the studies and with the University in general. This is typically due to personal circumstances, such as poor mental or physical health, family/personal crises (such as family violence, poverty, homelessness), and/or having avoidant personality traits. This means that traditional communication approaches lead to inequitable outcomes. This cohort of students require additional support to properly understand and engage with the process. Process design must take into account their need for accommodation and flexibility to ensure they are given a fair opportunity. This is especially important considering the serious consequences of the APC process, which can lead to a student being excluded from their studies.

Generally, student advocacy services act to provide the additional support needed in this area. However, our impact is limited by the information and engagement we receive from the faculties themselves. If we are not properly notified of a student at risk, we cannot provide timely support that they require.

Issues and Recommendations

Below are collected issues and recommendations regarding the APC process. We note that some feedback from previous rounds/submissions are replicated as they are still ongoing.

Pre Hearing

1. Relevant student notices and communication:

- **Are limited in accessibility and not written with plain English for students with poor English in mind;**

The current communications are written in a manner that heavily utilises corporate and legal language. They are also extremely lengthy. While appropriate for certain audiences, is not very accessible to students going through the APC process. In particular, this cohort has a high concentration of students with poor English language skills who will struggle to decipher the style of language used. Not all students are capable of using translation AIs or tools - which may also misconstrue meanings.

Recommendation: It would greatly increase accessibility and help improve engagement if these communications were written in plain English language. For example:

Current: You previously indicated that you do not wish to attend your APC hearing. As such, your case has been referred to a hearing where a decision will be made in your absence.

Adjusted: You previously said you don't want to attend your APC hearing. This means a decision will be made without you.

- **do not clearly emphasise seriousness of process;**

Presently, the risk of exclusion is not clearly emphasised in Level 3 risk level notices, and is only mentioned briefly toward the later half of the notice. The term exclusion is also not an everyday word and students may not immediately understand what this means, the most serious points of the notice are not clearly communicated in this regard.

Recommendation: Explain what the APC process is, the risk of exclusion, and what the exclusion is at the very start of the email. For example, an introduction at the beginning such as: Every semester, Monash reviews student grades to decide if students are on track to complete their course. You have been identified as at high risk and are being considered for exclusion and removal from your course. Please read below for important information and actions for you to take.

- **are missing empathetic language.**

Decision letters are focused on stating facts, and do not read or come across as sympathetic to the student's emotional needs. This is particularly concerning for hearings where exclusion was the outcome. Students often are in deep distress following exclusion decisions and may not have the mental or emotional capacity to probably engage with these notices which trigger deep feelings of shame or fear for them.

Recommendation:

Add emotional support and empathetic language to the beginning (and throughout) relevant communications such as decision letters. For example:

Thank you for attending your recent Academic Progress Committee hearing on Thursday 1 January. We understand that the outcome was not what you had hoped for, and may have been difficult to receive. We encourage you to reach out to support services, and any trusted friends and family, who can guide you through the next steps.

Please find below details of the decision, as well as other resources that you may find useful.

2. Lack of proper notification of advocates by faculties for Level 3 students being considered for a hearing.

Where students give permission for their information to be released to their SROs, faculties often elect to only notify advocates when a hearing date and time has been confirmed. This prevents student advocates from performing a critical role in explaining the process to a student and in encouraging them to attend and prepare for the hearing.

Students who do not understand the process may elect to ignore the hearing notice and invite or otherwise miss the email in their inbox. Advocates proactively reach out to students via email and/or phone where faculties may not have the resources to do so. There have been times where an advocate has informed the student that they have been invited to a hearing but the student was not aware, and only responded to the invite after the advocate notified them of this.

Recommendation: For faculties/Monash to notify and release student information to SROs when the student first gives permission upon completing the My Academic Progress tool and/or is referred to hearing, and not waiting for the student to respond or for a date and time has been confirmed.

3. Continued delays and inconsistencies in faculties giving snapshot access, including advocates being given snapshot access only to later learn the student hadn't given permission.

Faculties continue to have an inconsistent approach with giving snapshot access to advocates. Of particular concern are executive officers who:

- did not appear to confirm if student had given permission before sharing snapshots; and/or
- did not indicate in the shared spreadsheet whether a student had given permission to share their information with SROs.

