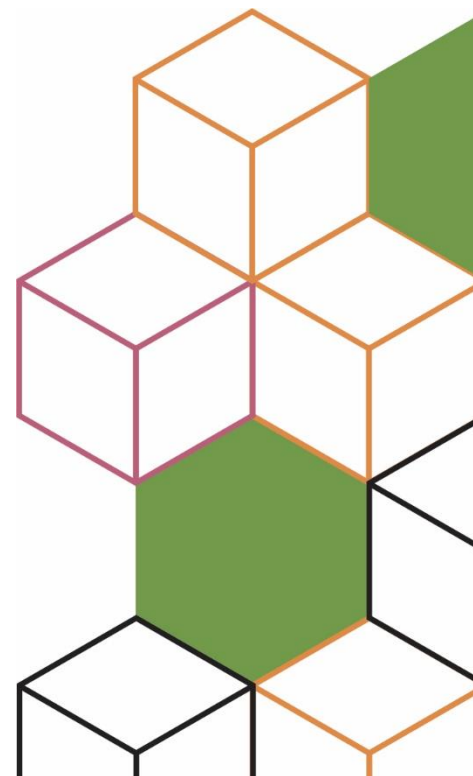


April
2024

Graduate Student
Association

**Consultation on the
City of Melbourne
Draft Homelessness
Strategy 2024-2030**



About GSA

The University of Melbourne 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 and 10 Representative Council members who are all elected University of Melbourne graduate students. On behalf of over 38,000 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.

Acknowledgements

GSA would like to thank Dr Erika Martino from the Melbourne School of Population and Global Health's Healthy Housing CRE for her input in this submission.

Executive summary

GSA welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the City of Melbourne Draft Homelessness Strategy 2024-2030. The current housing and cost of living crisis has become increasingly relevant to our work in supporting University of Melbourne graduate students. Overall, we find the development of this new Strategy – along with the future implementation of support services and advocacy – encouraging.

However, we note that graduate students are a unique and diverse cohort with their own specific needs and priorities. To ensure that these needs and priorities are considered, we have provided a set of recommendations for both the Strategy and the Action Plan. We would also welcome any future opportunities to provide feedback for the Action Plan.

Our recommendations for the Strategy are based on our view that the City of Melbourne can take additional steps to ensure there is a whole of organisation approach to ending homelessness. We support the prioritisation of Aboriginal

peoples, young people, women, and people experiencing chronic homelessness and sleeping rough in this Draft Strategy. We also believe that further steps should be taken to identify and support other priority groups during the lifetime of the Strategy.

Our recommendations for the Action Plan are based on our understanding that graduate students are a unique cohort in need of specialised support and advocacy. We recommend that, to understand the needs and priorities of graduate students, the City of Melbourne should engage with them and their representative organisations. We would also support future partnerships between the City of Melbourne, universities, not-for-profits and student accommodation providers to deliver genuinely affordable student housing. Additionally, we note the need for international students to be eligible for key housing and homelessness support. Finally, we highlight the importance of advocating for renters to other levels of government.

Recommendations

Homelessness Strategy recommendations

GSA recommends that:

1. An outcome be added to the Draft Homelessness Strategy whereby the City of Melbourne will embed the aims and principles of this plan within future relevant plans and strategies (to ensure a whole of council approach to ending homelessness).
2. An outcome be added to the Draft Homelessness Strategy whereby the City of Melbourne will aim to identify any additional priority groups throughout the lifecycle of the strategy and work to meet their unique support needs.

Action Plan recommendations

GSA recommends that The City of Melbourne:

1. Engage with graduate students, their representative organisations (e.g. – student unions and associations) and universities to ensure that support services reflect their unique needs and priorities.
2. Partner with universities, not-for-profits and purpose-built student accommodation providers to provide university students with genuinely

affordable student accommodation options. This should include affordable student accommodation options for students with children/families.

3. Reduce barriers to accessing support services (including emergency accommodation) delivered under the Homelessness Strategy by including international students among those eligible to receive support.
4. Advocate on behalf of private renters to other levels of government. This should include advocating for limiting rent rises, regulation of short-term rentals, better enforcement of existing rental laws and the development of affordable rental housing stock.

Introduction

GSA welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the City of Melbourne Draft Homelessness Strategy 2024-2030.

