

ANNUAL

IMPACT REPORT

ADVICE

2024/25



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INTRODUCTION

Everyone encounters challenges in life that can feel complex or overwhelming.

At Lancaster University Students' Union we believe no student should have to navigate these difficulties without access to high-quality, independent advice. When we say we're here for everyone, we mean it. Students trust us because we are impartial and entirely independent.

Our Advice Service provides free, confidential support online, over the phone, and in person. No other service within the university context interacts with as many students facing such a wide range of issues, giving us a unique perspective on the challenges they experience. With the right evidence, we can advocate for change, helping institutions, from the University to local authorities, improve the student experience.

Our mission is simple: to equip students with the knowledge and confidence they need to move forwards, no matter who they are or what they're facing.

This impact report highlights the work of the Students' Union's advice and advocacy service.



A stylized, handwritten signature in purple ink, consisting of a large 'E' followed by a cursive 'S' and a trailing flourish.

WELLBEING OFFICER - ELLA SMITH

Advice is an important and core service of Lancaster University Students' Union. It's been a year of breaking records in terms of students accessing the service, demonstrating that there's never been a demand for advice greater than now. As a service we remain committed to providing independent, impartial, high quality advice to students at Lancaster University.



SERVICE MISSIONS

As a Students' Union we are a values-driven organisation. We use a mission-led approach to making change, which ensures that every decision, campaign or strategic shift is rooted in purpose, not just process, trends, or pressure.

This helps us to maintain integrity, focus, and long-term impact.
As an Advice Service, our four strategic service-wide missions are:

1 PROVIDE ADVICE FIT FOR THE FUTURE
We'll be there for students when they need us, in the ways that will make the biggest impact.

2 TAKE EARLY ACTION
Using an early intervention model approach, we'll prevent more students from reaching crisis point by addressing the systemic problems they face earlier on.

3 CLOSE THE GAP
We'll end the disparities in access and experience to support services for marginalised members of our student community.

4 GIVE CONTROL BACK TO OUR SERVICE USERS
We'll give students the knowledge and the confidence they need to find their way forward - whoever they are and whatever their problem.



WHAT SETS US APART?

We are not the only student support provider who operates in the context of Lancaster University, or the wider community. However, there are a number of areas which set us apart from these other providers, making our service not just distinct but also essential in the modern university environment.



WE EXIST SOLELY FOR THE BENEFIT OF STUDENTS

Unlike other services, our Advice Service exists exclusively to serve students' interests. That means we are free to support students to challenge university decisions, policies, or processes when necessary. Our independence from the University allows us to advocate for students without conflict of interest, especially in appeals, complaints, or misconduct cases.



WE SPEAK UP FOR STUDENTS

No other provider sees as many students with as many different kinds of problems as the Advice Service, and that gives us a unique insight into the challenges students are facing today.

We see how problems can be linked together, and with the right evidence we work with the University (and other stakeholders) to see how they can make things better for students.



WE MAKE A REAL DIFFERENCE

The Advice Service saves the University money. Over the last decade, the advice we have delivered to students has directly supported with the retention and continuation of thousands of students. We estimate we have directly saved the University hundreds of thousands of pounds in what would otherwise have been lost tuition fee income. By working holistically with our service users we are also helping stop problems occurring or escalating, therefore reducing pressure on existing university services like counselling, academic appeals, complaints processes and more. Solving problems leads to better wellbeing, participation and productivity for the students we help, improving their lives.



WHAT SETS US APART?



WE SEE THE WHOLE PERSON

When working with a student, we take into account the complete picture rather than just focusing on one specific issue. We understand the interconnected nature of the challenges facing students and make every effort to find a personalised path forward that's right for them, by addressing the underlying cause of their problems and making sure they don't get worse.



WE ARE LED BY STUDENTS' NEEDS

We prioritise the needs of the person requiring support and design our services with their best interests in mind. We believe that the most effective advice empowers individuals with the knowledge and confidence to help themselves and others.



EMBEDDED IN REPRESENTATION & CHANGE

Unlike standalone legal or institutional welfare services, our service is closely connected to elected officers, campaigns, and democratic structures. This means we don't just resolve individual problems — we spot patterns, escalate them, and help drive wider institutional change. For example, a single housing issue might spark a housing campaign, or a spike in academic appeals might lead to policy reform.



