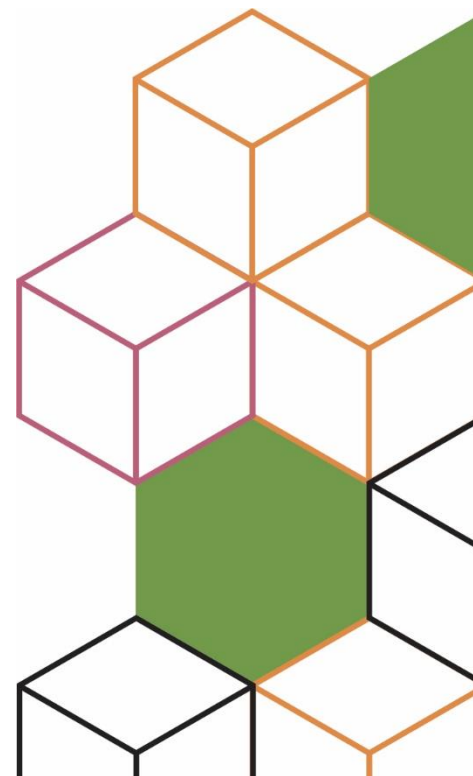


March
2023

Graduate Student
Association

**Submission to the
Select Committee on
the Cost of Living**



Introduction

The University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association (GSA) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Select Committee on Cost of Living.

The Graduate Student Association 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 and 10 Representative Council members who are all elected University of Melbourne graduate students. On behalf of over 36,000 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.

Executive summary

To respond to the cost of living pressures faced by postgraduate students at the university of Melbourne, GSA recommends the government raise the Research Training Program (RTP) stipend rate to match the minimum wage and expand income support payments to all domestic postgraduate students.

Cost of living pressures are driven by low incomes and the high cost of living in Melbourne. GSA as an organisation has recently been forced to refocus resources from its traditional advocacy priorities onto poverty alleviation initiatives.

The experiences of University of Melbourne postgraduate students

RTP stipends

Graduate researchers are often supported by a Research Training Program (RTP) stipend from the Australian Government. The University of Melbourne Research Training Program Scholarship provides postgraduate research students full fee remission and, in some cases, a living allowance. Recently, Universities have begun increasing their stipends to attract potential students and assist them in managing the rising cost of living.¹ Despite the University of Melbourne increasing their living allowance to \$34,400 per year pro rata for 2023, this rate remains below the minimum wage. For students studying full-time (and thus unable to engage in full-time work) this stipend is likely to be their primary source of income. This means that the current government full-time base RTP stipend rate of \$29,863 is inadequate.²

¹ Times Higher Education, *Australian PhD stipend increase sets off chain reaction*
<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/australian-phd-stipend-increase-sets-chain-reaction>

² The Department of Education, *Research Training Program*, The Australian Government.
<https://www.education.gov.au/research-block-grants/research-training-program>

Living in Melbourne

Graduate student poverty is exacerbated by the increasing cost of living in Melbourne. Melbourne is consistently ranked as one of the most expensive cities to live in the world, ranking as the 15th most expensive in 2022.³ The median apartment rent in Melbourne has increased to \$450 per week, rising 20% in the fastest annual growth on record.⁴ Graduates studying in Melbourne also face declining rental vacancy rates.⁵ This is likely to worsen now that students are encouraged to return to campus for in-person learning and would require housing in Melbourne.

Additionally, full-time postgraduate students in Victoria are the only postgraduate students in Australia ineligible for student transport concessions. Graduate students are 49% of the total student cohort and when surveyed the majority reported difficulty affording study-related transportation costs.⁶

The rising cost of living in Melbourne drives students into poverty and deters students who have the aptitude from completing their studies. Recent Student Experience Surveys found 20% of postgraduate coursework students who considered leaving their studies early cited financial difficulties as their reason for doing so.⁷ The status quo risks individuals and society losing the benefits of individuals being adequately educated prior to entering the workforce.

³ The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), *Worldwide Cost of living Index 2022*, EIU.

<https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/worldwide-cost-of-living-2022>

⁴ Domain, *December 2022 Rental Report*, Domain.

<https://www.domain.com.au/research/rental-report/december-2022/>

⁵ SQM Research, *Residential Vacancy Rates*, SQM Research.

https://sqmresearch.com.au/graph_vacancy.php?region=vic%3A%3AMelbourne&type=c&t=1

⁶ University of Melbourne (UOM), *Facts and figures*, UOM.

<https://about.unimelb.edu.au/facts-and-figures>

⁷ Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT), *Student Experience Survey*, QILT.

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

GSA's experience as a service provider

At the University of Melbourne, the increasing cost of living is particularly evident in students' experiences of food insecurity. Alarming levels of persistent food insecurity have been reported among the University of Melbourne's student body, primarily caused by a lack of income.⁸

GSA is positioned as a service provider and community building organisation. In the past, we have hosted social events, like the Graduate Ball, and provided academic support through programs like our Thesis Bootcamp. However, recently GSA has experienced demand for more material aid provision. Last year we launched our Healthy Breakfasts program and provided daily free breakfasts for graduate students.

The service was fully utilised by the student body, with an average attendance of 85 students per day. Around 25 students attended the breakfasts regularly (around three days per week), with some students attending every day. Postgraduate international students were overrepresented, comprising around 90% of total attendees. Around 30% of attendees were also PhD students.

⁸ Melbourne Social Equity Institute, *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

The high number of program attendees demonstrates the prevalence of food insecurity, and the need for material aid, among University of Melbourne graduate students. Given that most students do not need to be on campus so often, it also points to students trading valuable study/work/leisure time to travel to campus early in the morning for free food instead. Previous research at the University of Melbourne found that students seek out events where free food is served. Some students organise their timetables around these events at the cost of their studies.⁹

The importance of programs like Healthy Breakfasts is shown in the comments we received from participating students. Several students stated that food in Melbourne was expensive and that knowing they had a regular, reliable source of food at breakfast meant one less meal to worry about. A student parent told us that the program meant she could focus on feeding her two children instead, as the cost of food meant she struggled to feed everyone in her family.

⁹ Melbourne Social Equity Institute, *Talking Hunger: Understanding and addressing food insecurity at the University of Melbourne*, Project Summary Report.

The high demand for the program meant that GSA spent \$12,300 on food procurement. In addition to this, more than 50% of the event team's capacity was spent on delivering this program while it was running. Healthy Breakfasts has become a much sought-after GSA service and will run again in 2023. In light of the rising cost of living in Melbourne, we expect the demand for this program to continue. University of Melbourne Student Union (UMSU) International, an organisation representing all University of Melbourne international students, has also launched a welfare daily breakfast program in response to student financial hardship.

The recent increase in service demands associated with the rising cost of living is concerning. Structurally, GSA is not geared towards providing poverty alleviation and material aid. Our primary focus has been student life and social/academic support events. Allocating resources to material aid provision limits our ability to deliver other events and services that enhance student life. However, demand for food aid and the severity of the anecdotes we are encountering precludes us from discontinuing our material aid initiatives. These come at the cost of GSA being unable to provide more career-oriented programs and services, like our Transition to Employment workshops and LEAD leadership program.

Recommendations

- Expand income support payments to all domestic postgraduate students.
- Raise the Research Training Program (RTP) stipend rate to match the minimum wage.