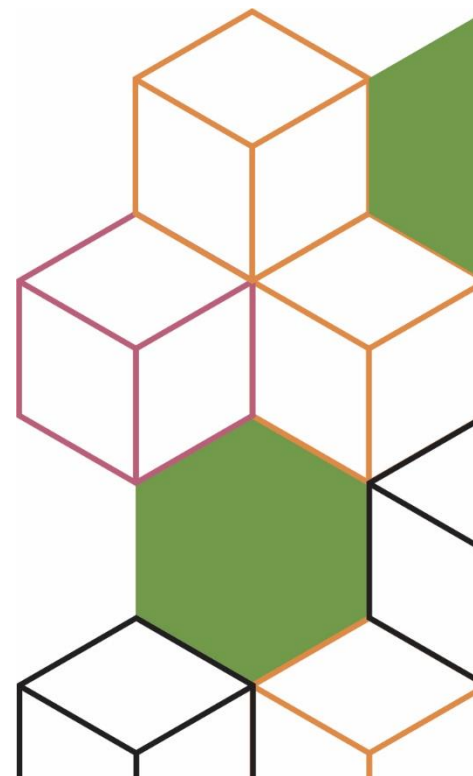


July
2024

Graduate Student
Association

**Submission to the
inquiry into food
security in Victoria**



About GSA

The Graduate Student Association (GSA) is the independent representative organisation for all graduate coursework and research students at the University of Melbourne. We are led by 8 GSA Board members, 11 Representative Council members and 16 Faculty Council members who are all elected University of Melbourne graduate students. On behalf of over 40,000 constituents, we represent graduate student interests to the University and wider community, provide student engagement events, activities, and information to the graduate student community, and support 150 affiliated graduate student groups.

GSA's vision is for inclusive, empowered graduate student communities that achieve meaningful and holistic university experiences. Our objectives are to achieve and support representation, academic support, transition to work, engaged and healthy communities, and organisational sustainability.

This submission was written on the Land of the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation. GSA acknowledges the Wurundjeri People as the traditional custodians of this land.

Acknowledgements

GSA would like to thank and acknowledge PhD Researcher Sara Guest from the University of Melbourne for her consultation, which contributed to the development of this submission.

Executive Summary

In May 2024, GSA developed a survey to explore the drivers and impacts of food insecurity on University of Melbourne (UoM) graduate students, as well as the barriers to accessing support. This survey received 554 responses from students from all faculties. Data from this survey has been used to inform this submission and develop key recommendations for the Victorian Government.

The survey responses indicate that graduate students are struggling with the rising cost of living. Graduate students are attempting to manage high costs while often on a limited income due to their study commitments. Some graduate students are experiencing food insecurity as a result. For example, to cope with the high costs of groceries and food, graduate students report skipping meals, using food relief services, shoplifting and dumpster diving, among other concerning measures.

The survey results highlight the serious impacts of food insecurity on graduate students. Survey respondents report that food insecurity negatively impacts their physical and mental health, as well as their social, emotional and cultural wellbeing. Respondents also report that experiencing food insecurity negatively impacts their educational experience, ability to study effectively and overall productivity.

Survey responses highlight that graduate students face barriers in achieving food security. These barriers include having limited time to access food relief services, limited space to cook and store food in their homes and a limited awareness of food relief services outside of university campuses.

Graduate students, like many Victorians, are vulnerable to the rising cost of living. Insufficient income and a limited knowledge of support services contribute to their vulnerability. Addressing food insecurity among this cohort is essential to ensuring that higher education is accessible to all graduate students in Victoria.

Recommendations:

To improve food security for all graduate students in Victoria, GSA recommends that the Victorian Government:

1. Include graduate students as a priority group when developing strategies and solutions to the cost of living crisis in Victoria.
2. Partner with relevant organisations to provide food relief to vulnerable graduate students.
 - a. Ensure that specific food relief programs are developed to support vulnerable international graduate students.
3. Work with Victorian universities to provide more employment opportunities on campus to graduate students (including international graduate students).
4. Extend the PTV concession myki to include graduate students, both domestic and international.
 - a. Extend the Free Tram Zone to include the University of Melbourne Parkville tram stop (Melbourne University/Swanston St).
5. Encourage Victorian universities to provide low-cost, nutritious, subsidised food options on campus through the establishment of university-run cafeterias.
6. Encourage Victorian universities to provide free fruit to graduate students.
7. Partner with Victorian universities to provide vulnerable graduate students living alone for the first time with cooking classes.
8. Encourage Victorian universities to develop communal cooking facilities on campuses.
9. Support food relief organisations to promote their services to graduate students (including international graduate students).
10. Increase funding to organisations providing food relief to ensure that they are able to manage increased demand for support.

Introduction

GSA welcomes the Victorian Government's *Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria*. In May 2024, GSA developed a survey to explore the drivers and impacts of food insecurity on University of Melbourne (UoM) graduate students, as well as the barriers to accessing food relief. The survey received 554 responses from graduate students across all faculties at the University. Survey respondents comprise a diverse cohort, with 82% being international graduate students, 77% being female and 46% being young people (under the age of 25). Data from this survey has been used to inform the development of this submission.