IMPARTIAL BUT EMPATHETIC

Our staff are trained professionals who not only operate with impartiality, but they are also deeply embedded in the student experience. We understand the pressures of student life — academic, financial, mental health, identity-related — and are able to offer support that's not just technically correct but emotionally intelligent and accessible.



VALUES

Our LUSU values underpin everything we do and believe in as a Students' Union. They guide not only what we do, but how we do it. Knitted together by a common purpose, our volunteers, officers, trustees, representatives, and staff power what we do.

The Advice Service strives to incorporate the values of the Students' Union and this is embedded in everything we do, and not just what we say.

WE ARE:



APPROACHABLE

We pride ourselves on being inclusive and approachable to any student in need of support, and this is at the heart of what we do. This includes giving students and staff the autonomy to choose what type of contact works best for them, as well as making sure that every student feels listened to and valued. We communicate openly and honestly to build trusted relationships with students and staff, and this trust is never taken for granted.



SUPPORTIVE

Being supportive doesn't just mean helping out when things go wrong, but it also means working to empower our students to know their rights and advocate for themselves. The support we provide is student-centred and proactive. We work with teams from across the Students' Union and the University to try and ensure that every student receives the individual, targeted support they need to thrive at Lancaster.



SUSTAINABLE

As part of the Students' Union we are a role model across the University, and we take this responsibility seriously. Practically, this includes looking to reduce our carbon footprint whenever possible, as well as encouraging others to do so. In the challenging financial climate across HE at present, sustainability also means we need to work to ensure we provide value for money. We ensure we do this by making data-driven and informed decisions about the service, as well as thinking creatively about how best we can support our student community.



INDEPENDENT

We recognise the unique position we occupy at Lancaster University and our ability to help students challenge aspects of their university experience when things have gone wrong. Our independence means that we are prepared to speak out about changes that can improve the lives of students, and our students can trust us to always be in their corner and work in their best interests only.



IMPACTFUL

We want to be judged on what we do, and not just what we say. We are passionate about how we can drive positive change and we always try to act in ways that enable us to do this. Our Advice Service works to have meaningful impact, not only on the particular processes we engage with and the cases we support, but also to encourage our students to stand up for the things they believe in and the causes they care about.



CORE PRINCIPLES

Our Advice Service is based on core operating principles which are the foundations, values and behaviours that guide how our service functions day-to-day:



FREE

Our service is free of charge to all students studying at Lancaster University. At no point will any student be expected to pay for advice, representation or information.

CONFIDENTIAL

We are committed to providing a confidential service to all students. No information regarding a student shall be disclosed, either directly or indirectly, to any third party without the student's expressed consent. This includes to any team in the University or a student's parent. The exception to this would be if there is a safeguarding risk, however the student would be informed of any action taken by an advisor regarding a safeguarding concern. All information relating to each case is stored in a confidential case management system.

IMPARTIAL

Our service offers impartial advice and information and this is central to the work that we do. All options for resolving difficulties will be explored with the student. We take an evidence-based approach and the advice we give will never be limited or influenced by political, religious or cultural biases.

NON-JUDGMENTAL

It is important that every student feels comfortable enough to be able to disclose and discuss anything with our Advice Service. We will help and advise any and all students facing difficulties, regardless of the nature of the difficulty, and we take an individualised approach to every case.

INDEPENDENT

The Advice Service is independent of any outside influence or external body, including the University. This allows us to be guided by the principles of natural justice and fairness in each and every instance.

EMPOWERING

We will enable and empower students to take action and resolve the issue for themselves, and so advisors will offer non-directive advice. They will provide the relevant information and advice to help students to make an informed choice about the best course of action for their particular issue, and guidance provided is tailored to their particular needs. Third parties that contact the Advice Service, such as parents or the University, will be asked to support the student to contact the service directly.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

We will ensure that every student at the University has equal access to the service and will not be discriminated against, in line with the Equality Act 2010.



MEET THE TEAM

ADVICE SERVICE MANAGER – VICKI GREENWOOD



Vicki manages the day-to-day operations of the service and has line management responsibilities for the caseworkers in the team. Vicki has 17 years of experience in advice and guidance within community and higher education settings.

She is trained to a Level 3 standard for Designate Safeguarding, and is the Deputy Safeguarding Lead for the Students' Union. Vicki is a fully trained Sexual Violence Liaison Officer and a Mental Health First Aider.