GSA provides University of Melbourne graduate students with material aid services, career support, social events and representation and advocacy. Recently, we have seen an increase in demand for services and advocacy related to supporting graduate students with the increasing cost of living and housing crisis. In our 2023 Graduate Student Survey, 'the cost of living' and 'rent/housing' were identified as the two most common issues graduate students were experiencing in their day-to-day lives. As such, we find the City of Melbourne's commitment to addressing the homelessness and housing crisis – through the development and implementation of this Homelessness Strategy – encouraging.

We invited feedback on the Draft Strategy from our graduate student community. Overall, we found broad agreement with the 3 identified priority areas.

"I do agree with these broad areas because they address the idea of home (rather than just shelter), the fact that different people have different needs and the removal of stigma associated with homelessness." – Graduate researcher

"...I think [the Draft Strategy is] inclusive, person-centred and focuses not just on the person experiencing homelessness but the entire community and their role in finding a solution." – Graduate researcher

Graduate students in Melbourne are a unique and diverse cohort with their own needs and priorities. This submission aims to provide further insight into how the Strategy (and Action Plan) can better meet these needs.

General feedback

A whole of organisation approach

GSA welcomes City of Melbourne's commitment to an organisation-wide approach to ending homelessness. We note that Priority Area 3 – A city unified to end

homelessness – can be further strengthened by working to embed the aims of the Homelessness Strategy in other relevant City of Melbourne plans/strategies. This could include working with the team responsible for the Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan to ensure a future version of this plan includes a commitment to ending homelessness. In doing so, the City of Melbourne can take a whole of council approach to ending homelessness.

Draft Strategy Recommendation 1: That an outcome be added to the Homelessness Strategy whereby the City of Melbourne will embed the aims and principles of this plan within future relevant plans and strategies (to ensure a whole of council approach to ending homelessness).

Identifying and supporting additional priority groups

GSA supports the identification and prioritisation of Aboriginal peoples, young people, women, and people experiencing chronic homelessness and sleeping rough in this Draft Strategy. We also note that the Draft Strategy recognises that other groups exist who may be overrepresented among people experiencing homelessness (e.g. – LGBTQIA+ communities). However, we believe that Priority 1 – A city where everyone has a home – would be strengthened by a commitment to identifying and supporting additional priority groups.

Draft Strategy Recommendation 2: That an outcome be added to the Draft Homelessness Strategy whereby the City of Melbourne will aim to identify any additional priority groups throughout the lifecycle of the Strategy and work to meet their unique support needs.

The experiences of graduate students in Melbourne

GSA welcomes the commitment to engaging with relevant communities and partners expressed in the Draft Strategy. We note that graduate students living in Melbourne are a unique and diverse cohort with their own challenges and needs. Many graduate students find their earning potential limited due to full-time (and even part-time) study commitments. For some students – namely, PhD students –

this may mean living off a stipend of under \$40,000 per year.^{1, 2} Other graduate students may be living in Melbourne and/or living alone for the first time. Given that graduate students tend to be older than their undergraduate counterparts, many are responsible for caring for children/other dependents.

We note that engagement with the City of Melbourne is critical for University of Melbourne graduate students, who study, work and often live in this area. To ensure that these students, and their unique perspectives, are accounted for when developing and delivering support services, we recommend that the City of Melbourne engage with students and the organisations that work with them.

Action Plan Recommendation 1: That the City of Melbourne engage with graduate students, their representative organisations (e.g. – student unions and associations) and universities to ensure that support services reflect their unique needs and priorities.

University students are unique in that they are eligible to live in purpose-built student accommodation. However, living in purpose-built student accommodation can be more expensive than a private rental. Since student accommodation is usually tailored towards single students, it is also inaccessible for students with children/families.

For students without rental history, however, there may be few other options. Other students may consider the potential savings in transport costs when choosing to live in student accommodation closer to campus. (Notably, Victorian graduate students remain the only graduate students in Australia ineligible for student transport concessions).

¹ “Graduate Research Scholarships”, The University of Melbourne, accessed March 2024, <https://scholarships.unimelb.edu.au/awards/graduate-research-scholarships>

² “Melbourne Research Scholarship”, The University of Melbourne, accessed March 2024, <https://scholarships.unimelb.edu.au/awards/melbourne-research-scholarship>

Currently, purpose-built student accommodation is inaccessible to students on lower incomes and students with children/families. To address this, GSA recommends that the City of Melbourne partner with universities, not-for-profits and purpose-built student accommodation providers to deliver more affordable and accessible student housing. (Refer to the YWCA Cause We Care House to see how the City of Vancouver partnered with other organisations to provide subsidised housing for single mothers).³

Action Plan Recommendation 2: That the City of Melbourne partner with universities, not-for-profits and purpose-built student accommodation providers to provide university students with genuinely affordable student accommodation options. This should include affordable student accommodation options for students with children/families.

