



Advice Centre

Annual Report 2006/07





*Community
Legal Service*



Advice Centre

Annual Report 2006/07

Presented by the Advice Centre to Executive Committee,
September 2007
The Advice Centre 99 Oxford Road Manchester M1 7EL
Manchester Metropolitan Students' Union
Nothing herein shall constitute an order or a contract

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What we do

The Advice Centre offers a free, independent and impartial service on all the main issues affecting students at MMU.

The Students' Union Advice Centre aims to ensure students' time at university is not lessened through a lack of support or knowledge of their rights. We also represent our members at meetings and hearings; resources permitting.

The Advice Centre helps current and future MMU students to resolve their money, academic, housing, health and other problems by providing information and advice, and by supporting elected representatives in influencing decision makers.

The most common areas we help support students of MMU are funding and benefits; debt and money; academic issues and housing. We understand student experience doesn't always fit neatly into categories – and so we aim to deal with any query that comes through our door. Just because a student's problem may not fit into one of the areas doesn't mean that students come and see us.

MMUnion is one of a handful of Students' Unions to have been awarded the Community Legal Services Quality Mark for our Advice Centre. The Commission for Legal Services (CLS), formerly the Legal Aid Board, issues this mark to those advice centres that demonstrate performance consistent with the criteria for providing legal advice. Once the award is given the agency becomes subject to periodic audit by the LSC to ensure the standards are being maintained.

Our award is in the general help category and was awarded in 2005. This category best fits our work of generalist advice with specialisms in the areas of funding, debt, housing and academic casework.

This lets students know they are getting a first class service and gives staff across the University the assurance that their referrals will be dealt with in a professional way.

We deliver information and advice through face-to-face, telephone and email services, and provide information online via mmunion.co.uk/advice.

VP Educations Foreword

Student experience matters

I am very pleased to introduce the Advice Centre's first Annual Report. This report outlines the important, crucial and skilled work that has been carried out over the past year.

We have had a very successful year supporting students at Manchester Metropolitan University. The Advice Centre has handled unprecedented caseloads, maintained our outreach service and seen some dramatic improvements in performance.

We are very proud to have directly improved the lives of over three thousand individual student clients through our work: Enabling them to continue their learning experience at MMU.

The case studies contained in this report are a just a small sample of the many issues that affect students during their time at university and how the Advice Service helps students overcome them.

The work of the Advice Centre undoubtedly helps students succeed at University by providing advice, information and support to those students who need it, and by bringing about changes in those policies and practice that cause the problems in the first place.

The Student Union Advice Centre in an integral tool in representing students to the University and other student facing organisations.

Advice statistics and identified trends inform elected representatives about current topics of student dissatisfaction or concern. Our aim is to prevent already identified problems reoccurring for future students.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of the staff for their continued hard work and I look forward to working with the team in the forthcoming academic year.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jessie Bahn". The signature is written in a cursive style and is enclosed within a thin, light-colored rectangular border.

Jess Bahn Vice President Education

Our Core Principles

The Advice Centre principles form the backbone of all our advice work.

Free

Students of MMU are automatically members of MMUnion. Students do not need to purchase an NUS Extra card to use our service. We also offer support and advice to prospective students and recent graduates.

Independent

We are independent of the university. This means that we can challenge them and assist students in challenging them. We could not do this if our funding came with terms attached from the university.

Confidential

Any information students tell us is treated in complete confidence. Case notes are kept in locked, fire-proof, filing cabinets. The information we hold is not disclosed to anyone outside the Advice Centre without exceptional reason or client permission after following the procedure in our confidentiality policy.

Conflicts of Interest

Sometimes a conflict can arise where two students come to us with different sides of the same issue wanting different outcomes. For example a student who faces disciplinary action because of complaints by other residents in halls. In these sorts of cases we look carefully at what arrangements need to be made to ensure that advisers do not face conflicts. If The Advice Centre is to deal with both sides we will assign different advisers and support to each side and do not discuss the case between groups. Nor will we pass information from one side to the other. We will discuss the issue with each side in depth if it arises.