Vicki holds two voluntary positions externally to her role at LUSU. She is a member of the board of trustees for Advice UK and is the North West Coordinator for ACSU (Advisors and Caseworkers in Students' Unions).

STUDENT ADVICE CASEWORKER - ELIZA REDFERN



Eliza supports students to navigate a variety of academic and non-academic processes. Having worked in advice and advocacy since 2020, Eliza has experience of supporting people through domestic violence, homelessness and higher education. Having started with a career in the arts, Eliza believes in the importance of strong communication and creative thinking to help others find their voice.

Eliza is leading research into rights for working parents and is developing a parents network within LUSU.

STUDENT ADVICE CASEWORKER - JENNA HIGHAM



Jenna originally started working within the team as a student staff member, but she has recently become a full time member of staff working with the rest of the team to provide tailored support to students on a range of issues.

As a two-time graduate of Lancaster University and a current PGR student Jenna knows the processes of the University well, and uses her experience to provide high-quality advice to students irrespective of their level of study. She has also previously served as a panel member on a range of cases, including disciplinary, fitness to practise, and complaints.

Jenna was formerly a Student Trustee of LUSU and she brings the insight and experience gained in these roles to her work with the Advice Service.



BACKGROUND TO THE SERVICE

MEMBERSHIP



The Advice Service is a member of Advice UK. Advice UK is a support network for free, independent advice centres. We purchase our indemnity insurance via Advice UK and also operate through their case management system Advice Pro. Advice Pro is a secure online case management system which we use to store and record details of all our casework. Only staff within the Advice Service have access to this system to ensure we maintain the confidentiality of the students we support.



The Advice Service is a member of Shelter Professionals, a service offered by the housing charity Shelter. Our membership provides us with access to their Expert Housing Advice Service, which includes a professional helpline that we can use to access support for any complex housing cases that may arise. Our membership enables us to access many free training opportunities regarding housing law, expanding our advisor's knowledge on housing issues and improving the quality of advice given.

THIRD PARTY HATE CRIME REPORTING CENTRE



The Advice Service is a Third Party Hate Crime Reporting Centre. Staff received initial training from the Advice Service Manager on how to manage disclosures of hate crime/incidents, following support from Lancashire Constabulary. To further expand the team's knowledge in 2024 the team accessed training on hate crime via Stop Hate UK. This has further enabled the Service to encourage students to come forward and disclose any hate crime/hate incidents that they have either experienced themselves, or that they may have witnessed.



BACKGROUND TO THE SERVICE

MAINTAINING QUALITY

As a service we are committed to providing high quality,
timely advice to students.

We do this by:

STAFFING

There has been a significant increase in demand for the service over recent years. It is therefore important to ensure we are appropriately staffing the service in order to enable us to be able to continue to provide quality, timely advice to students who require our help.

TRAINING

To maintain the quality of the service it is vital that students receive accurate information and advice at all times. As such, it is important that all staff are supported to maintain up-to-date knowledge on relevant policies, procedures and regulations, including those from the University and from external sources such as government legislation. The Advice Service maintains these standards through a commitment to regular training and a culture of information-sharing between the team. Each advisor is empowered to keep a training diary in order to identify gaps in their knowledge or training that they would find beneficial. Training is discussed as part of supervision each month, and the team undertake regular training with providers such as Shelter and the OIA to ensure that we are keeping up to date with best practice.

INDEPENDENT FILE REVIEWS & SUPERVISION

Independent file reviews take place each month in order to maintain high standards and to support the development of advisors. Caseworkers are asked to nominate one or two cases that they have found particularly challenging, and a further case is selected at random. The Service Manager reviews each case to ensure that the advice provided is timely, accurate, and of a high standard. File reviews also help to determine if there are any training needs for that caseworker. The file reviews are then discussed during monthly supervision meetings, where caseworkers are encouraged to speak about their current caseload as well as any challenges they might be facing. Supervisions are a collaborative process to provide support for each caseworker and to ensure that every member of the team is equipped to succeed.

INSURANCE

In order to ensure we are fully compliant and able to provide professional advice to students we hold Professional Indemnity Insurance through Advice UK. This enables us to maintain our independence as a service and ensures we are kept accountable for the quality of advice we provide to students.