The results of this survey highlight that graduate students have a distinctive, but varied, experience of food insecurity while they pursue a master's degree, graduate diploma/certificate, or PhD. Food insecurity can have dire impacts on graduate students' lives and studies, leading them to pause or cease studying in some cases. The Victorian Government has a responsibility to support the needs of graduate students and should work with Victorian universities to address food security as an enabler of graduate student welfare and equity. This submission makes recommendations for change to ensure that graduate students experiencing food insecurity in Victoria are adequately supported.

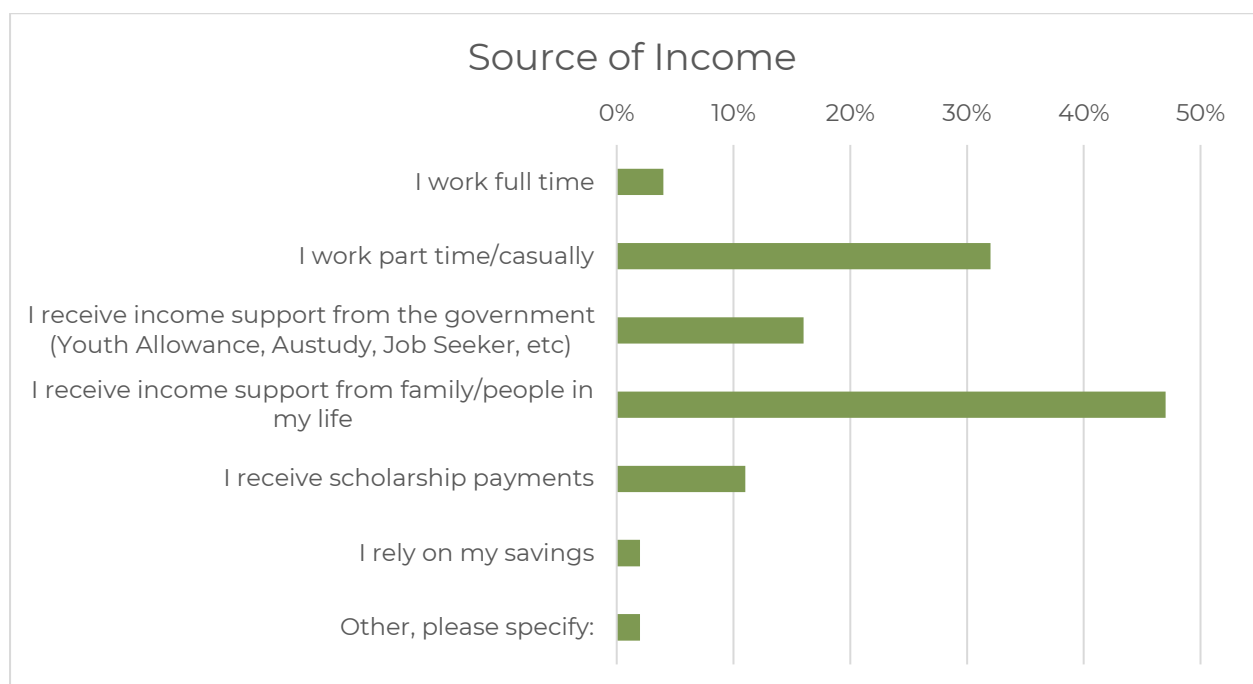
"(Food insecurity) ...has caused a toll on my studies and ability to focus during academic hours. I feel lethargic and emotionally vulnerable when I am working with peer groups for assignments. Often times I find myself feeling weak and ridden with self pity, although I shouldn't. And it has caused frequent breakdowns. I know how hard my parents have worked to get me here, and to ask them for more help would be challenging for me. So I try my hardest to fetch any job or work that I can, which has gotten extremely hard for international students. I break down very often and it has severely reduced my quality of living. Something as simple as being able to eat twice a day, could make me feel so much safer and at ease."

– an international graduate coursework student

Drivers of food insecurity among graduate students

The rising cost of living and limited income

Graduate students are struggling to adapt to the rising cost of food, housing and energy in Victoria. In a previous 2023 GSA survey of almost 7000 UoM graduate students, respondents identified the 'cost of living' and 'rent/housing' as the two top issues challenging them day-to-day. This struggle can, in part, be attributed to the limited earning potential of graduate students while undertaking full-time study. GSA's food insecurity survey found that 4% of survey respondents work full-time, while 32% report either working part-time or casually. 47% of respondents receive income support from their family or from people in their lives.



Graph 1 'Source of Income'

Attempting to manage the high cost of living while on a limited income consequently leaves some graduate students vulnerable to experiencing food insecurity. For example, survey respondents frequently cite that they are often unable to afford the amount of food they require.

“I feel more stressed and burnt out, and more time poor, due to having to spend my free time working additional hours to try to keep up with the cost of living crisis.”

