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Graduate Student
Association

Graduate Researcher Workspaces Report 2025



Table of Contents

About GSA, Acknowledgements and Abbreviations	4
Preliminary notes	5
Executive Summary	7
Recommendations	8
1. Introduction	11
2. Current Policy Settings	13
3. Key Findings	14
3.1 Essential workspace requirements	14
3.2 Key issues at the University of Melbourne	17
4. Survey Evidence and Analysis	25
4.0a Overview of workspace requirements	25
4.0b Overview of workspace issues	27
4.1 Privacy and quiet versus noise and crowding	31
4.1a Requirements: contained offices with quiet, calm, and privacy..	31
4.1b Problems: Open-plan or crowded offices with noise, sensory issues and lack of privacy	33
4.2 Dedicated desks versus hotdesking and precarity	36
4.2a Requirements: Dedicated desks and stability	36
4.2b Problems: Hotdesking and precarity	38
4.3 Air, light and warmth	50
4.3a Requirements: Fresh air, good lighting, and temperature control	50
4.3b Problems: Bad air, bad lighting, and poor temperature control	51
4.4 OHS, ergonomics, and good maintenance	55
4.4a Requirements: safe and healthy workspaces	55
4.4b Problems: issues with OHS, ergonomics and maintenance	55
4.5 Shared spaces and amenities	59
4.5a Requirements: Distinct social spaces, work areas and food facilities	59
4.5b Problems: Clashing or inadequate social spaces, workspaces, and food facilities	59
4.6 Equipment and technology	62
4.6a Requirements: Suitable equipment and technology support ..	62

4.6b Problems: Equipment and IT issues	62
4.7 Equity and accessibility	64
4.7a Equitable access, universal design, and accessibility support....	64
4.7b Problems: Equity and accessibility issues	65
4.8 Community and wellbeing	69
4.8a Requirements: Community, belonging, and a sense of place ..	69
4.8b Problems: Loneliness, non-belonging, and mental health risks	70
4.9 Governance and co-design	72
4.9a Requirements: Co-design, clear processes and democratic accountability	72
4.9b Problems: Governance issues, lack of co-design, and undemocratic decision-making	73
5. Recommendations	79
Glossary	81
Appendix A – Data sources	83
Appendix B – Extract from University of Melbourne’s Principles for Infrastructure Support	84
Appendix C – Letter from Walter Boas occupants to the Faculty of Arts’ Executive Director (Jan 2024).....	85
Appendix D – GR Letter to Dean of FEIT (Nov 2024).....	91
Bibliography.....	96

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, 12 Representative Council members and 9 Faculty Council members who are all elected University of Melbourne graduate students. On behalf of over 37,000 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 over 150 affiliated graduate student groups.

GSA's vision is to be an organisation known and valued by all the graduate students at the University of Melbourne, respected by our partners, and trusted by graduate students as the voice that advocates their interests.

This report was written on the land of the Wurundjeri-Woiwurrung People of the Kulin Nation. GSA acknowledges the Wurundjeri-Woiwurrung People as the ongoing custodians of this land and recognises that sovereignty was never ceded.

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Abbreviations

Graduate Student Association (GSA)	Faculty of Education (Education)
Faculty of Arts (Arts)	Faculty of Business and Economics (FBE)
Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology (FEIT)	Faculty of Fine Arts and Music (FFAM)
Faculty of Science (Science)	Melbourne Law School [no abbreviation]
Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences (MDHS)	
Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning (ABP)	

Preliminary notes

The findings of this report are primarily based on a survey on graduate researcher workspaces which the GSA conducted at the University of Melbourne, with 410 valid respondents, from August to September 2024 (see Appendix A). All current graduate researchers at the University of Melbourne were eligible to participate. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to “the survey” refer to this one, and all references to “the University” refer to the University of Melbourne. Findings are enriched by several further sources:

- Insights gathered at a GSA Townhall held in October 2024 where 23 graduate researchers attended. The Townhall concerned graduate researcher issues in general, and contingents existed for a number of issues, but the largest contingent to show up was concerned with workspace issues.
- Ongoing consultations with a range of graduate researchers, particularly those affected by the Walter Boas eviction in the Faculty of Arts and the Flexi-Space scheme in the Faculty of Engineering and IT. See Appendices C and D.
- Further research, as collated in the bibliography.