WHAT WE DO

WHO WE ADVISE

The Advice Service will give advice and information; at every level of study, to the following students:

- Students registered at Lancaster University (LU) on programmes delivered via staff at the Bailrigg campus, including those on partnership programmes like Frontline.
- Recent graduates of LU who have an open case with us and the case is on-going.
- Concerned relatives and friends of students who seek advice on behalf of the student, when the student can't contact the Advice Service themselves and with their consent (e.g. receiving medical treatment, students with a disability, currently abroad).

Where resources permit, we will also advise students at a location owned by LU in the UK or overseas and Regional Teaching Partner/International Teaching Partners students where LU is the awarding body, and only on LU procedures.

WHAT WE ADVISE ON

We provide advice and casework on the following areas:

- Academic Issues (including academic appeals, complaints, representation at academic misconduct hearings).
- Disciplinary Issues (including representation at college and university level disciplinarys, bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct).
- Housing (including disrepair, tenancy checking, tenant rights).
- Third Party Hate Crime Reporting.

This is not an exhaustive list and to a lesser degree, we will also advise students on wellbeing/welfare issues, student finance, consumer rights, and personal issues where it is appropriate/possible for us to do so. If we are unable to help with a query then we will identify an appropriate agency to signpost to.

HOW WE ADVISE

As a service we work on an Educate, Empower and Enforce model of advocacy. Empowerment is intrinsically linked to education therefore students need to know what their rights are, have enough confidence to stand up for them and have the genuine belief that their rights will be upheld (by themselves or through an advocate).

We support and empower students by providing them with the information and guidance they need to make informed decisions. We do not provide guidance based on our own opinions or perceptions, but we use our professional judgement and knowledge to best support students, and only advocate based on their express wishes. We understand that every case/student is different, and tailor our service to help them achieve the best outcome based on their own circumstances. Our advisors always encourage students to be open and honest about the issues they are facing and we provide the support to help facilitate this.



A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A STUDENT CASEWORKER

9am:

I arrive in the office and make a brew - caffeine is always needed! I check the Advice Inbox and see that 5 emails have come in overnight. I allocate these to the relevant team members and respond to my own cases that need an update.

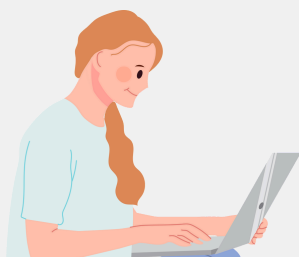


10am:

I've been busy responding to emails for the past hour and so it's time to fill up my water bottle to stay hydrated. I take the opportunity to catch up with colleagues from other teams in the kitchen, to find out how the Advice Service can help support some of the students they are working with.

11:30am:

I meet with a student on Teams to discuss an upcoming academic integrity hearing. The student is nervous about the process and so we spend some time discussing the sorts of questions that might come up in the hearing. We also talk about different sources of support they can access to help them manage their stress and anxiety.



12:30pm:

I spend some time catching up on my notes. We record every email, call or meeting on our confidential case management system so that we have all the information we need in one place. This is really important: it helps us to keep track of the many different cases we manage at any one time, ensuring we give accurate, high quality advice. It is an essential part of our role to also ensure that we remain compliant.

1:30pm:

The Welcome Desk sends a message to the Advice Service to see if an advisor can speak with a student. I pause doing my notes to go down to speak to the student, and we have a discussion in one of our private advice pods. These are a great space that allow us to meet with students to discuss their issues, and they also host a sexual-health practitioner every month to offer students expert advice and testing!



2pm:

I grab some lunch before my next meeting. The LUSU Farmer's Market is on in Alex Square today so I buy a delicious wrap - my soup can wait! I chat with colleagues in the kitchen before heading to a meeting room to prepare for my next call.

3.15pm:

I've just finished supporting a student in a complaints hearing. Advocating for students is a huge part of my job, but they did a really great job of answering the panel's questions. After the hearing we have a quick debrief to talk through what happens next, and to answer any questions they have.



5.00pm:

It's been another busy day so I finish updating my notes from today's meetings. After that, there's just enough time to respond to a couple of emails before checking my diary for tomorrow.

PROVIDING HIGH QUALITY ADVICE REQUIRES A COMBINATION OF KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND EXPERIENCE

Does the student have an ILSP? Are there any accessibility issues to consider?

Do I need to make a referral into another team or service?

External regulations, like housing legislation and data protection

Are there any possible conflicts of interest?

Managing expectations - what does the student want to happen?

What impact is this issue having on the student, or any third parties?