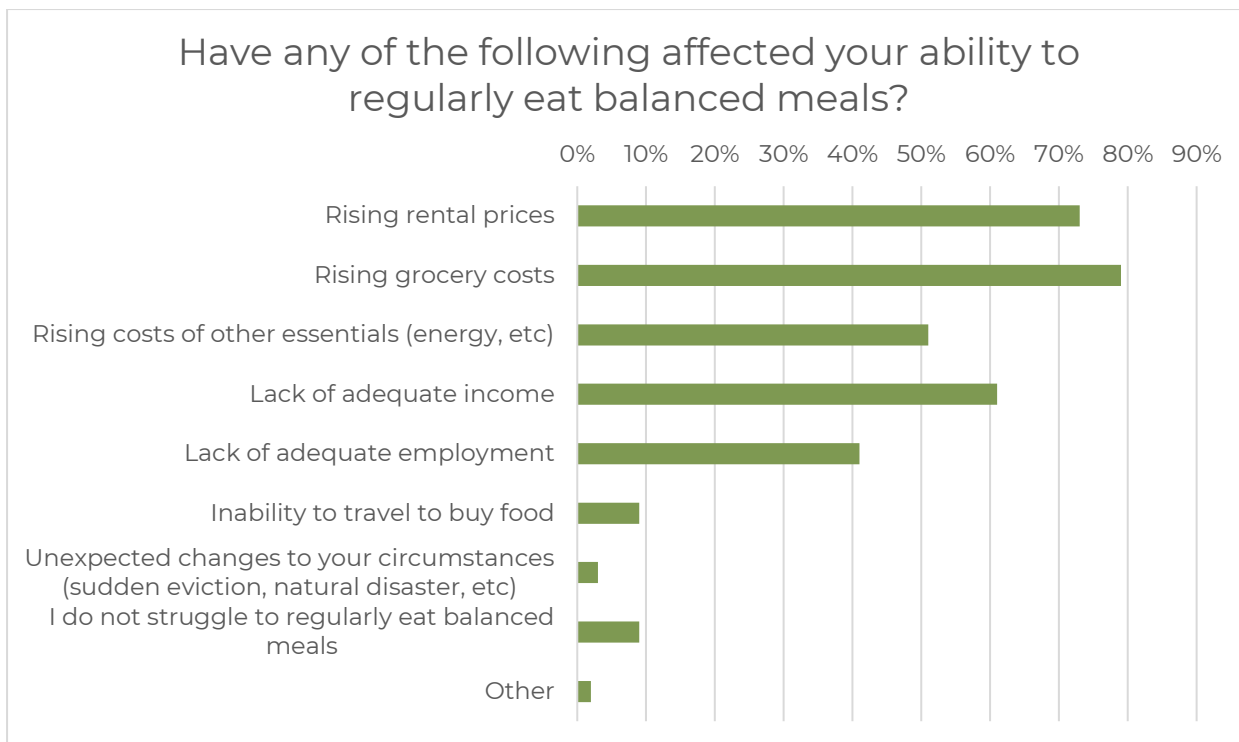
- a domestic graduate research student

When asked what has affected their ability to regularly eat balanced meals, 79% of survey respondents identify rising grocery costs and 61% report a lack of adequate income. To cope with the impact of food insecurity in their lives, graduate students report taking actions including:

- stringent budgeting,
- buying only discount groceries or buying in bulk,
- attempting to secure additional income through employment,
- altering their diet,
- eating less balanced foods,
- skipping meals,
- seeking out free food opportunities,
- accessing University food relief services,
- shoplifting,
- dumpster diving.

“It’s not “coping,” it’s surviving. I patch together meals using food from discount grocery stores and then try not to think about how hungry I am.”

- an international graduate coursework student



Graph 2 'Have any of the following affected your ability to regularly eat balanced meals?'

International graduate students can face additional challenges as they are subject to visa conditions which may restrict their earning abilities. Additionally, these students are usually ineligible for government support.

"I spend most of the time working when I'm not studying. I had to find a job to cover increasing costs which sometimes makes me feel a bit stressed and exhausted. Food insecurity has led to my skipping meals frequently, which I feel is not doing good to my health."

- an international graduate coursework student

Several survey respondents also note that the cost of Public Transport Victoria (PTV) is prohibitively high. Notably, graduate students in Victoria are the only ones in Australia not eligible for concession fares. Many survey respondents call on the Victorian Government to extend the PTV student concession to all graduate students, both domestic and international. Easing the financial burden associated with high public transport costs would allow graduate students to better manage the increasing cost of groceries, housing, energy and other essentials.

“Public transport concession would be a huge start! Paying half the cost in travel every week would help so so much.”

- a domestic graduate research student

“With the rising cost of living, graduate students should be considered concession for all purposes (for example, we are not concession according to PTV, and must pay full fare). The government should step in to ensure graduate students are protected in all areas..”

- a domestic graduate coursework student

Recommendations:

1. Include graduate students as a priority group when developing strategies and solutions to the cost of living crisis in Victoria.
2. Partner with relevant organisations to provide food relief to vulnerable graduate students.
 - a. Ensure that specific food relief programs are developed to support vulnerable international graduate students.
3. Work with Victorian universities to provide more employment opportunities on campus to graduate students (including international graduate students).
4. Extend the PTV concession myki to include graduate students, both domestic and international.
 - a. Extend the Free Tram Zone to include the University of Melbourne Parkville tram stop (Melbourne University/Swanston St).

Impacts of food insecurity among graduate students

Physical health

Graduate students are found to experience physical health impacts because of food insecurity. Survey respondents report both losing weight and gaining weight due to insufficient nutrition and poor diets resulting from food insecurity. Others report changes to physical appearance

including hair loss and decreased muscle mass. Graduate students report that changes to their physical appearance, rising from improper nutrition, harms their self-esteem and self-image.