Non-Judgemental

It doesn't matter what a student's problem is or how it came about. We deal with the here and now to sort out a situation and will not reach a moral conclusion. We will not judge students.

Safe Space

The Advice Centre is open to all students regardless of race, sex, age, gender, religion, disability, sexuality or other factor and all students should feel safe and comfortable coming to us. We ask that students respect other clients' privacy and the Advice Centre's arrangements.

Legal and Fair

We are prohibited from assisting people in illegal acts - for instance we will not assist people to apply for benefits they are not entitled to. However, we can help students rectify situations where people are receiving incorrect income etc.

We also must treat all third parties fairly - for instance, in debt cases, we will not treat one creditor differently to another without good cause.

Social Policy

The Advice Centre works closely with the Student Officers and other agencies and organisations to ensure that students' rights are upheld. To do this we need to show examples of good practice and bad. If we use your case in this way, all identifying features are removed and third parties see only that case study.

Meet the Team



Meg – Senior Adviser. First became involved in advice work during her time at university as a Welfare Officer. After graduation she spent 2 years at a local CAB where she became a specialist benefits adviser. She joined MMUnion in 2001. She was promoted to her current position in 2005.



Jackie – Adviser. Became a volunteer at her local CAB after graduating with a degree in Psychology. There she spent 2 years as an Adviser and joined MMUnion in 2002.



Jon – Adviser. A graduate from UMIST (University Manchester) Jon's loyalties are now firmly with MMUnion. Jon has over 12 years of experience of advice work in a number of CABx in Greater Manchester in addition to his time at MMUnion.



Paul – Advice Centre Manager. Graduated from university in 1995 and joined Liverpool CAB in 1996. He started work at Liverpool Students' Union in 1998 and joined MMUnion as Advice Centre Manager in October 2004.



Felicity – Advice Centre Receptionist. An MMU graduate, Fliss is the public face of the Advice Centre whose efficiency and professionalism ensures the advisers can do their jobs effectively and our clients benefit as a result.



Lorna – Adviser. Another MMU graduate and union student staff member. In 2002 Lorna joined a CAB in Merseyside after graduating and travelling. She built up considerable expertise during her time at the CAB and returned to MMUnion as an Adviser in 2004.



Alex – Adviser. Another graduate of York University who became involved in both advice and representation whilst a Welfare and LGBT officer. Alex volunteered at a CAB following graduation and joined us in 2006.

Our year at a glance

We got a new home

Towards the end of 2006 we commenced work on building a new purpose built Advice Centre at the front of the third floor of the Students' Union building. This £65000 project was part of the union and university's planned redevelopment of the union building.

In January the team moved to our new purpose built Advice Centre overlooking Oxford Road. The new Advice Centre environment has enabled better access for our members whilst at the same time affording greater privacy for clients.

In January the team relocated. Our previous offices are now occupied by the executive officers providing our members with easier access their elected representatives.

The creation of the new Advice Centre and the continued investment in the union by MMU demonstrates our shared commitment to working together and investing in improving the student experience.



We've been actively promoting our Advice Centre.

As well as reacting to student problems as they come to us, we have been extremely active in marketing our Advice Service to students across the University. This year we have worked very hard to develop our brand, and have improved our use of all forms of available media, and build on our links with MMU student services.

We have designed and produced a range of in house material on a variety of subject areas providing information for our members.

The Advice Centre produces our own range of informative booklets covering different student related topics as diverse as Money Management; Academic Advice; Drugs or understanding Council Tax. Some of these are available all year round. We release others at key strategic times in the year when students need them most.

In addition to our own material we display and distribute all MMU student services information and give away books and leaflets from other specialist organisations. For example: childcare and housing safety information.