An awareness of the relevant University policies and procedures

The student's health and wellbeing



ADVICE CAMPAIGNS

The Advice Service supports with the creation and delivery of advice campaigns for the student community. This is a collective endeavour where we work alongside other LUSU departments and elected student leaders in order to deliver these campaigns successfully.

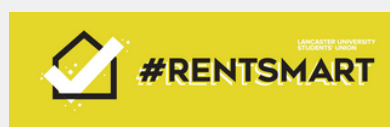
SEXUAL HEALTH & PERIOD POVERTY



The Advice Service provides free period products to students, which are accessible via our Welcome Desk in LUSU. As a Service and as a Students' Union, we feel strongly that no one should have to go without period products and we recognise that period products are still an expense that some students may struggle to afford. We also provide free condoms to students, which are readily available in discreet packs at our Welcome Desk.

We are partnered with Revolution who provide their Sexual Health Outreach Service to our students using one of our Advice consultation rooms. This occurs on the first Wednesday of every month during term time. Revolution is a free, confidential and professional non-clinical HIV & Sexual Health Support Service that operates across Blackpool and the wider Lancashire area. We have been working with Revolution via Renaissance UK successfully for the last five years.

RENT SMART



The Advice Service has created materials to advise students on private renting issues. This ranges from information sheets on what to look for when searching for accommodation, things to think about before renting, as well as guides on moving in and moving out of both halls and privately-let accommodation. We work closely with LU Homes to promote the Accreditation Service, and the Service Manager sits on LUHAP (Lancaster University Homes Advisory Panel) which includes staff from the University, Lancaster City Council and the University of Cumbria, feeding back relevant information about trends and issues students are facing in the housing sector locally.



CASE STATISTICS

CASE NUMBER STATISTICS

Our case numbers are collated from the 1st July to the 30th June each year

Advice Cases 2018/19: **519** cases

-

Advice Cases 2019/20: **666** cases

28% Increase

Advice Cases 2020/21: **726** cases

9% Increase

Advice Cases 2021/22: **786** cases

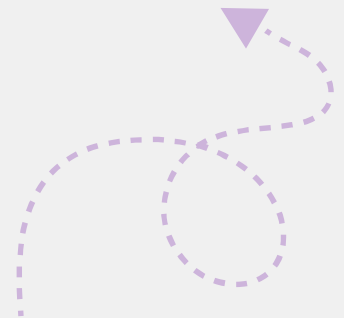
8% Increase

Advice Cases 2022/23: **826** cases

5% Increase

Advice Cases 2023/24: **941** cases

14% Increase



Advice case numbers have increased at a higher rate than student numbers, demonstrating that more students than ever are in need of high quality advice.

FINANCIAL OUTCOMES



Financial outcomes refer to money the Advice Service have helped secure for students. This includes compensation following complaints, refunds of tuition fees and returns of housing deposits.

2023/24

£88,236.63



CASE STATISTICS

CASEWORK STATISTICS

Our casework hours are collated from 1st July to the 30th June each year

Casework Hours 2018/19: **464** hours

-

Casework Hours 2019/20: **583** hours

26% Increase

Casework Hours 2020/21: **925** hours

59% Increase

Casework Hours 2021/22: **952** hours

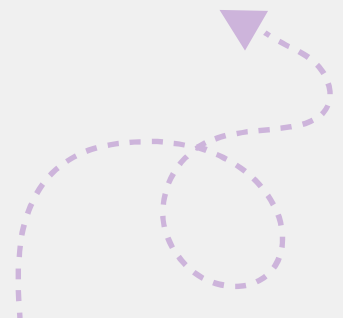
3% Increase

Casework Hours 2022/23: **989** hours

4% Increase

Casework Hours 2023/24: **1,153** hours

17% Increase



The total number of casework hours do not always align fully with any increase in case numbers. This is because we see significant variation in the amount of time each case might require: a complex case spanning multiple processes can often exceed 20 hours, whereas a relatively simple enquiry might be resolved within an hour. Overall, total casework hours has increased, further demonstrating the increasing demand for the service.

CASEWORK SPOTLIGHT



Academic integrity cases amounted to **26%** of our overall case numbers in the year 2023/24. The majority of these cases were with regards to allegations of students using Generative AI in their assessments.