"I now have high cholesterol following recent blood test. I worry about food access constantly and am often hungry. My energy levels are low. I spend a lot of time calculating grocery costs and planning meals patched together from discount grocery stores (Cheaper Buy Miles) because it's the only way I can make it to 2 meals a day."

- a domestic graduate research student

"I've lost 20 kgs of my body weight in the past two years which has quite severely impacted my self-confidence and self-esteem. I am experiencing decreased concentration and memory. I feel more tired and burnt out. I experience higher levels of anxiety and stress than usual."

- an international graduate coursework student

Survey respondents also report that food insecurity has increased their susceptibility to illness, negatively impacting their physical health. Graduate students describe experiencing colds and flus more often, as well as stomach aches due to food insecurity.

"...there has been a significant increase in stress levels to being unable to afford food everyday. A deteriorating level of nutrients has [led] to weight and hair loss and increase in illnesses due to decreased immune system..."

- an international graduate coursework student

Some survey responses from graduate students describe high cholesterol, iron deficiency and malnutrition as examples of the other physical health impacts caused by food insecurity. Graduate students also report that, because of food insecurity, they more frequently feel a lack of energy, or general lethargy to complete basic tasks, and feel tired more easily. Graduate students describe that their sleep is also impacted due to food

insecurity. Survey respondents report both sleeping less due to hunger and sleeping excessively to avoid feelings of hunger. Some graduate students also report that they experience insomnia due to food insecurity.

Mental health

Graduate students report that food insecurity negatively affects their mental health. The mental health impacts of food insecurity range from graduate students' detailing in a broad sense that their mental health has been adversely impacted, to specifying that they experience anxiety and depression due to food insecurity.

"... Living with food insecurity can cause significant stress, anxiety, and depression. The constant worry about where the next meal will come from and the inability to provide enough food for oneself or one's family can take a toll on mental well-being. Moreover, the stigma associated with food insecurity can exacerbate feelings of shame and isolation."

- an international graduate coursework student

Furthermore, survey respondents report that they feel worried and stressed about securing food, particularly their next meal. Graduate students report that the worry and stress they feel is "constant" and something they feel "everyday". This highlights the concerning degree of food insecurity that many graduate students are experiencing day-to-day.

Social, emotional and cultural wellbeing

There are social, emotional and cultural aspects of food that are relevant to the experiences of graduate students who experience food insecurity. For example, food is often involved in facilitating social interactions and food is also often something used for comfort or joy, supporting emotional wellbeing. Food is also an important part of culture and access to culturally appropriate food is an essential element of graduate students' wellbeing.

"It is stressful. My diet is not as healthy or joyful, which probably impacts everything. I like to cook but I can't really afford extras like condiments, herbs and spices so I don't do it much"

- a domestic graduate research student

Graduate students who are experiencing food insecurity report that they are limited in their ability to interact socially. Many socialising opportunities involve buying food and some graduate students without the ability to do so feel that they must either attend and not eat, or instead not attend altogether. This can be isolating and can also limit opportunities to connect with potential mentors, such as university professors or professional colleagues.

"It's hard to navigate not being able to afford eating out when your peers and colleagues are always doing so, e.g. going to a restaurant to catch up, social occasions at work/in my research group/school etc. If I don't make sure I'm organised and bring my own lunch to campus, it's not affordable to buy something for lunch, e.g. a simple sandwich from the cafes around campus is always at least \$15! It doesn't feel like students are being catered for with the new Student Pavilion, nothing is cheap."

- a domestic graduate research student

International graduate students also report that they often feel that they miss the food of their home country, indicating that access to culturally appropriate food may be limited. The survey responses of graduate students also identify that feelings of isolation and shame can arise due to experiencing food insecurity, potentially further negatively impacting their emotional wellbeing.

"I miss food from my home country the most, more than my family. It speaks a lot about the quality of food I'm having here."

- an international graduate coursework student

Education and productivity

The results of the survey have found that food insecurity impacts the educational experiences and productivity of graduate students. Survey respondents report that they are often unable to concentrate and to study effectively. Graduate students describe that they struggle to manage their university workload while also seeking to maintain employment and manage expenditure to ensure that they can access sufficient food. Graduate students describe that food insecurity causes them to consider underloading, pausing or ceasing their university studies.

“Food insecurity has significantly impacted my life, affecting my studies, physical health, and mental well-being. The constant stress of not knowing where my next meal would come from made it difficult to concentrate on my coursework, leading to poorer academic performance. Physically, a lack of consistent access to nutritious food resulted in fatigue and weakened immunity, making me more susceptible to illnesses. Mentally, the anxiety and worry about food availability took a toll on my emotional health, often leaving me feeling overwhelmed and unable to focus on long-term goals.”

- an international graduate coursework student

“... it is overwhelming to keep thinking on grocery shop when you don't have much money in your bank account + other bills. No way to fully focus on your studies - instead, I am always thinking on getting an extra job. This is extremely stressful and I am seriously thinking of giving up the PhD.”

- a domestic graduate research student

These concerning accounts highlight the potential impact of food insecurity on equity within the university system. Graduate students experiencing food insecurity are potentially more likely to disengage with their studies and may potentially drop out of their course. This can lead to already vulnerable graduate students being unable to advance their education and secure employment in their chosen fields. Worryingly, it can subsequently further inequality in academia and the workforce.