Getting our Brand Seen by Students

Students require our support at different points in their university journey – and so getting our brand in prominent places through out the year is important.

Branding all year items that are useful to students (like our academic calendars and bookmarks) has made sure that students have access to essential a comprehensive list of union, university and other agencies advice related contact numbers all year round.

This year we distributed over 5000 academic calendars to new students at our Freshers information stalls and our bookmarks went out to all first year students with our service and contact details. A steady supply of them was also collected at the Advice Centre and MMU student services.

You can view our full range of booklets on our website mmunion.co.uk/advice or by calling into any of the union buildings or MMU student services.

We've improved student access to information



In addition to physical materials, we have made massive improvements to our web presence at mmunion.co.uk/advice.

As well as letting students know they are not alone in the problems they may face, the website now gives students access to information 24 hours a day. Whilst online students can access information about our service, they can download our information booklets, get to know the team and access key contact details.

In some cases this will be enough to allow a student to help themselves but for the many students who require further support the site makes it easy for students to understand when and how they can see an adviser.

We've helped with Access to Learning Funds

The Advice Centre works with MMU Student Services, Financial Support Unit, with the university's allocation of the Access to Learning Funds (ALF).

This is Government funding awarded to each university based on the profile of their student makeup. Those with a high proportion of non traditional students or from a widening participation background receive larger sums to be allocated.

The fund itself is administered by MMU and the Advice Centre concentrates on offering free and independent assistance to students when they are completing their applications. The publicity for the ALF reflects the efforts of both MMU and MMUnion in trying to ensure the fund is distributed as effectively and fairly as possible.

We've been busier than ever

This year alone we have seen 3607 new students across all sites. Advising these students has resulted in over 14500 client actions. This all work carried out by the Advice Centre, from general signposting on reception to representation at hearings.

Actions taken split into new enquiries, further visits with clients and actions carried out autonomously by advisers, at roughly a 45:30:25 split respectively as demonstrated in diagram 1.

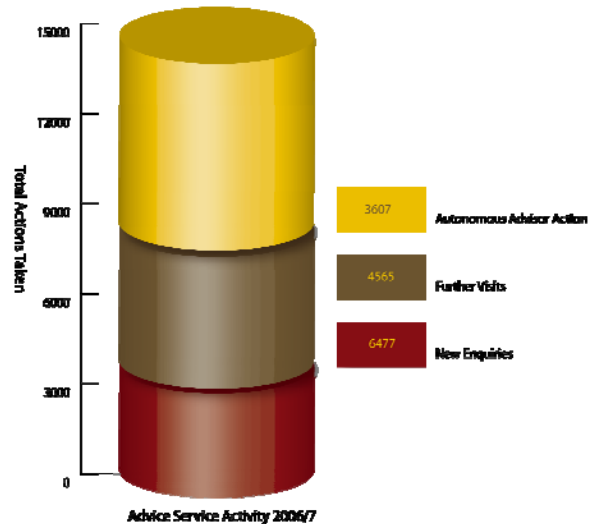


Diagram 1 showing split of total number of actions taken to resolve cases across all sites for 2006/7

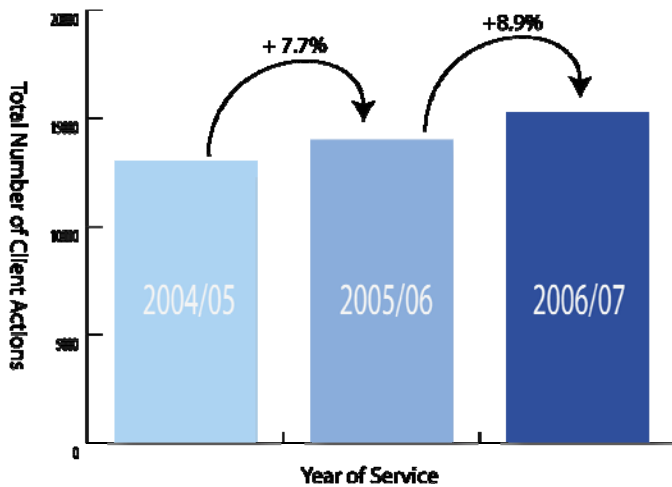


Diagram 2 showing the increase in client actions over three years

Student demand on the service has grown to record levels. In 2006/7 has increased by 8.9%, a continuing trend for the past three years. This represents a combination of seeing more students, and students' cases requiring greater support from the service.

