

PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION SUBMISSION

To: Productivity Commission

From: Graduate Student Association

Subject: GSA's submission to the Productivity Commission's 5-year Interim Report *From learning to growth*

Date: 21/10/2022

SUMMARY

The University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association (GSA) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission on the Productivity Commission's Interim Report for the five-year Productivity Inquiry, *From learning to growth*, and to provide input into your final report.

GSA is the peak representative body for all enrolled graduate students at the University of Melbourne. We are an independent association led by a board of 8 elected graduate students, providing representation, events, training and support.

As the *From learning to growth* report and fellow submissions acknowledged, education is vital in developing human capital and driving productivity growth. As the peak body representing graduate students at the University of Melbourne, we regularly encounter students struggling through, dissatisfied with or withdrawing from tertiary education. While the causes are often varied and complicated, GSA's research and our engagement with the student body have identified some recurring issues and themes, that we then focus our advocacy on.

The key themes we see are a lack of response to student welfare issues, lack of institutional accountability for failing to deliver on promised services and a lack of consideration of student voices in decision-making. Like many employees choose to leave companies with these characteristics, many students choose to drop out of their studies, or avoid undertaking postgraduate study in response to these themes.

Below are some of the ways these themes manifest as issues that prevent graduate students from succeeding in their postgraduate studies.

KEY ISSUES

The prevalence of sexual misconduct

In February 2016 Universities Australia launched the *Respect. Now. Always.* Campaign, which aimed to prevent sexual misconduct in university communities and improve university responses to and support of those who have been affected.

As part of *Respect. Now. Always.*, two national surveys entitled the National Student Safety Survey (NSSS) were commissioned, the first in 2016 and the second in 2021. The NSSS collected data on the scale and nature of university student experiences of sexual misconduct.

The 2021 survey revealed 1 in every 6 students had experienced sexual harassment since starting university.¹ Even more worrying was students' awareness of or engagement with university supports and reporting mechanisms. Only 1.9% of students who were sexually harassed at our university made a formal complaint.² This is largely due to a lack of awareness and trust in the assistance available from the university. In contrast, 17% of members of the Australian workforce reported their sexual harassment incidents.³ These numbers show the difficult environment students must contend with to complete their studies.

Balancing the rising cost of living and tertiary education

The rising cost of living disproportionately affects those unable to work fulltime, including students. This cost is deterring students who otherwise have the aptitude to complete their studies and robs individuals and society from benefiting from a postgraduate education. As mentioned in the *From learning to growth* report, students have limited time to earn a wage while studying, yet many do not have access to enough savings to fund their study.

One of the consequences of students being on low incomes, or having inadequate savings, is that many go without sufficient or suitable food during their studies. The Melbourne Social Equity Institute reports one in three students in Australia suffers from food insecurity.⁴ GSA helps address this problem by

¹ Heywood, W., Myers, P., Powell, A., Meikle, G., & Nguyen, D. 2022, *National Student Safety Survey: Report on the prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual assault among university students in 2021*, Melbourne: The Social Research Centre.

² Ibid.

³ Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) 2021, *Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces*, AHRC. https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-10/sexual_harassment_in_australian_workplaces_-_australias_third_upr_2021.pdf

⁴ Melbourne Social Equity Institute 2021, *Talking Hunger: Understanding and addressing food insecurity at the University of Melbourne*, Project Summary Report, University of Melbourne. https://socialequity.unimelb.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0011/3831086/Talking-Hunger-Summary-Report-2021.pdf

providing food relief through our free breakfast service and supermarket vouchers, but we cannot meet current student demand.

Additionally, expensive public transportation makes post-graduate study even more inaccessible for many. Currently, postgraduate students studying full-time are not eligible to receive the public transport concessions provided to full-time undergraduate students in Victoria. Graduate students are 49% of the total student cohort and when surveyed the majority reported difficulty affording study-related transportation costs.⁵

Inadequate and low-quality graduate research supervision

The quality of supervision of graduate researchers has dropped in recent years. Our members are reporting barriers in communicating and accessing support from their supervisors, which impacts students' capacity to complete high-quality research.

The *From learning to growth* report highlighted the impact of university research's contribution to national productivity. The University of Melbourne's largest graduate researcher faculty, Medicine Dentistry and Health Sciences (MDHS) recently conducted a survey of graduate researcher's experiences as a response to increasing anxiety and depression levels among the cohort.⁶ MDHS identified over 20 serious issues that negatively impact graduate researcher's research, including absent supervisors and a lack of support for students experiencing mental health challenges.

Student isolation and lack of student voice

There is a lack of consideration of student voices in university decision-making, resulting in an increasingly dissatisfied and isolated student cohort. This manifests as lost productivity when students who had the ability to enter the graduate workforce withdraw because they cannot complete their studies who isolated as a result of a weakened student community.

GSA observed a surge in students reporting frustrations regarding inadequate hybrid/remote learning, less time on campus, quality of teaching and lacking connection to the university community. This observation is also reflected in the 2021 Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) Student Experience Survey (SES) "student's sense of belonging to the institution, working with other students as

⁵ University of Melbourne (UOM), *Facts and figures*, UOM.
<https://about.unimelb.edu.au/facts-and-figures>

⁶ Dooley, B., Coe, A., Crisafulli, E., Martin, A., Poole-Warren, L., & Zammit, F. 2021, *MDHS Review of Graduate Research: Final Report May 2021*, Faculty of Medicine Dentistry and Health Sciences, University of Melbourne.

part of their study and interacting with students outside their study requirements, remain 10 percentage points lower than 2019.”⁷

There is growing evidence that working together in partnership with students increases the relevance, efficacy, quality and satisfaction of university programs for both students and staff.⁸ Greater student voice ensures degrees and teaching are fit-for-purpose. When universities have a strong and vibrant student community, students get a high-quality education, and the community and economy benefits from their increased productivity.

THE EFFECT ON PRODUCTIVITY

There is a cost associated with the above issues, and that cost is found in lost wages and productivity. The *From learning to growth* report notes that 53% of newly created jobs over the next five years will require higher education, yet the journey to attain the education necessary for these jobs has become unduly difficult.

Compared to the average workplace, the university experience for students is more challenging. Rates of sexual misconduct and food insecurity are higher. Students have fewer choices compared to the workforce and universities have fewer mechanisms to listen to the needs of students.

These issues and themes are not only quality of life issues, they are also education access issues. Just like employees cannot work in any environment, students cannot study where they are facing unmet physical and psychological needs, like access to safety, food and community. To the extent these issues remain unaddressed they will continue to prevent students from completing or continuing their education.

GSA recommends the implementation of external mediator bodies for addressing university issues and ensuring student advocacy bodies are fit-for-purpose. Over time this would enhance the rights of university students, as we have seen for employees in the workforce.

⁷ Social Research Centre 2022, *2021 Student Experience Survey: National Report*, Department of Education and Training, Australian Government.

[https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/student-experience-survey-\(ses\)](https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/student-experience-survey-(ses))

⁸ Mercer-Mapstone, L., & Marie, J. 2019, *Practical Guide: Scaling up student-staff partnership in higher education*. University of Edinburgh.