"I have had to underload in my course due to health issues that have accumulated due to the stress of things like food insecurity. I also recently narrowly avoided a hospitalisation due to mental health decline caused by things like food insecurity, and I have had to take a step back from commitments due to this."

- a domestic graduate coursework student

Recommendations:

5. Encourage Victorian universities to provide low-cost, nutritious, subsidised food options on campus through the establishment of university-run cafeterias.
6. Encourage Victorian universities to provide free fruit to graduate students.

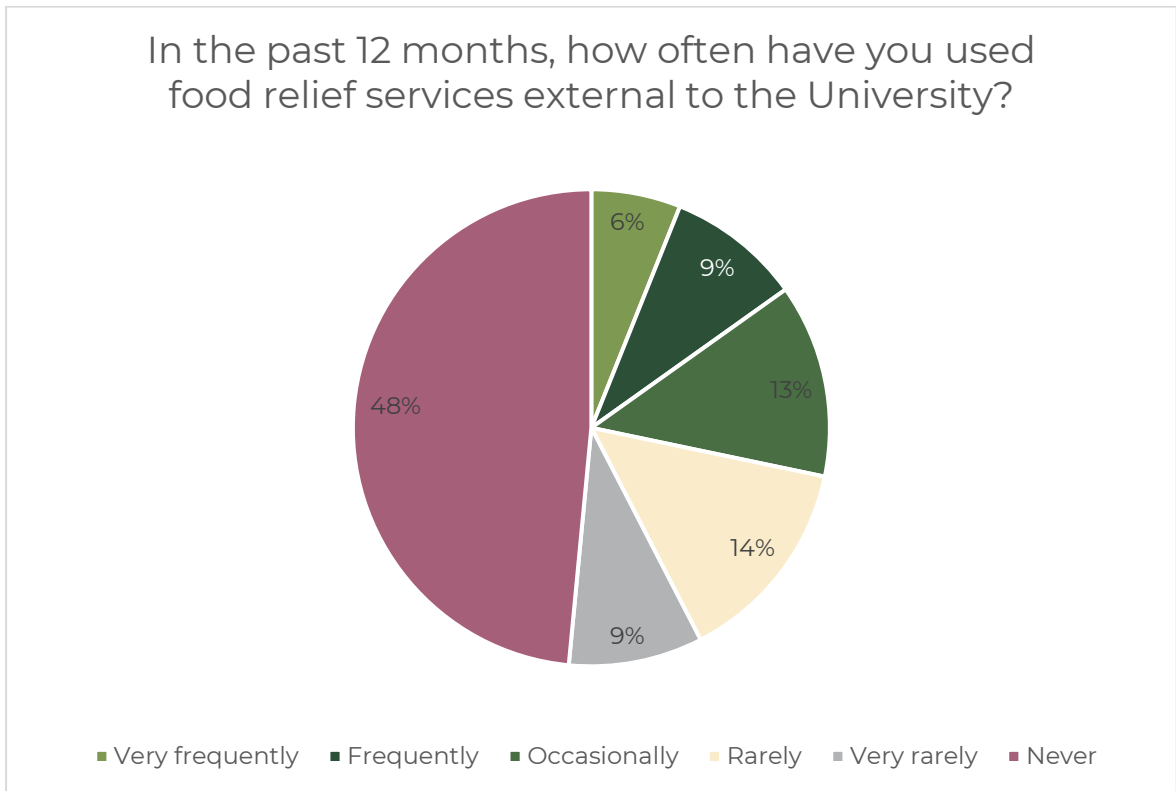
Barriers to food security facing graduate students

Time

Due to university and work commitments, graduate students often have limited free time. In the survey responses, graduate students describe that they often do not have the time to seek out food relief services outside the University, or to line up for a substantial period of time to access that relief. For example, 48% of respondents identify that they have never sought to access food relief services external to the University and 20% report that it is too difficult to travel to where food relief services are located. The high cost of PTV may also contribute to this. Graduate students also report having limited time to prepare and cook their own food.

"Sometimes when I access food from Food Relief or dumpster diving, it needs to be eaten quickly. This can be challenging because I need to suddenly reorganise my schedule to devote time cooking and freezing meals, and sharing it with friends and family, before the fresh food spoils. This takes away from time I would like to spend studying, but it's worth it in the end."