Aligned with GSA’s place as the voice for graduate students, a strong emphasis is placed on the qualitative input of graduate researchers, allowing them to speak for themselves. This can lead to thematic repetition, since multiple graduate researchers often face the same problems. However, we would request readers’ patience in these cases, since it is important to remember that each of these individuals makes an important contribution to the University, and should be treated as equal participants in community decision-making.

All names of graduate researchers in this report, except GSA office-holders, are pseudonymous. In order to protect participants’ anonymity, the name assigned to each of them was randomised. As such, the name and pronouns used may not reflect the participant’s gender or other identity markers, reflecting our prioritisation of participant safety. The use of a unique pseudonym for each graduate researcher is important, nonetheless, both to emphasise that each of

these represents a distinct individual, and to avoid any misconception that the feedback reported is coming from a small number of respondents.

Certain details (such as faculty) have been occluded from participant testimonies where there was a risk these might reveal the identities of either the participants, or of staff not involved in key decision-making processes. The use of even pseudonymous names is suspended throughout the section concerning equity issues, to avoid any risk of identifying details emerging via cross-referencing. In a few other cases, we refer only to unnamed respondents rather than giving a pseudonym, to avoid the potential for identification though cross-referencing.

Appendices have been lightly edited to remove names in certain instances where we thought it necessary to protect staff and graduate researchers' anonymity. These edits are marked by square brackets [].

In rare instances, potentially identifying details remain for key decision-makers in the University administration where this does not lead to the disclosure of confidential information, it is judged that this level of detail is essential to correctly identify decision-making processes which have taken place, and it would not unduly place members of staff in a vulnerable position.

In general, percentages are given for quantitative data, and raw numbers for showing how many respondents repeated certain themes in their qualitative feedback.

Executive Summary

GSA conducted a survey of 410 graduate researchers, a Townhall, and extensive consultation of our members. We found that, across the University, graduate researchers largely affirmed support for a number of existing policy settings: graduate researchers are best served by consistent, **24-hour access to sole-use dedicated desks** across their candidature in **safe, contained office environments** with **secure storage, shared with a manageable number** of other researchers.

Additionally, graduate researchers regard quality IT equipment and ergonomic furniture (such as sit/stand desks) as essential office facilities. Graduate researchers determined that office spaces should have **temperature control systems, ventilation and natural light**, with localised control over lighting to avert sensory issues. Graduate researchers also consider it essential that they have access to nearby **bathrooms, shared kitchen facilities, shared social spaces, and separate collaborative/meeting rooms**. Graduate researchers linked sole-use dedicated workspaces with an improved sense of belonging and reduced isolation. They expect to be included in decision-making processes regarding their workspaces, and for management to be accountable to staff, graduate researchers, other students, and the University community.

Graduate researchers make a vital contribution to the University of Melbourne. As one of Australia's top universities, the University of Melbourne should take a leadership role in ensuring its graduate researchers' work is valued, and their work is enabled. However, graduate researchers identified multiple risks to the successful provision of their workspace needs. These included:

- crowded and noisy workspaces;
- the introduction of hot-desking, particularly in the Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology (FEIT), as well as unstable and precarious access to workspaces;
- unstable and precarious access to workspaces;
- bad ventilation, lack of natural light, and poor temperature control;
- limited access to ergonomic furniture and equipment;
- variable access to adequate shared spaces and amenities;
- issues of belonging, community, and mental health; and

- a lack of co-design, clear communication, and democratic accountability in decisions by executive level management.

Critically, according to graduate researchers, replacement of sole-use desks with hot-desks, hotelling or bookable desks – such as the Flexi-Space model in FEIT – does not meet their basic requirements, and is therefore unsuitable for graduate research. We call for a suspension and review of Flexi-Space in FEIT, and a moratorium on hotdesking plans in other faculties.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were developed from GSA's survey, Townhall, and discussions with graduate researchers, supplemented with relevant peer reviewed research.