We've been helping students succeed

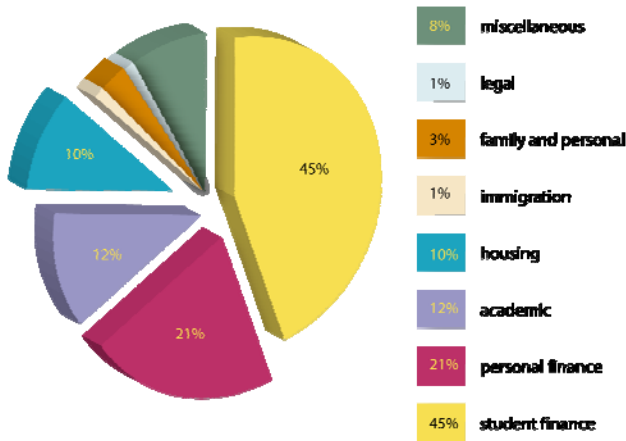


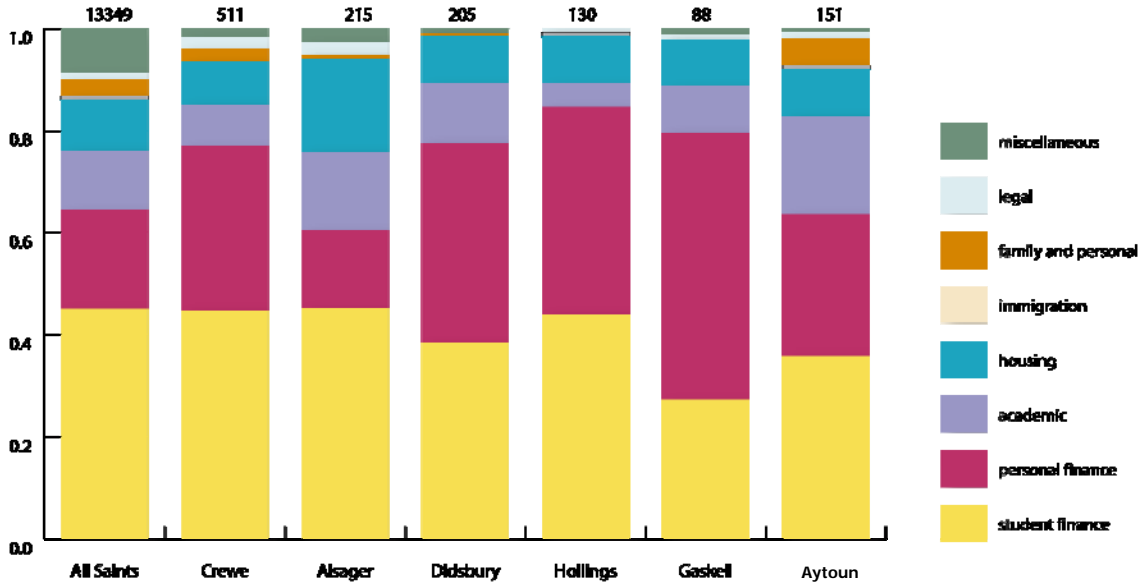
Diagram 3 shows the percentage split of areas of work the Students' Union Advice Service has helped students with in 2006/7

The spread of work that has been required by our clients this year is consistent with previous years. Student finance, personal finance, academic and housing issues comprise about 90% of our work with almost 65% being financial. The breakdown of work is shown in diagram 3.