- a domestic graduate student



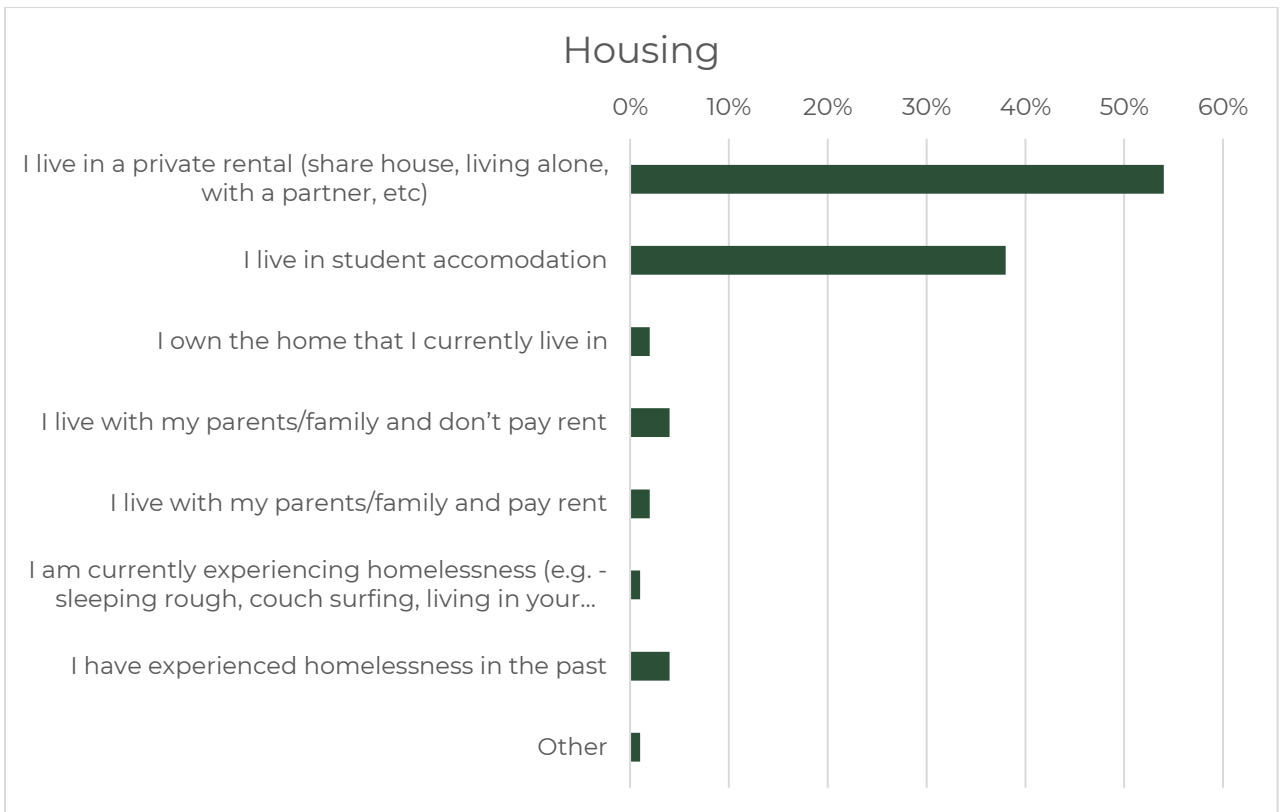
Graph 3 'In the past 12 months, how often have you used food relief services external to the University?'

Space

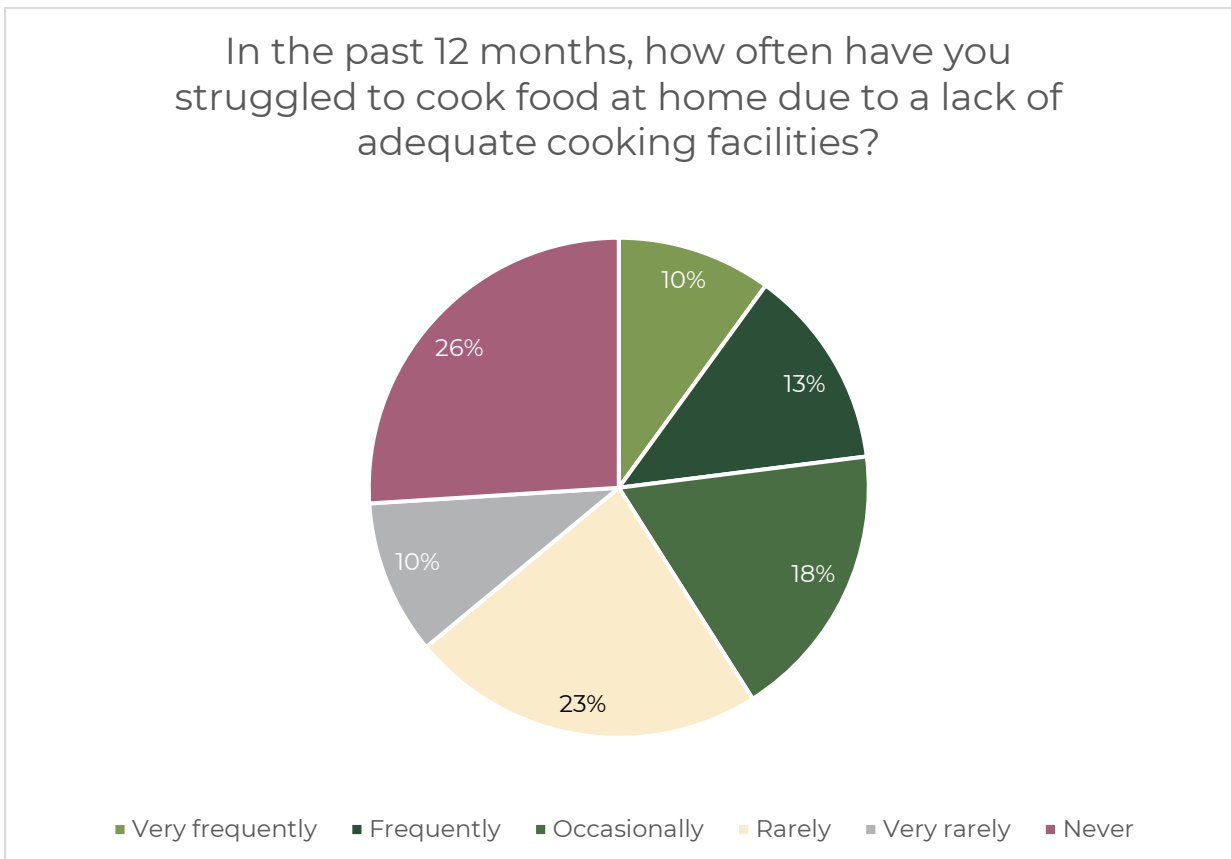
The survey responses of graduate students detail that 38% of respondents live in purpose-built student accommodation and 54% of respondents live in a private rental, such as a share house. In these accommodation arrangements, graduate students may have limited access to food storage spaces or cooking facilities. For example, 41% of survey respondents describe that they have struggled to cook food at home due to limited cooking facilities. Limited cooking space may hinder the ability of graduate students to prepare food and increase the potential for food insecurity.