1. Immediate action to address current issues, including:
 - a. A moratorium on all further implementation of hotdesking and bookable desk systems at the University until the Flexi-Space review is complete.
 - b. Suspension and review of Flexi-Space in FEIT to facilitate a co-designed, user-led solution to issues of underutilisation in FEIT. The review team should include graduate researchers from each FEIT department, including those living with disability and specific access needs, as well as representatives from GSA, the University of Melbourne Student Union, and, since some staff are also affected, the local branch of the National Tertiary Education Union.
 - c. Immediately provide sole-use allocated desks to all FEIT graduate researchers committed to attending campus 3 or more days a week while not on leave.
 - d. An inspection of all existing graduate researcher workspaces to ensure adequate ventilation, natural light, and temperature control, starting with those in the Faculty of Science. Where immediate changes are not able to be immediately made, recommendations should be noted for implementation as a priority.

- e. An inspection of all existing graduate researcher workspaces to ensure all reasonable requests for ergonomic furniture (such as sit-stand desks), high quality monitors and desktop computers are met.
 - f. Increased investment in property services, to ensure timely responses to any issues.
- 2. Conduct an extensive review of workspaces at the University of Melbourne to create a policy which commits to and builds on conditions already outlined in the existing *Principles for Infrastructure support*. This includes:
 - a. A recommitment from the University to the conditions already outlined in the existing *Principles for Infrastructure support*, and to their interpretation as stipulating provision of a sole-use, dedicated desk to each graduate researcher.
 - b. Ensure this policy includes measures for:
 - i. adequate natural light and ventilation,
 - ii. temperature control,
 - iii. regular building maintenance,
 - iv. the provision of ergonomic furniture,
 - v. quality IT equipment,
 - vi. increasing graduate researchers' access to meeting rooms, collaborative spaces, focus rooms, shared kitchen and dining areas, researcher lounges, and focus rooms.
 - vii. Efforts to place graduate researchers near their peers.
 - c. A commitment to prevent crowding, to reduce dependence on open-plan offices, and to move towards smaller, more self-contained office spaces for graduate researchers.
 - d. Review of all workspace practices across the University to ensure they comply with relevant laws, policies, and best practice principles for universal design (see Glossary) and equitable access. Incorporate identified recommendations into this policy.
- 3. A commitment to improved governance and more democratic decision-making through incorporating co-design, robust graduate researcher input, and transparency into decision-making processes concerning graduate researcher workspaces. This should include:
 - a. establishment of a graduate researcher workspace reference group to develop the future principles for all future graduate researcher

workspaces. Graduate researchers in this group should be treated as equal partners remunerated for their time;

- b. ensuring staff, students, and graduate researchers have a real say in high level infrastructure decisions potentially affecting workspaces at the University, such as the Estate Master Plan and the FEIT Workspace Strategy.

1. Introduction

The University of Melbourne is an internationally recognised leader in research. Attracting and retaining talented researchers is essential to sustaining our research output and credibility. Research conducted by graduate researchers drives advancements in our society, providing new ideas, ways of thinking and technologies for the public domain. Graduate researchers are crucial for building our institution's research capability. Nationally, postgraduate students are the primary contributors of research and development hours; in 2022, for example, they contributed 54% of the total "person years of effort" dedicated to research and development at Australian universities ([ABS, 2022](#)). In *Nature's* survey of over 6,300 graduate researchers globally, over 76% reported spending more than 40 hours a week on their PhD programme, and nearly half more than 50 hours ([Woolston, 2019](#)). Hence, graduate researchers need suitable workspaces and equipment for their field of research.

Graduate researchers deserve to be recognised as equal members of our academic community. GSA believes that investing in high quality workspaces is an investment in our university's research.