CASE CATEGORIES

The Advice Service advise across a broad range of issues. Here are the top ten most commonly discussed:

1

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

2

ACADEMIC APPEALS

3

PRIVATE HOUSING COMPLAINTS

4

HOUSING CONTRACT ADVICE

5

UNIVERSITY COMPLAINTS

6

STUDENT CONDUCT & DISCIPLINE (NON-ACADEMIC)

7

EXCEPTIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES

8

WELLBEING & SAFEGUARDING

9

FITNESS TO STUDY

10

STUDENT FINANCE & FUNDING

COMPLAINT CASE STUDY

ADVICE

Summary

A student approached the Advice Service after feeling they had been inappropriately charged by their college accommodation team at the end of their tenancy.

MAIN ISSUES

Cleaning fine

The student was issued a fine by their college for not disposing of rubbish, despite not being present in their accommodation at the time.

Challenging the fine

The fine was challenged with written and verbal evidence, demonstrating they were not staying in the flat at the time of the fine being issued.

Dissatisfied with response

The student was dissatisfied with the way the complaint was handled by staff in their college.

ADVICE

- How to submit a complaint.
- Merits of the case and what evidence to provide.
- Signposted for support re. impact of the case.
- Accompanied to Complaints Panel.

OUTCOME

Incorrect fine

The Complaints Panel upheld the complaint. They agreed the fine should not have been provided once the student had submitted appropriate evidence to their college.

Clarification of procedure

The Complaints Panel agreed that procedures around implementing of fines needs to be clarified. Further training would be provided to those administering fines.

Apology

The panel noted there had been some failures in customer service, and that an apology should be provided to the student.

CONCLUSION

The clarification of the implementation of fines for cleaning and further training for staff will benefit all students living on campus. This student was also provided with £300 compensation due to the distress and inconvenience caused. The student stated: *"I'm really happy with the outcome! Thanks again for all your help and support, I really appreciate it!"*



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ACADEMIC CASE STUDY

ADVICE

Summary

A student on a study abroad programme originally contacted the Advice Service for help around an Academic Integrity case. The academic and mental health fall-out from this process led to the student returning to the service for help to complain about the course syllabus not including a module on Java coding.

MAIN ISSUES

Java code

The student wasn't made aware that Java would be taught at LU. Java isn't taught at their home university.

Response

The student sought help but was told they had to learn Java in time for their deadlines, which was not possible. The department acknowledged Java should be in the course syllabus.

Capped resit

The student had originally been penalised with a capped resit (40%) due to academic malpractice. As a result of this, the student would fail the module resulting in them also failing their year abroad.

OUTCOME

Java not on course syllabus

The panel noted that there was not a pre-requisite of Java mentioned in the syllabus and, though this could be an improvement expected from the home university, the student would not be held accountable for this oversight.

Resit of assessment uncapped

By removing the capped limit, and combining it with their exam result, the student would receive enough credits to pass the year.

Compensation

The student was offered £500 for distress and inconvenience, as in line with the Office of the Independent Adjudicator's for Higher Education's definition of 'moderate' distress.

CONCLUSION

The clarification of necessary information on the course syllabus will benefit future students on study abroad programmes.

The student said: "You have been very supportive and helpful throughout this entire process and I'm really appreciative of it. I would have been lost without your guidance, so thank you so much!!"

ADVICE

- How to submit a complaint and which evidence to provide.
- Expectations of the process: timeline and merits.
- Accompanied to the investigation meeting and complaints panel.



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HOUSING CASE STUDY

ADVICE

Summary

Two students approached the Advice Service after feeling they had been inappropriately charged by their letting agency at the end of their tenancy.

MAIN ISSUES

Extra charges

The students were informed by their landlord that there were outstanding charges at the end of their tenancy due to repairs needed.

Return of deposit

The students requested the return of their deposit at the end of the tenancy. They agreed to some of the charges for repairs, but disputed the rest.

Dissatisfied with response

The students initially challenged this with their landlord, but received an unsatisfactory response.

ADVICE

- Advised on merits of their case, some of the repairs could be seen as wear and tear for example.
- Advised on process of challenging dispute via the relevant Deposit Protection Scheme.
- Advised to request proof of repairs from landlord.

OUTCOME

Reduction of charges

The landlord reduced the amount they wished to withhold from the return of deposit by £100 once they knew it was being disputed formally via a protection scheme.