We are aware that in some cases we have been given access to a snapshot when the student had not given permission. We wanted to flag this as the advocates will generally presume that snapshot access is only given where the student has granted permission. It is the role of the EOs to correctly manage these permissions and data and the onus should not be on the student's advocate to ensure that the EOs have correctly upheld privacy requirements.

Recommendation: Further training for APC Executive Officers, especially in highlighting privacy requirements. Ensuring processes are in place to ensure that APC executive officers are fully trained well ahead of APC hearings starting.

4. Lack of notification and information for time uploaded, and for new documents uploaded to student snapshot

The current snapshot/CRM system and communication processes do not appear to have any step to ensure students are informed in a timely manner when new documents are made available for a hearing. This is a potential breach of procedural fairness as there is very little time provided to students (two working days) to review and respond to new documents. In some cases, these documents - such as placement reports - can be very lengthy and substantive, and require significant time to review and respond to. Students unaware of essential documentation being uploaded may neglect to review or respond to these documents, leading to unfair outcomes at the hearing.

Recommendation: That the University update the CRM/Snapshot system to show the upload date of files; add a clear process to notify students when new documents are uploaded to the snapshot that will be considered by the APC.

5. Students unfairly impacted by maximum file upload limit

Considering the duration and complexity of cases for students facing APC, many students may need to provide detailed evidence and information that stretch back several months to years. The current system has a file upload limit of 10, which is not sufficient for a student to present their full situation in evidence. In particular, this disadvantages students who don't possess the IT skills to combine multiple attachments into one file.

Recommendation: Remove file upload limits for student responses.

6. Overly complex deadlines for students ahead of the hearing

Currently, students have multiple deadlines they must keep in mind ahead of their hearing. As listed in the referral to hearing notice:

- You must [tell us whether you want to attend] your hearing within three working days of receiving this notice
- If you wish to [submit evidence], you must notify us within three working days of receiving this notice
- Within four working days of receiving this notice: You can lodge an objection against any Committee member that you think may have a conflict of interest in your case.
- At least four working days before your hearing: You can elect to not have a student member on the committee.
- At least three working days before the hearing: You can provide a copy of your faculty's written permission for a course transfer (if you've been granted permission to transfer to another course).
- At least two working days before the hearing: You can supply documentary evidence regarding your case and provide details of your support person

These deadlines are deeply confusing for a student engaging with the process, and in some cases, it is questionable whether they are truly necessary. In practice, many faculties are willing to disregard deadlines and accommodate students in the interests of procedural fairness and equitable access. Keeping in mind that these are often deeply disengaged students who may be struggling with serious life issues at the same time. It is questionable whether the process properly acknowledges this.

Recommendation: Review the current deadlines to see if they are truly necessary and beneficial to the process, and whether they can be unified to one clear deadline. If deadlines must be kept, update the template so it is easier to read and understand, such as using a table and/or including specific dates instead of 'x days before'.

7. Unfair deadlines for faculty provision of documents vs. for students to submit evidence and respond to evidence.

Presently, the deadline in the Academic Progress Committee Procedure for faculty to upload student documentation is two working days before the hearing to allow the preparation of a written or oral response. However, the deadline for students to submit additional written evidence is the same - up to two working days before the academic progress hearing date.

While permission can be requested to submit additional files, this clearly disadvantages students who may form the impression that they cannot respond as the deadline has passed. This is of particular concern as the current process does not notify students when new documents are uploaded, leaving the onus on the student to check their snapshot.

This leaves a clear avenue for appeals under the ground of procedural fairness, where a student was not given sufficient time to respond to evidence.

Recommendation: Where substantial evidence is submitted from the faculty within two days of a hearing, the hearing should be rescheduled or otherwise delayed so the student has sufficient time, in alignment with the principles of procedural fairness, to review the evidence and to prepare and submit a response. Alternatively, the faculty deadline to include relevant evidence should be at least 5-10 working days before the hearing, to allow the student sufficient time to review and respond to evidence.

Case Study: For students who failed placement, we have seen placement reports uploaded by the faculty in the final afternoon of the two working days deadline. This created a great deal of anxiety for the students as they did not have time to respond in writing by their own same 2 day deadline.