From August to September 2024, GSA conducted a survey of graduate researchers across the University of Melbourne, seeking to determine the conditions they needed for their research, and how the University was providing for these conditions. We received 410 valid responses across all faculties, with particularly strong responses from the Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology (FEIT) and the Faculty of Science. We further consulted graduate researchers via a Townhall in October, alongside discussions with graduate researcher networks, and a number of meetings with graduate researchers in FEIT.

One of the most worrying issues to emerge was the implementation of Flexi-Space, a hotdesking scheme being rolled out across a number of work areas in FEIT. Quantitative and qualitative data demonstrates that a large majority of graduate researchers in FEIT oppose Flexi-Space. Most FEIT graduate researchers surveyed considered hotdesking (78.6% of respondents) and bookable desks (73.3% of respondents) "Inadequate" or "Not at all suitable" (n=131). This was corroborated by qualitative responses. The largest cohort at GSA's graduate researcher Townhall

was FEIT researchers concerned about Flexi-Space. Moreover, around 36% (321) of all FEIT graduate researchers made the greater commitment of signing an open letter opposing Flexi-Space.

In section 2 of this report, we lay out some key existing policy settings at the University of Melbourne. In section 3, we explain the key findings and recommendations of our survey and consultations with graduate researchers. This comprises three subsections. In 3.1, we summarise graduate researchers' core requirements, and envision both how it might look when these are met, and how it might look when they are frustrated. With this established, section 3.2 lays out the major workspace issues graduate researchers have recently been facing. In section 4, we explain and analyse the findings of our survey in greater depth and detail. Each subsection first lays out the core requirements in a particular domain, then explains the problems graduate researchers have reported in this domain. Based on our findings, section 5 lays out our key recommendations for action by University leadership.

Section 3 is intended to provide all the necessary information for those who wish to quickly ascertain the main takeaways from this report. Section 4 is intended to further clarify and corroborate our findings, and to provide a useful resource for anyone looking to delve more deeply into particular issues.

The glossary explains some key terms. Appendix A provides further clarification on our data sources. Appendix B provides a snapshot of the University's own Principles for infrastructure support at the time this report was written. Appendices C and D are not official GSA documents, but open letters written by graduate researchers at this university. They serve as supplementary illustrations of graduate researcher sentiment on some of the key issues examined in this report.

2. Current Policy Settings

As per the University of Melbourne's [*Principles for infrastructure support*](#), all full-time graduate researchers should be provided with shared office accommodation that includes a sole-use desk, lockable filing cabinet and bookshelf facilities. Part-time graduate researchers should have access to a workspace, and at least shared use of a desk. It is acknowledged that some departments face major space and accommodation problems. The University states it is committed to improving the availability of office facilities for all graduate researchers.

With due regard to security and safety, there should be 'after hours', ideally 24-hour access, for graduate researchers to their offices, labs or shared workspace.

Graduate researchers must have access to on-campus computer facilities, internet and email.

'Off campus' graduate researchers must have reasonable access to the University's internet services and other resources required to support their research and thesis preparation.

University policy determines it is the responsibility of the dean in each faculty to ensure that the Principles for infrastructure support are met. Section 4.28 of the [*Selection and Admission Policy*](#) states that "The dean is responsible for ensuring that appropriate supervision, facilities and resources are able to be provided to the applicant in accordance with the principles for infrastructure support."

[*The University of Melbourne Student Wellbeing and Mental Health Framework*](#) endorses the Canadian Association of College and University Services Framework for Mental Health, which outlines that student experience is best underpinned by a 'stepped-care' approach. This stepped-care approach demonstrates that institutional structure, organisation, planning and policy should be designed to support the mental health and wellbeing of students as the first step. Recommendation 4 of the *Wellbeing and Mental Health Framework* is to "create and strengthen in-curriculum and co-curricular wellbeing supporting learning environments that promote active learning and mitigate risks to mental health." Given graduate researchers' workspace is their learning environment, it is critical that workspaces are meeting graduate researchers' needs.

3. Key findings

3.1 Essential workspace requirements¹

Adequate and appropriate workspaces for all graduate students and researchers at the University of Melbourne are essential to their wellbeing, and to their ability to complete their degrees in a timely manner and to the best possible standard.