Work in these areas is vital in ensuring student success at MMU. A 2007 National Audit Office report cited financial and academic dissatisfaction as being key reasons why students drop out of higher education. 77% of the cases supported by the union fell into these categories in 2006/7. This equates to assisting approximately 2777 at risk students in continuing their university journey through MMU.

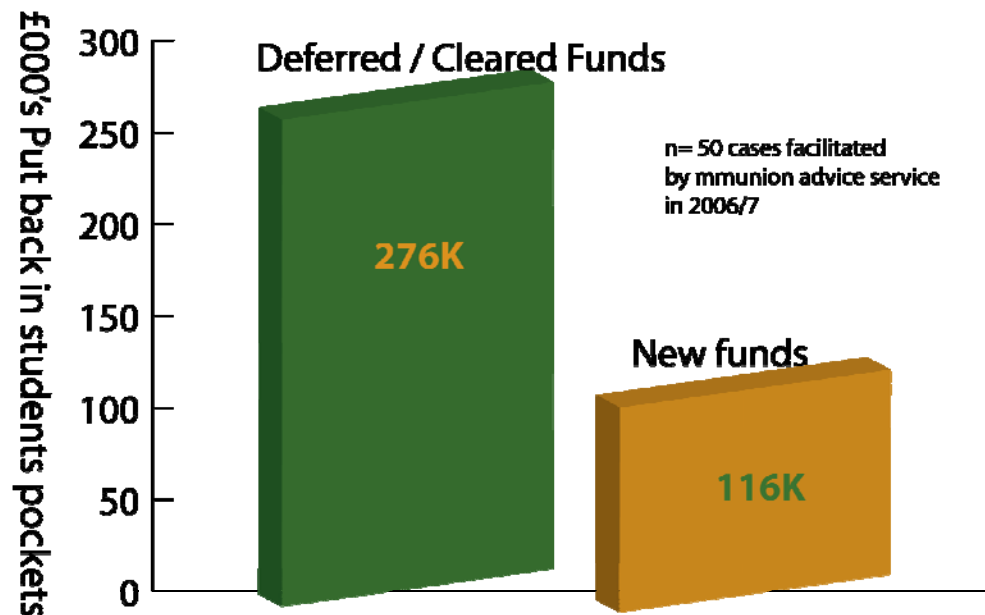
Different sites can mean different problems

Whilst broadly the same, the types of problems students bring to advisers does vary across sites. The diagram below shows the percentage split of work for each site.



We've put money back in students pockets

This year the Advice Centre calculated the amounts of money gained by students with our assistance or representation and the amounts of debt suspended along with charges and interest in 50 cases, including the case studies that follow.



The above figures include rent, consumer debt, benefits and funding overpayments, mortgages and council tax amongst others.

In addition to this we also assisted numerous students in academic issues including disciplinaries, complaints, appeals, suitability hearings and notification of mitigating circumstances applications. Helping students manage their problems, particularly alleviating hardship, can preserve a students' ability to attain the highest possible marks available to them.

We've been helping real students

We have included case studies in the appendices to this report to better demonstrate the impact of the Advice Centre work in 2006/7.

We have reached more students than ever

Our Advice Centre on the All Saints campus is open from 9-30 - 4.00 on Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. The service is closed on Tuesday to allow staff development and administration. We operate a dual system of advanced appointments and appointments allocated for later the same day (open door).

Currently 90% of our advice work is performed at the All Saints Advice Service in the Students' Union. This equates to 6613 visits from students to the new Advice Centre this year.

In addition to our main Advice Service, financial support from the university to recruit and fund a new advisor has meant we have been able to continue to provide an outreach service at all MMU sites, not just All Saints.

Our outreach service allows students at other sites to meet advisers by pre arranged appointment between 9.30 and 4 pm on one day each week.

The diagram below show the frequency of actions carried out at each of our outreach sites in 2006/7.