8. Inconsistencies with faculties not sending out zoom links/hearing invites to students who don't respond (non-responders)

Currently, the University does not have a standard approach for how hearings for students who do not respond to the My Academic Progress tool should be handled. We have observed that faculties have an inconsistent approach with how non-responder students are informed of their hearing. In particular, while some faculties will inform students of the full details of their hearing - including location, time, and zoom link where relevant, other faculties will only inform students that they are referred to hearing. No details of the hearing are sent to the student unless they respond to confirm they wish to attend.

This means that some faculties will restrict students from attending hearings at all, while other faculties will accommodate and allow students to attend hearings even if they respond on or after the date.

Depending on the faculty the student is enrolled in, two students in identical circumstances may face very different outcomes due to one student having been afforded the opportunity to respond, while the other was blocked from attending the hearing at all. Based on first-hand experience of advocates, students facing stress and mental health concerns may not engage with the process and will not respond to emails out of fear and anxiety, but will appear at their hearing if notified, to present evidence and explain their situation.

Due to the inconsistent approach, it has also been very difficult from a staff resource allocation and management perspective, as advocates do not know if they need to be on standby to support the student at the hearing based on information currently shared to us.

Recommendation: For Monash to adopt a uniform approach to handling non-responder students that lead to consistent and fair outcomes. The University provides clear direction on whether hearing times, locations, and/or zoom links should be disclosed to students as a part of the Notice of Hearing.

For fair student outcomes, students should always be afforded the opportunity to attend, even if they had not previously engaged with the process. Even where a student has indicated they will not attend a hearing or do not reply, they must be notified that a hearing will take place and given an opportunity to attend and receive support from advocacy. MGA Advocacy recommends that students always being formed of their hearing time, date, and location.

9. Scheduling of APC hearings expected to conclude near or after 5pm leading to a lack of access to support services.

APC hearings may often have devastating outcomes for students, who can be removed from their course entirely. This can cause extreme emotions and be triggering for students facing stress and mental health issues such as depression and suicidal ideation. During working hours, students can be walked to Monash Health services to see a Mental Health Nurse and access other supports. However, where a hearing concludes near or after 5pm, these support services are no longer available.

Recommendation: For hearings to not be scheduled, or to be adjourned and rescheduled, if expected to conclude after 4pm. This means that students have sufficient time to be referred to and to engage with mental health support services that they would not have access to if the hearing concludes after 5pm.

Hearing Process

10. Management of situations where student (or other) panel members are unavailable

Due to their voluntary nature, APC panels sometimes face situations where a student member fails to show up. Compared to professional and academic staff, student panel members are not paid for the time they spend with the APC process. In other situations, illness or emergency may also lead to a student or panel member failing to attend. While this situation is rare, it does occur from time to time. Sourcing back up or replacement panel members may be challenging due to late notice and the need for a student panel member to have received proper training.

A student panel member's role is unique as the APC panel presently cannot exclude a student without a student panel member present. While the student can give permission for the hearing to go ahead without the panel member, panels often fail to notify the student of this important distinction. Students feel intimidated by the hearing environment, and will likely say yes without understanding the impact of doing so.

Recommendations:

- Consider implementing formal processes for backup panel members, and giving sufficient advance notice to MSOs that organise student panel members.

- Where a student panel member is not available to attend, ensure the student is notified of procedural impact before they are required to give permission for the hearing to go ahead.
- Consider making student panel members a casual paid opportunity to reduce risk of no-shows.

11. Lack of understanding of executive officers and panel members as to the role of student advocate, and/or confusion with the role of the student panel member.

We have observed instances of executive officers and panel members becoming confused by our role as support persons. In particular, while support persons do not represent or speak on behalf of the student, we are able to prompt or communicate directly with the student where necessary - such as to clarify questions the student is not clearly understanding. There have been unfortunate instances where panel members have asked the advocate to be silent, or otherwise look to us to influence the decision of the student.

Recommendation: That the role of the student advocate, especially in relation to the student panel member, be clearly communicated to executive officers and panel members as a part of training.