The University has a responsibility to ensure that all graduate students and researchers have adequate and appropriate workspaces, and to monitor and enforce provision of workspaces in faculties and graduate schools.

Based on our survey, the 2016 GSA Council Policy Statement on workspaces, the University's Principles for infrastructure support, GSA's Townhall, ongoing consultations with graduate researchers, and peer reviewed research, we have identified the following requirements for graduate workspaces.

Graduate coursework students:

- While undertaking coursework subjects, graduate coursework students should have the same ready access to shared study spaces in University libraries, faculty and school buildings, and other appropriate locations as undergraduate students.
- When undertaking research or practical projects, students in graduate coursework degrees should have the same access to dedicated study space as part-time graduate researchers, with appropriate provisions for the requirements of their project.

Graduate researchers:

- All graduate researchers, including part-time researchers, must have access to dedicated workspaces as described in the University's Principles for Infrastructure Support.

¹ Please note that this section reproduces much of the wording of the 2016 GSA Council Policy Statement, most recently approved in December 2018. However, updates have been made to reflect key findings of this report.

- This includes access to a long-term, sole-use, dedicated desk for the duration of their studies, and bookshelf facilities and a lockable filing cabinet nearby.
- Graduate researcher workspaces must not be overcrowded. Where possible, they should be self-contained rather than open-plan.
- Graduate researchers' offices should include natural light, ventilation, and reasonable temperature control.
- Graduate researchers' offices should include ergonomic furniture, high quality monitors, and the availability of standing desks.
- Graduate researchers should have access to a nearby kitchen, meeting rooms, and other shared collaborative spaces.
- Graduate researchers must have access to suitable equipment and technology support. The University should be proactive in addressing graduate researchers' accessibility needs to ensure equity and inclusion.
- Graduate researchers should have access to study spaces located within their faculty, graduate school or department buildings, and close to other graduate researchers and academics.
- Graduate researchers should have a genuine say in decision-making affecting their workspaces.

These various requirements could be met in a number of ways, and individual graduate researchers' needs will always vary. However, many of these needs were clearly facilitated by four things: a dedicated desk, a smaller office environment (as opposed to an open-plan one), access to shared spaces, and an accountable administration responsive to graduate researcher preferences and needs. In summary, then, we can imagine what a simple and straightforward synthesis of graduate researchers' requirements might look like for most of them. We can term this the "Happy Workspace".

The Happy Workspace

Each graduate researcher has a dedicated desk in a small office shared with 1 to 4 other graduate researchers for the duration of their candidature. In these offices each has access to an ergonomic chair, a standing desk, and can elect either a screen for their laptop or a desktop computer. Each has a lockable cabinet and

shelves near their desk to store their things. The lighting at each desk is adjustable, and room temperatures can be locally adjusted. When they need, the researchers have ready access to specialised equipment necessary to their research (whether laboratories, library collections, or high performance computing). Researchers often give their desks a personal touch, with books, posters, diagrams, and plants. They treat the space and their colleagues with respect. Just down the hall are bookable meeting rooms, a shared kitchen, a space to eat together. These shared spaces are regularly cleaned and maintained, and the researchers are on friendly terms with University services. The researchers enjoy coming into the office most days, and a strong sense of community has begun to form among them. They are consulted before any major changes are made to their workspace, and are given a chance to meaningfully affect decisions. They feel a strong sense of ownership over their space, and a strong stake in the University at large.

In contrast, based on the issues identified, we might imagine two alternate scenarios to the Happy Workspace. We may term these the “Basement” and the “Tower”.