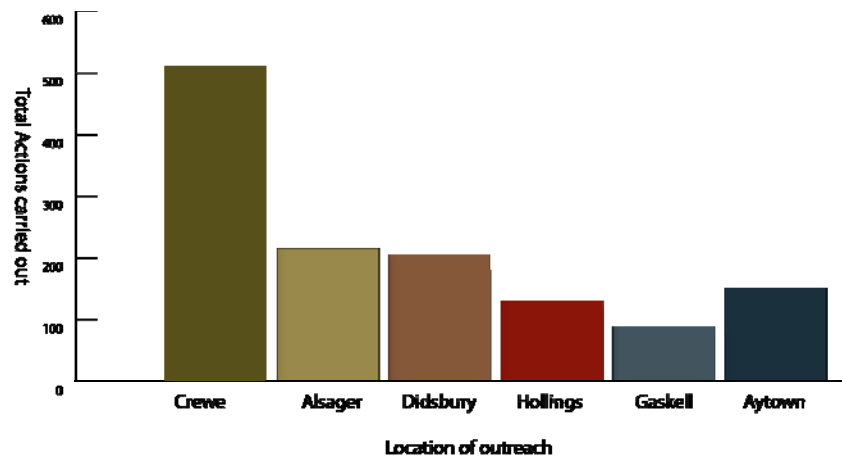


Diagram 5 shows the levels of outreach activity across sites in 2006/7

Still more work to do

Despite extra staff support, the current level of funding has meant that reaching some students has taken longer than they want. This may be due to the frequency of them being one day or half day per week, that the presence on the campuses is not as strong as at All Saints or that the key university staff at the outreach campuses do not fully appreciate the role of the Advice Centre.

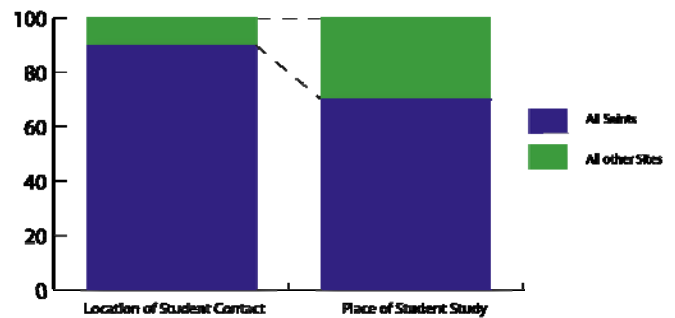


Diagram 6. Chart shows location of where advice was given against place of student study

The chart above demonstrates that for this year 90% of advice was given via the main Advice Centre. However, only 70% of recipients were registered to study at all saints. This means that 20% of students travelled to the main Advice Centre in All Saints to get speedier advice, burdening students with extra costs on their time and their pockets.

Waiting a week for an adviser to be on site is not always convenient for students. In many instances students require much swifter support. In addition to our face to face services, we offer a phone service from 10-12 Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday.

This has been a fantastic year for the Advice Centre, and there is much to look forward to in 2007/8. Projects we are looking forward to working on next year include:

- Playing a lead role in exciting technology project designed to develop ways to record national case statistics across students unions
- the recruitment of a member of staff to better link the work of student officers, the advice service and the university
- Working with the university to provide a more comprehensive service at Didsbury and Crewe.

Thank you for reading

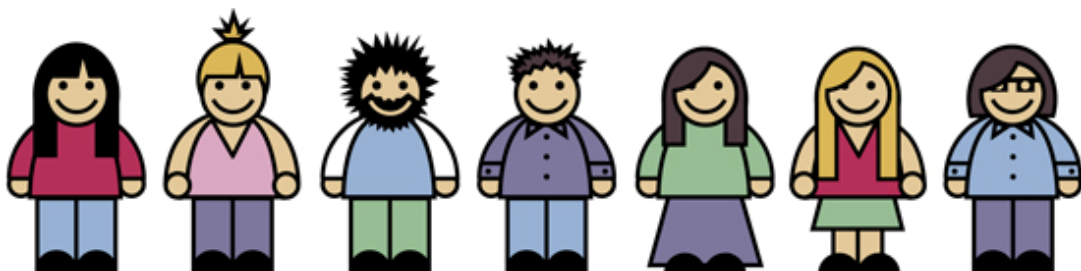
If you have any questions about the content of this report, or the work of the Students' Union Advice Service please contact us