"I spend a lot of time to cook since food prices in the restaurant are expensive. Meanwhile the facilities for cooking is not great enough."

- an international graduate coursework student



Graph 4 'Housing'



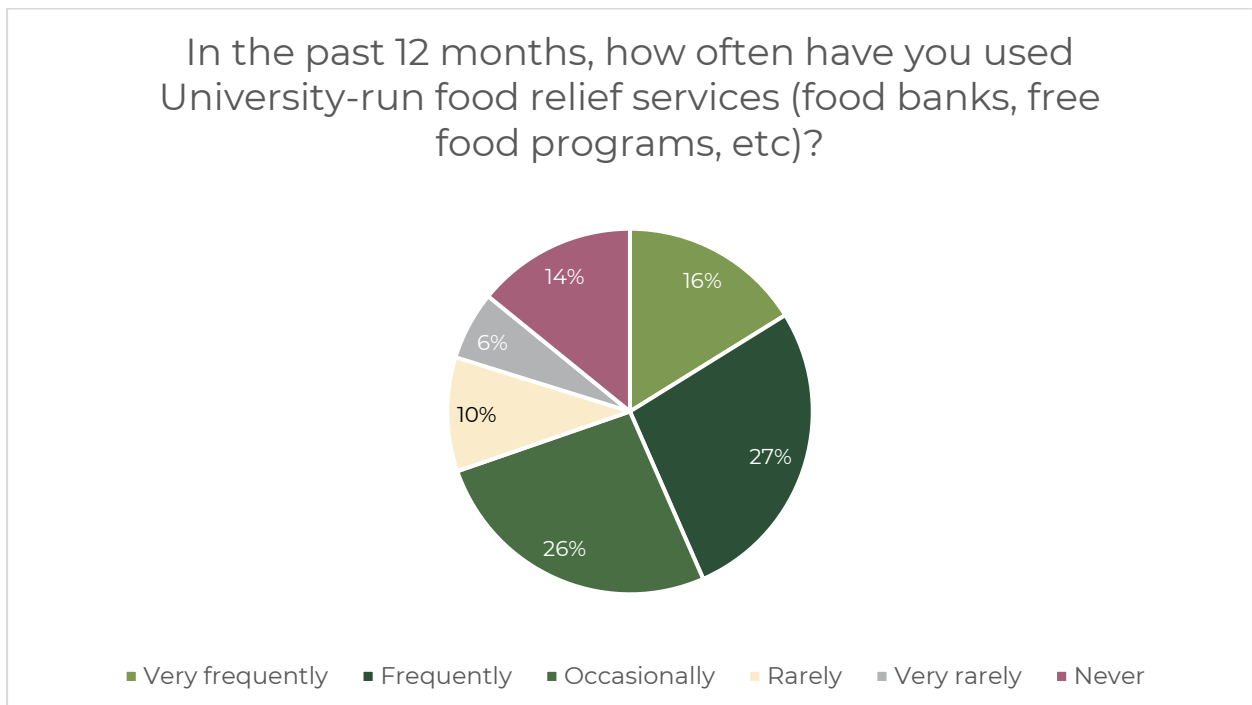
Graph 5 'In the past 12 months, how often have you struggled to cook food at home due to a lack of adequate cooking facilities?'

Awareness

Graduate students are generally unaware of how to access food relief services outside of the University. The survey results indicate that graduate students overwhelmingly access food relief services through the University, rather than through external organisations. For example, 44% of survey respondents identify that they frequently or very frequently access food relief services through the University. The University provides some food relief to graduate students, including through a free frozen meal program and a free food bank service. Furthermore, 20% of survey respondents report that they occasionally or frequently access food relief through GSA's free food programs, including the Breakfast Club and Lunch Social.

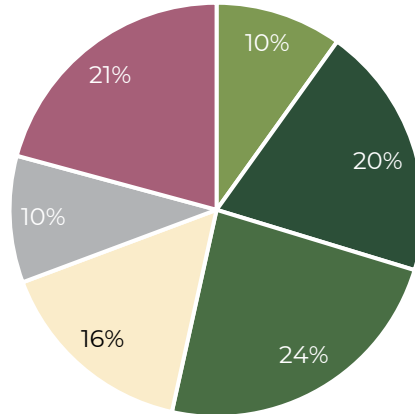
"Utilised the frozen meals and fresh food allocation from University, shown up for all free food events on campus, started utilising union mart."