The Basement

In the Basement scenario, a handful of graduate researchers are crowded together in a dark corner of a decrepit old building. There is no natural light, and the air gets stale quickly. In the winter, it is cold and damp; in the summer it is hot and sweltering. In theory, there is air-conditioning, but they’ve given up on fixing it. From time to time, they hear an odd noise, maybe gnawing, coming from inside the walls, and one swore they saw a mouse the other day. There is a hole-in-the-wall kitchen with a peculiar smell. But there’s nowhere to sit, so the researchers just eat at their desks. The carpets breed moths, the walls are stained, and there is a hole in the ceiling. Nobody is sure if it’s leaking asbestos. The Internet connection is patchy and the chairs are old. They keep calling campus services, but nobody ever comes. The researchers don’t talk or collaborate much, since they don’t want to disturb each other’s work. Although each has their own desk, some rarely come in anymore. Nonetheless, the remaining researchers express relief, from time to time, that at least they’re not in the Tower.

The Tower

The Tower is a sparkling new building of chrome and glass. There's bookable rooms and excellent open-plan kitchens. The open-plan office areas contain plenty of adjustable desks and chairs, with high quality monitors. Windows and fluorescent lighting pour light across every surface. Cleaners come through each day, clearing the desks. The graduate researchers must book these desks each day, and clear them at the end. Researchers keep trying to claim a desk as their own, but their books and papers are always removed. These sometimes go missing. The researchers have heard that their attendance data is closely monitored. By whom exactly, and by what methods, nobody knows for sure. Sometimes, researchers arrive in the morning to find a stranger at their favourite desk. Most have lost the habit of going into the office. The workspace feels liminal and transient, like a shopping mall or call centre. It is echoey, and the tapping of keyboards can be heard from afar. Resentments are building between those who want to talk at their desks, and those who want silence. The meeting and focus rooms relieve some of the pressure, but rapidly book out. The temperature for several floors is centrally controlled, such that half the researchers are cold, the other half sweating. The only stain left on this perfect space is the graduate researchers themselves. Their presence is tolerated, provided they book each day in advance. Nonetheless, they are told they're lucky: at least they're not in the Basement.

Fortunately, the Basement and the Tower scenarios are *not* the norm at the University of Melbourne. Indeed, the overall picture is fairly positive. However, some existing workspaces do exhibit many of their features.

3.2 Key issues at the University of Melbourne

Overall, the picture is somewhat positive: qualitative feedback suggested those surveyed highly valued their existing workspace. Moreover, a majority of those surveyed (79%) considered their present workspace to be either 'good' or 'very good'. However, our survey and other inquiries revealed some major problems, and alarming signs that conditions are deteriorating.

1) Open-plan or crowded offices: noise, sensory issues and lack of privacy

Respondents across multiple faculties complained of excessive noise, sensory issues, and a lack of privacy. Respondents often identified crowding and open-plan offices as contributing to this problem. In some cases, this prevented graduate researchers from using their desks at all.

Harlee, whose faculty we will not specify for anonymity, described similar issues. They are based in a large open plan office, sitting near a door and elevators:

It has a constant stream of people past it (including students who want someone to help them), it is noisy, and it is almost impossible to study without wearing noise cancelling headphones.

Harlee noted that due to other accessibility requirements they have, headphones are not suitable. As such, they said

it's more practical for me to study almost anywhere that isn't my desk. I'm sure large, open plan offices can't easily be rebuilt, but it'd be good for them to not continue to be built.

2) Hotdesking and precarity

Many respondents were either losing access to a secure, sole-use dedicated desk or had been made to move from their office previously, impacting mental health, productivity, security, belonging, and their feelings towards the University. This issue was especially prominent in the Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology (FEIT) where respondents identified the FEIT Flexi-Space hotdesking scheme and its lack of co-design as major risks to their wellbeing and productivity. Lillie, for instance, said

I want to have a permanent desk. It is tiring to book desks every month. I work in Melbourne connect. Someone helps me please. I need a desk. I come to office everyday because my apartment does not have a place to study.

FEIT executives have contested characterisation of Flexi-Space as a hotdesking scheme. However, it closely fits accepted definitions. Hot-desks/bookable-desks/Flexi-Spaces are distinguished by the absence of a “fixed personal workspace” (a sole-use desk), and are commonly facilitated by flexible ICT systems with exchangeable workspaces (see Felstead 2012, p. 33; Maraslis et al. 2016; Hirst, 2011; Esland 1996). Hot-desking [often includes](#) “hotelling”, a booking system, and “office neighbourhoods”. Hot-desking's advocates tend to promote it as facilitating

a flexible workspace. However, it is not suitable for all work environments. See Glossary for further discussion.