Lack of inventory

The students were not provided with an inventory at the start of the tenancy, which highlights the importance of ensuring an inventory is taken and checked upon moving into student accommodation.

Return of deposit

The students won their dispute as they were able to demonstrate where they had requested for repairs to be undertaken during the tenancy.

CONCLUSION

The students won their housing deposit dispute by challenging the case through their deposit protection scheme. The students had already agreed to some of the charges but wished to contest £541 of the proposed reduction. They successfully received £359.50 of the contested amount back. The students said: *"we just wanted to let you know that today we got the lovely news that we won the dispute over our deposit and got our money back. Thank you for your support in this!"*



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ACADEMIC CASE STUDY

ADVICE

Summary

A student approached the Advice Service for help with submitting an Academic Appeal, after being withdrawn from their PhD studies.

MAIN ISSUES

Viva

The student had failed their viva, leading to them being withdrawn from their PhD studies.

Procedural irregularity

The student believed there had been a procedural irregularity within the assessment of the viva. They also stated they had exceptional circumstances at the time and that there had been a lack of supervision throughout their studies.

Appeals panel

The student required support in preparing for an upcoming appeals panel.

ADVICE

- Provided advice on the merits of the case.
- Advised on the appeals process and what to expect during the appeals panel.
- Supported student to prepare in advance of the panel.
- Accompanied student to their appeal hearing.

OUTCOME

Appeal upheld

The Appeals panel upheld the appeal in the student's favour.

Acceptance of procedural irregularity

The panel accepted that there had been procedural irregularities with how the viva had been assessed, in relation to changes to the internal examiners and supervisors.

Fresh viva

The panel agreed a fresh viva should be held.

CONCLUSION

The panel agreed that a fresh viva should be held and that this should occur in six months' time with new examiners.

The student stated: "Thank you again for your help with the appeal, I'm delighted with the result after such a long wait, it still doesn't feel real yet."



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TESTIMONIALS

Some warm words of appreciation from the students we have supported:

“I wanted to send a very big thank you for all of your help and support with my complaint. You recognised the impact it was having on me and took this seriously, which made me feel less alone in the process.”

“My experience using the advice service has been extremely valuable. My advisor helped me navigate my way through a complaint, supported me through the process, and generally helped me whenever I have had any questions or concerns. The advice service has been extremely beneficial to me, and I would have been lost without it when trying to address my concerns to the University.”

“I just wanted to thank you for your support of the last few weeks. The academic appeal process is pretty gruelling and as a member of staff and student I found it particularly tricky. There were times when I questioned my grounds and my perspective on the whole process but conversations with you made it clear that my concerns were justified and that I was doing the right thing.”

“I just wanted to say thank you so much for all the support you have given me, especially with how rushed the final deadline was! All of the information and feedback that you have provided has been so useful, and given me the strength and reassurance to get through what has been a very difficult experience, so I am incredibly grateful for all the support you have provided.”

“I'd like to thank you for your empathy, generosity and of course for your time. It is the first time I have really felt supported and listened to by an adult in the UK. I truly appreciate it.”

“I just wanted to contact to say how grateful I am for your Service. Two days ago, I contacted you to say that I had been wrongly accused of plagiarism.

Well, what can I say, you made the situation bearable. Straight away your staff made me feel at ease. The staff member on the front desk was amazing, she did not judge me and got me in touch with my advisor immediately.

My advisor was absolutely fantastic. She calmed me down, explained everything clearly and her support throughout the whole process was amazing. If I had, had to deal with this on my own I think I probably would have had a meltdown.

I have had a terrible couple of days dealing with this, but because of your support, it has actually turned out to be a positive experience as it has pushed me to seek the support that I should already have in place. I honestly cannot thank you enough.”



CHALLENGES

The role of a Students' Union Advice Service is more important now than ever — and like so many of our colleagues in other Students' Unions and the wider advice sector we are also facing a growing list of challenges that threaten our ability to operate at full strength and deliver impact for service users.

1 INCREASING SERVICE DEMAND

As our casework statistics show, the demand for the service has steadily increased over the years, despite staffing and resource levels remaining static. This higher demand can be attributed to a number of factors, including our work to actively raise awareness of the service to the student body. We also believe a significant reason for this is as a result of changes to institutional policies driving students to seek additional support. Much of the demand increase has been in the areas of academic integrity, academic appeals, and a significant increase in the number of students making formal complaints to the University.