In person:

3rd Floor Students Union,
99 Oxford Road
Manchester
M1 7EL

By phone: 0161 247 6533

By email: s.u.advice@mmu.ac.uk



Case Studies

Student 1 **A student with disabilities**

Students' Union Advisers helped this student with an application to United Utilities for reduced water bill due to disabilities. She was previously unaware the assistance was available. Her bill was reduced by £750 per year applied for three years (£2250).

We also assisted this student with debts totalling £8,836 – managing to secure suspension of payments and to freeze interest on the debt.

An application for student support for a repeat year including higher education grant of £1,000, a fee grant of £1,200 (total package £6750)

We made a successful application for the student to remain on the old funding system instead of new funding. This meant the student was charged £1,200 for her tuition fees instead of £3,000 and was able to receive a fee grant instead of a fee loan (saving of £2800).

Finally we advised on welfare benefits resulting in the student successfully applying for Income Support £43.70 per week and full Housing Benefit throughout the academic year (£4029.10)

Income gained for this student was £10779.10

Total debt suspended was £8836.00.



Student 2

22 year old student who was estranged from her parents

She was therefore only receiving the non-means tested loan (£2,735) with no help with fees. The Students' Union Advisers assisted with her successful application to LEA as an independent student. She was awarded a grant for her tuition fees (£1,175) and additional loan amount of £1,500. In addition we assisted this student to apply for Access to Learning Fund resulting in an additional £1,000.

Income gained for this student was £2500

A total debt liability of £1175 was removed.

Student 3

A mature student with two children.



This student had applied to her LEA for Childcare Grant and Parents Learning Allowance. She was awarded £5,000 but was then told there was an overpayment and she had to repay the amount to the LEA. The student was informed that the reason for this was their household income was too high due to partner's income.

The Advice Centre re-calculated her entitlement and checked LEA figures. We noticed the LEA hadn't used their discretion to disregard part of the household income and requested they did so. As a result the £5,000 overpayment for 2003/04 was reduced to £250.

We then recalculated her entitlement and wrote to the LEA for each academic year resulting in:

- 04/05 – total grants of £3,197
- 05/06 – total grants of £3,068
- 06/07 – total grants of £1,650

Finally we assisted the student to apply to ALF who awarded her £3,000.

Income gained for this student was £15665

Total debt removed was £4750 and negotiated manageable payments for the £250.

Student 4

A mature student with disabilities

The Advice Centre helped this student apply for Housing Benefit of £64 per week (yearly £3328), Income Support of £13.05 per week (yearly £678.60) and the student was awarded £3,200 from Access to Learning Fund.

Income gained for this student was £7206.60.

Student 5



A mature student with serious mental health problems

This student presented the Advice Centre with multiple debts of approx £60,000. We advised them regarding liability, priority and other issues.

We negotiated payment plans on relevant accounts including avoiding eviction and loss of essential transport.

We helped the student maximise income with successful Access to Learning Fund application resulting in an award over £2000.

We then applied for Disability Living Allowance, Incapacity Benefit with Income Support and Housing Benefit for the student: In real terms this meant over £60,000 of debt suspended or avoided, £2000 awarded from the Access to Learning fund, £2340 Disability Living Allowance, Incapacity Benefit/Income Support of £3000 and Housing Benefit of £3250 awarded.