Along with student parents, international students are another often-overlooked subset of graduate students. International students make up 41% of the University of Melbourne’s overall student population.⁴ Many also live in the City of Melbourne. This cohort can face housing stress due to a lack of Australian rental history, work restrictions, discrimination in the rental application process and vulnerability to scams targeting international students.

Despite this, we were concerned to see that international students were not identified as a group requiring additional support in the Draft Strategy. One graduate student expressed the following:

“[The Draft Homelessness Strategy] does not mention [i]international students who find it much harder to survive in Melbourne. Many international students are there on scholarships and paying fees. The situation in Melbourne is not welcoming to them. Houses are hard to find, income is low.” – Graduate researcher

³ “YWCA Cause We Care House”, Cause We Care, accessed March 2024, <https://causewecare.org/initiative/ywca-cause-we-care-house/>

⁴ “Facts and figures”, The University of Melbourne, accessed April 2024, <https://about.unimelb.edu.au/facts-and-figures>

Despite the challenges they face, many international students cannot access housing support (like social housing or RentAssist bond loans) due to their visa status. When asked for feedback, one graduate student expressed feeling uncertain whether international students would be eligible for the support services delivered under the Draft Strategy. To ensure that services are accessible to all who require their support, GSA recommends that the City of Melbourne include international students among those eligible to receive support.

Action Plan recommendation 3: That the City of Melbourne reduce barriers to accessing support services (including emergency accommodation) delivered under the Draft Homelessness Strategy by including international students among those eligible to receive support.

Addressing housing insecurity in the private rental market

GSA recognises that the state of the private rental market has been identified as a contributing factor in Melbourne's homelessness crisis in the Draft Homelessness Strategy. We also support the City of Melbourne's ongoing aims to provide long-term affordable rental housing in Melbourne. Contrary to the housing spectrum presented in page 22 of the Draft Strategy, however, private rentals are not always a 'secure long-term' housing option for many graduate students.

In our 2023 survey of graduate student renting experiences, we found that graduate students face a variety of challenges when trying to rent in Melbourne, including:

- Rising rental prices and a lack of affordable rental properties close to the Parkville campus (reported by 73% of survey respondents)
- Competitive rental application processes which disadvantage graduate students on low incomes/with minimal rental history (reported by over 40% of survey respondents). This can be particularly relevant to international students, who made up over 80% of overall survey respondents
- A high demand for, and low supply of, private rental properties (reported by 21% of survey respondents)

The following survey result highlights these issues:

"I have been in the same rental for several years. It is old, cold, musty, and frequently infested with moths and silverfish so I need to keep most of my books and clothes in plastic crates, but it is comparatively cheap and a 40 min walk to campus. Earlier this year a cracked waste pipe under the back of the house is causing an external wall to collapse. I have spent many, many hours helping my elderly landlady to organise engineering inspections and plumbing inspections. She has decided not to fix the damage and will sell the house instead, but there is no timeline so I am stuck in housing purgatory waiting. I have a chronic illness so it is difficult for me to move and our (sharehouse) rent will double. I am also a casual worker and a full time PhD student so it will be difficult to be competitive in a tight rental market. I have had to pause my PhD today (perhaps indefinitely) and scramble to take on more casual work because I just cannot afford to keep a roof over my head while studying. I am in my mid-30s, highly skilled, but because of disability and precarity I will probably be homeless [in 6 months]." – Graduate researcher

Finding – and being able to continue living in – an affordable private rental property that meets minimum standards can help graduate students avoid homelessness. As such, we recommend that the City of Melbourne work to address the current rental crisis, including through advocacy to other levels of government.

Action Plan recommendation 4: That the City of Melbourne advocate on behalf of private renters to other levels of government. This should include advocating for limiting rent rises, regulation of short-term rentals, better enforcement of existing rental laws and the development of affordable rental housing stock.

Recommendations

Homelessness Strategy recommendations

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4. Advocate on behalf of private renters to other levels of government. This should include advocating for limiting rent rises, regulation of short-term rentals, better enforcement of existing rental laws and the development of affordable rental housing stock.