Quantitative and qualitative data clearly demonstrates that a large majority of graduate researchers in FEIT oppose the Flexi-Space hotdesking scheme. 78.6% and 73.3% of FEIT graduate researchers surveyed considered hotdesking or bookable desks “Inadequate” or “Not at all suitable”, respectively (n=131). This was supported by qualitative responses. The largest cohort at GSA’s graduate researcher Townhall was FEIT researchers concerned about Flexi-Space. Moreover, around 36% (321) of all FEIT graduate researchers made the greater commitment of signing an open letter opposing Flexi-Space. The letter was signed by 420 people across the University, including over 45 staff, most of whom were from FEIT. These graduate researchers’ opposition to hot-desking is in line with research indicating hot-desking can lead to loss of connection, isolation from colleagues, informal desk-squatting, disruption of routine, loss of productivity, territorial conflicts, a lack of ownership and belonging, and emotional divestment from the employment relationship (e.g., Hirst, 2011, pp. 771-3, 776-783; Mohezar et al., 2021, pp. 116-117).

Graduate researchers in the Faculty of Arts (Arts), moreover, identified precarity as a major source of concern, as exemplified in the Walter Boas graduate researcher eviction in January 2024. Erin, for instance, said

Last year, I filled out a form to secure my space in Walter Boas. However, two months later, we were abruptly notified via email that we had to vacate within two weeks. After a great deal of stress, countless emails, and time spent, we finally secured a meeting. The outcome was an arbitrary decision: those on the left side of the floor could stay, while those on the right had to leave. This process has had a significant impact on me, both mentally and time-wise, yet it seems no one is taking it seriously. As a full-time student already struggling with other issues, losing my office has significantly slowed down my progress while at the time I was at the highest productivity.

The loss of stable and consistent access to a suitable workspace, caused by these decisions by management, have harmed graduate researchers’ wellbeing, productivity, and trust in the University.

3) Bad air, bad lighting, and poor temperature control

Many respondents worked in offices which lacked adequate ventilation, natural sunlight and temperature control. This issue was especially prominent among respondents in the Faculty of Science (Science). Duong, for instance, said

There's literally no window in my office. There only one old ventilation fan and an old ac. Both make extremely loud noises and people avoid them as much as they can. It's very stuffy when we have 10 people sitting in the same room. NOT ENOUGH AIR!

Issues with temperature control and lighting were sometimes reported to be exacerbated by open-plan offices – for instance, large offices with many subdivisions blocked out natural light for those further from windows, and large open-plan offices made it harder to achieve temperatures all occupants were happy with.

4) OHS: issues with ergonomics and maintenance

Survey respondents across multiple faculties identified a number of OHS concerns. These included issues with ergonomics such as a lack of sitting/standing desks and inadequate technology. For instance, Leon from FEIT said, “No standing desk caused my neck problem.” Giang from the Faculty of Education requested, “Better chairs/a standing option - for back pain”. Ezra in the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences (MDHS) said, “my screens are so poor they hurt my eyes”.

Our qualitative responses also revealed issues of poor maintenance, unresponsive building services and unsanitary work conditions. Landyn from Science noted their office was “filled with junk from past students that has not been cleared out”. Arjun from Science noted that, “The balcony above my desk leaks water because of heavy rain. And it damages some of our property.”

In some cases, respondents reported potential workplace hazards, such as asbestos, mould and potential obstructions to evacuation in case of emergency. Nguyen in Arts, for instance, noted that

The building is in a shockingly poor state (the first aid box hadn't been updated since 2017 until yesterday, there is literally a sticker above a hole in the office wall with masking tape over it telling people there is asbestos in the wall.