**Income gained for this student was £10,590
Debt suspended of £60,000.**

Student 6

Student and 2 housemates

These students did not receive their deposit after the end of the tenancy. After threatening recovery action in the County Court an agreement was reached for half of money to be returned.

**Income gained for these students was
£375**



Student 7 **Final Year Student**

This student had been accused of plagiarism for the second time during her final year. This could have resulted in failure of the whole final year, including units already passed. An Adviser attended the investigation by the head of department who found this was not a case of repeated plagiarism. No further academic sanction was applied to the student's final year.



Student 8 **Part time student**

This student had transferred course after an unsuccessful first year. They had already passed half the units for the first year of new course and so agreed to attend part time.

However an error occurred on registration as to their mode of study. As a result the student was not entitled to student loans, bursaries or grants and only limited support from the Access to Learning Fund.

By the time they came to see the Students' Union Advice Service this student had struggled all year on part time wages only.

The Advice Centre negotiated with MMU and the students registration was amended and we then assisted them to apply for her correct funding. Student support of £4636 was obtained and a bursary of £1000.

Income gained for this student was £5636.

Student 9 **Student Parent**

The student attended the Advice Centre after being informed by HM Revenue & Customs that his Child Tax Credit (CTC) award had been overpaid. HM Revenue & Customs claimed he owed £11,149.53 as a result of overpayments for the years 2005/06 and 2006/07 and his current weekly payments of £112.75 were stopped.

We assisted the student to appeal and attended an interview with him at the HMR&C offices in Manchester. The appeal was successful and HMR&C concluded that the student had not been overpaid at all; therefore he will not have to re-pay the £11,149.53. The weekly payments of £112.75 CTC award were also re-instated.

Income gained for this student was £4848.25

Liability removed was £11149.53

Student 10

Student with a Disability



The student has a disability, and before he came to university he claimed income support and housing benefit. However, he was told by his local benefit office that as a full time student he was entitled to neither despite being disabled. The student stopped claiming benefits.

The Advice Centre wrote to the student's local benefit office quoting the relevant regulations which state that a student who is incapable of work can claim HB. The student went on to successfully claim £42.37 per week housing benefit.

Student 11

Final Year Student

The student took her academic designs to a specialist craftsman in Manchester to have them made to present to MMU for her final assessments. The student paid £835 for 4 items. When the student collected the completed designs she was not happy with the quality of the goods stating they did not match the designs she provided to the craftsman to work from. In addition she believed the items were unfinished and poor quality.

The Advice Centre wrote to the craftsman and claimed a breach of the Supply of Goods and Services Act (1982) on the grounds that the goods were of unsatisfactory quality and did not match their description. We successfully asked the craftsman to provide our client with a full refund of £835.

Income gained for this student was £835

Student 12

First year student

This student visited us during her first year. She is a refugee who had been unsuccessful with her Access to Learning Fund (ALF) application. We assisted her appeal and she was awarded an exceptional payment of £500 to cover "the transition to full time study". We are also dealing with benefit overpayments totalling £660 and other non-priority debts of approximately £6000 that are suspended along with the interest.

Income gained for this student was £500
Debt suspended of £6000.

Student 13

We assisted this student to apply for an Access to Learning Fund (ALF) award to cover rent arrears which accrued over the summer holidays. While the application was ongoing we represented the student regarding the eviction process and prepared the case for court. The ALF award of £630 cleared the rent arrears and the eviction procedure was discontinued by the Landlord.

Income gained for this student was £630

Student 14

A postgraduate student

This student had multiple debts totalling £33,500 from 12 creditors. The student was sectioned under the Mental Health Act after she suffered Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Students' Union Advisors suspended the majority of the debt plus interest and the student is currently making nominal monthly payments all creditors.

Debt suspended: £33,500 plus interest and charges.

Student 15

Placement Student

This student visited the Advice Centre due to difficulties experienced whilst on their placement for a professional course. After negotiation with the department it was agreed that the placement be deferred and the student would attempt a different placement during the summer.

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