- an international graduate coursework student



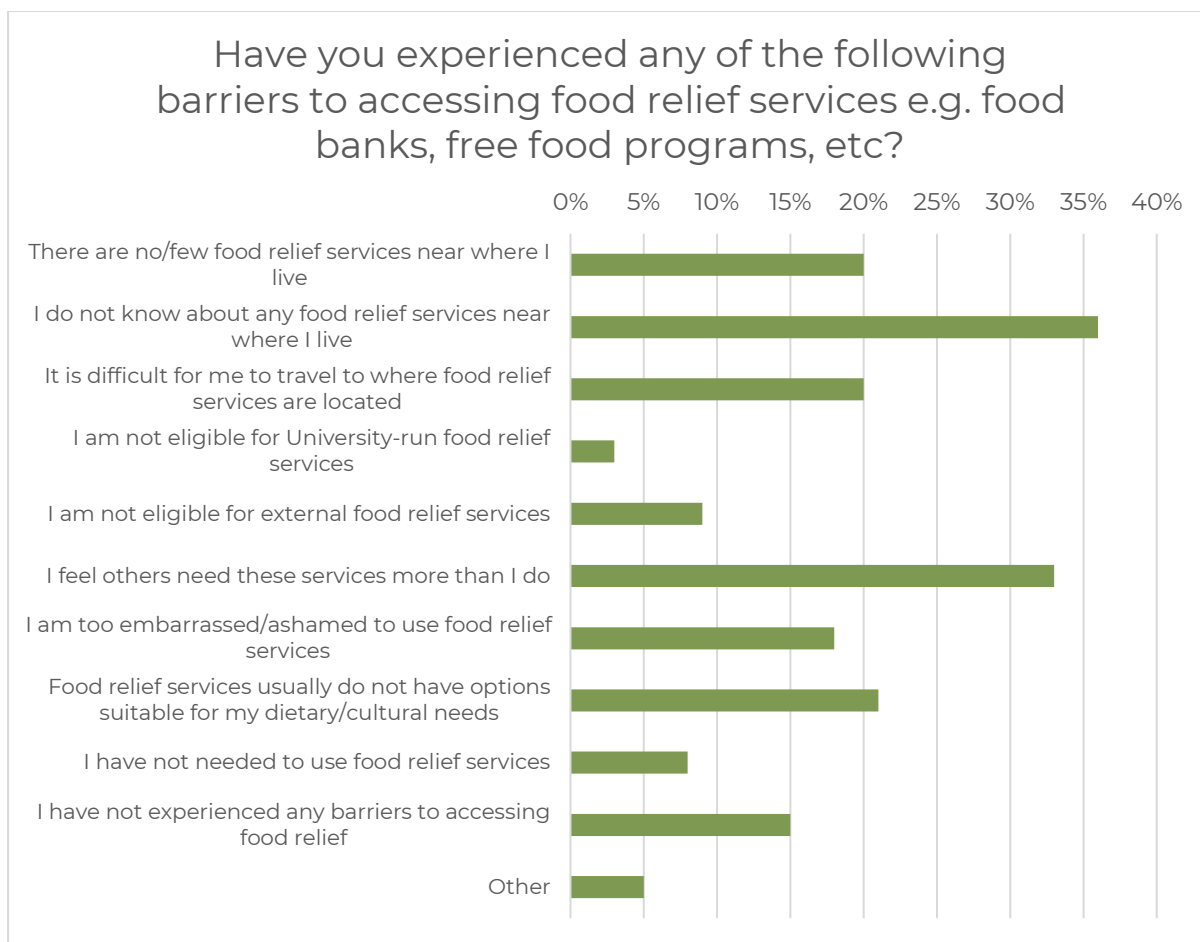
Graph 6 'In the past 12 months, how often have you used University-run food relief services (food banks, free food programs, etc)?'

In the past 12 months, how often have you used GSA's free food programs (Breakfast Club, Lunch Social, etc.)?



■ Very frequently ■ Frequently ■ Occasionally ■ Rarely ■ Very rarely ■ Never

Graph 7 'In the past 12 months, how often have you used GSA's free food programs (Breakfast Club, Lunch Social, etc.)?'



Graph 8 'Have you experienced any of the following barriers to accessing food relief services e.g. food banks, free food programs, etc?'

The survey responses of graduate students also indicate a significant knowledge gap regarding the food relief services available to them in Victoria. For example, 36% of respondents describe that they are not aware of any food relief services near where they live. This indicates that there is more work to be done to promote the food relief services available to graduate students in Victoria.

Recommendations:

7. Partner with Victorian universities to provide vulnerable graduate students living alone for the first time with cooking classes.
8. Encourage Victorian universities to develop communal cooking facilities on campuses.

9. Support food relief organisations to promote their services to graduate students (including international graduate students).
10. Increase funding to organisations providing food relief to ensure that they are able to manage increased demand for support.

Recommendations

Graduate students, like many Victorians, are vulnerable to the rising cost of living. Insufficient income and a lack of knowledge of support services contribute to their vulnerability. Addressing food insecurity among this cohort is essential to ensuring that higher education is accessible to all graduate students in Victoria.

To improve food security for all graduate students in Victoria, GSA recommends that the Victorian Government:

1. Include graduate students as a priority group when developing strategies and solutions to the cost of living crisis in Victoria.
2. Partner with relevant organisations to provide food relief to vulnerable graduate students.
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