12. Lack of cultural awareness in panel members, aggressive or confrontational attitudes.

There have been unfortunate instances across hearings of panel members or even panel chairs becoming aggressive, rude, and confrontational toward students. Instead of concern, understanding and compassion, students may be met with condescension, dismissiveness, and doubt. For students already going through a stressful and intimidating time, this can lead students to completely shut down emotionally or become unable to properly answer questions or explain their situation.

Cultural awareness can also be a major issue, as panel members from a different cultural background can struggle to understand the unique values, pressures students from certain backgrounds face. For example, students from Asian backgrounds may emphasise the value of making their parents proud, or the sacrifices their families have made for them to study at Monash, as a reason for wanting to proceed with the course. However, panel members from western backgrounds may impose westernised value judgements and argue that students should only be doing a course because they are 'passionate'. While passion is important in academic success, these panel members fail to understand and appreciate that family is not a 'lesser' or 'inappropriate' motivation for students. Other students passionate about their degree may also fail and trigger the APC process for other reasons. The degree of passion is not necessarily a relevant consideration for whether they can succeed in their course. In this sense, panel members need to be mindful of irrelevant versus relevant considerations for the case at hand.

Where the panel chair is the one exhibiting this behaviour, they can role model accepted behaviour for the rest of the panel and set the tone for other panel members to follow. In other cases, panel members uncomfortable may not feel empowered to speak up or intervene, as the chair is in a position of authority in the panel overall.

Recommendation: Proper training, selection and peer review processes for panel members and chairs in relation to matters such as cultural sensitivity, disability awareness, and LGBTQ+. In particular, panel members must be mindful of their demeanour, wording, tone, and conduct. Panel members should be empowered to speak up and intervene when and if a chair or other panel member begins to behave inappropriately.

13. Exclusions in absentia - notice of decision should specify panel members

In notices for exclusions that take place in absentia, there has been no record provided of the panel members included in making the decision. However, University procedure states that a committee can only exclude a student where a student panel member is present - unless the student concerned has explicitly given permission for the hearing to proceed without a student panel member. Similarly, staff or students subject to complaints or involved in conduct proceedings involving the APC student are not to participate in the APC.

In the interest of procedural fairness and natural justice, it is essential for the students to be made aware of the panel members involved in making the decision when being notified of an exclusion outcome.

Recommendation: For exclusion notices to explicitly outline which individuals comprise the decision making academic progress panel.

14. Lack of ongoing feedback collection, information dissemination, and process review channels (particular for student advocates)

Where historically, various forums have been in place, these channels have all ceased in recent years. In particular, pre-COVID times would see all staff brought together in person in a forum setting for discussion, review, and dissemination of information. These were extremely high value as it allowed for a level of attention and communication that current processes are unable to replicate. During and following COVID, regular meetings were provided to facilitate feedback collection and to help improve processes. This has not been the case in recent years.

Recommendation: Re-implement processes for ongoing feedback collection, information dissemination, particularly involving student advocacy staff.

Other Issues

15. Students discontinuing during the process not receiving full refunds, particularly if post census date

Under the current Refund Procedure, international students who discontinue prior to census date, will only receive a 50% refund. Students with hearings scheduled post census date who choose to discontinue during the hearing are not able to receive any refund for the units they had enrolled in during that semester.

Considering that APC is an intervention process aimed at supporting students, this outcome seems contrary to the APC's aims. In particular, students have little to no incentive to discontinue in good faith even if they wish to do so. The current process actively encourages students to ask the panel to exclude them - upon which they would receive a refund for their units. This leads to a waste of staff time and resources where students may be genuinely considering discontinuing from their course. Students will also have to deal with having an exclusion on their record as a result which can impact their future education prospects. But for many, the prospect of losing up to \$20,000 in fees means they will risk this.

Students unaware of the University's refund policy are also negatively impacted when they discontinue only to learn that they are not entitled to refunds. These students may have made different decisions had they been made aware of the financial consequences of their decision.

Recommendations:

1. That the University revises its Refund Procedure to allow students who discontinue in the APC process to receive full refunds for their units.
2. Panels should inform students of the financial consequences of discontinuation at the time of their hearing, such as if they would not be entitled to any refund for their unit fees.