2 FINANCIAL/STAFFING CONSTRAINTS

Financial constraints continue to pose a challenge to the service. We have been unable to expand our team in recent years due to budget limitations, preventing us from being able to grow in line with the increasing demand for advice. Our case numbers have risen by over 40% in the last 5 years and as this trend looks set to continue, difficult decisions will need to be made in the future should the team remain limited to 3 FTE.

The service must therefore ensure it continues to balance the provision of high quality, student centred advice whilst ensuring the service is working as efficiently as possible. This includes identifying opportunities to streamline processes and simplify administrative tasks for advisors, allowing them to prioritise the most important elements of their work. This will allow the service to focus on what we do best, advising and empowering students studying at Lancaster.

3 RISING AND MORE COMPLEX STUDENT DEMAND

Students are dealing with a greater volume and complexity of issues — from academic pressure and financial hardship to housing crises and mental health challenges. Casework is becoming more emotionally intensive, often involving intersectional issues (e.g. a student appealing a grade whilst managing disability discrimination and housing insecurity).



CHALLENGES

4 **REDUCED CAPACITY TO ENGAGE IN STRATEGIC WORK**

Due to high demand and limited staff, our service is increasingly becoming stuck in “firefighting” mode. This has resulted in less time being available to be spent dedicated towards working proactively on trends, campaigns, and policy reform — even though we’re often the most well-placed to spot the systemic issues facing our students at Lancaster.

5 **LEGAL AND REGULATORY COMPLEXITY**

Internal changes to academic regulations, and frequent shifts in housing and safeguarding legislation mean that in order to ensure our service continues to be a quality and impactful service, our staff need constant retraining and development. Due to time-limitations, service capacity issues, and a lack of access to consistent specialist training or CPD resources, this means staying on top of this is becoming increasingly difficult – increasing risk factors for incorrect advice or liability.

6 **STAFF RETENTION AND WELLBEING**

The team at the Advice Service are often supporting people in crisis. This can lead to burnout and high turnover, especially where caseloads are high. Whilst we have continued to invest time and money in professional supervision and wellbeing provisions for staff in the team, it is an increasing risk factor we are having to keep closely monitored.

7 **DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE SUPPORT**

As a small, but specialist advice service, we are doing vital work. We have not been able to invest fully in the digital infrastructures which would allow us to increase our reach to students and to best capture and report on our data insights, demonstrate our impact, and scale up our provisions in a more sustainable and digital way. This is an area of increasing strategic importance for us in the coming years and one in which we would need additional support with.



LOOKING AHEAD

Despite the aforementioned challenges, we remain committed to providing high-quality advice to all students at Lancaster.

1

Looking ahead, the key priorities for the service are:

Securing investment to develop a more digital first approach to the service and enhance our digital infrastructure and systems in order to free up advisor time. This will include:

- Ensuring all our key processes are transitioned digitally to reduce the burden of administration.
- The development of strong data collection and reporting tools to better evidence our impact and inform policy development.
- Identifying and acquiring a secure digital booking and triage system to streamline access and provide more innovative pathways into the service for students.
- To build our digital knowledge base, with the aim of introducing a new ChatBot advice function for the wider Students' Union and service.

2

We will seek to invest in:

To support staff with professional development and accreditation, and ensure we are operating a quality advice service provision, via the following:

- Accredited training for staff through sector bodies like Advice UK, Unipol, NASMA and UKCISA.
- Achieving the Advice Quality Standard mark (AQS) for the service via Advice Service Alliance.
- Increasing staff access to external supervision to support and enhance staff wellbeing, particularly in regards to the emotionally challenging nature of their work.

LOOKING AHEAD

Despite the aforementioned challenges, we remain committed to providing high-quality advice to all students at Lancaster.

3

We will seek to explore:

More sustainable and flexible long-term options for future service expansion in order to improve efficiency and help cover for times of peak service demand (e.g. academic appeals seasons) through:

- Exploring the opportunities for trained specialist student staff roles.
- The use of advice apprenticeships through local and national training providers.

4

To consider strategic pilots in offering:

- Specialist Legal clinic or partnerships with local law firms or pro bono schemes on housing advice.
- Peer advice programmes for under-represented and marginalised student groups, through collaborations with liberation groups and student societies, underpinned by clear training and safeguarding provisions.
- Training and tools for students and student leaders, helping to educate them on student rights and understanding how students can best advocate for themselves.

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