5) Issues with shared spaces and amenities

Respondents identified a number of issues in accessing adequate shared kitchen facilities, lounge areas, meeting rooms, focus rooms, and collaborative spaces. Respondents highlighted that there was a need for at least three distinct spaces: their offices, kitchen and dining areas, and spaces for meetings and collaboration. Additionally, several suggested it would be beneficial to have a social lounge area in addition to dining space. These different spaces needed to be properly separated and soundproofed. In FEIT, tensions also emerged over inadequate access to focus rooms, possibly exacerbated by open plan offices and hotdesking.

6) Equipment and IT issues

Some respondents identified equipment and technology support issues, such as a lack of computers, monitors, and suitable cables. Equipment issues can also vary widely by discipline and project, necessitating responsive and flexible support services for graduate researchers.

7) Equity and accessibility issues

Survey respondents raised issues with having their accessibility needs met, posing equity issues. A number of these were tied to sensory issues around noise and lighting for neurodivergent graduate researchers, and were exacerbated by open-plan offices and the introduction of Flexi-Space. Subsequent consultation with multiple graduate researchers in FEIT revealed further concerns around Flexi-Space and accessibility. Equity issues also emerged for part-time graduate researchers, who sometimes reported unequal treatment, feeling isolated from their peers, and not having access to adequate workspaces.

8) Loneliness, non-belonging, and mental health hazards

Graduate researchers' loneliness, community, belonging and mental health are relevant to the University both because they owe these researchers a duty of care, and because these factors have a major impact on whether they complete their studies (e.g., see Larscombe et al. 2021; Mackie and Bates 2018; Ryan et al. 2022; Van

Rooji et al., 2021).² Moreover, graduate researchers highly value a sense of community with their colleagues.

A number of respondents identified issues of loneliness, feelings of non-belonging or exclusion, and mental health hazards. Loneliness was sometimes exacerbated by not working near other graduate researchers, not having adequate shared spaces, and not having access to a suitable workspace on campus. Moreover, community and a sense of belonging were often damaged by frequently being forced to move workspaces, by the implementation of hotdesking, and by management decisions which did not take graduate researchers' views into account meaningfully. To facilitate community, belonging, and a genuine sense of place, it is essential for graduate researchers to have a true sense of ownership over their spaces and the decisions affecting them.

9) Governance issues, lack of co-design, and undemocratic decision-making

Respondents across multiple faculties identified issues of unresponsiveness, poor communication, lack of transparency, lack of procedural fairness, lack of co-design, and an unwillingness to work with graduate researchers to address issues. Graduate researchers complained of dismissive attitudes, abrupt and harmful decisions, a lack of compassion, and unclear communication of decisions and processes. In some cases, graduate researchers reported their concerns were not adequately accounted for, and that there was little meaningful attempt to understand and address the issues they raised. Taken together, these indicate a need for a more democratic, responsive and participatory approach.

For example, qualitative data suggested that the Flexi-Space implementation lacked transparency, genuine consultation, and co-design. While FEIT claims it has undertaken consultations, graduate researchers from the faculty reported that these consultations did not genuinely take their criticisms or constructive suggestions into account. This is reflected in the extensive opposition to Flexi-Space. Moreover, by removing graduate researchers' access to sole-use desks,

² Integration into the university through a sense of 'belonging' and self-identification as a student have also been identified as important elements of a successful transition to university study for undergraduates (Tinto 1975; West 1986)

Flexi-Space in Melbourne Connect violates the University's own Principles for Infrastructure Support, which stipulate, "All full-time graduate researchers should be provided with shared office accommodation that includes a sole-use desk, lockable filing cabinet and bookshelf facilities." This could also place the Dean in violation of section 4.26 of the Selection and Admission Policy, which states that "The dean is responsible for ensuring that appropriate supervision, facilities and resources are able to be provided to the applicant in accordance with the [principles for infrastructure support](#)."

As implemented, we have concerns as to where Flexi-Space would sit in relation to s9 of the Equal Opportunity Act 2010.

(1) Indirect discrimination occurs if a person imposes, or proposes to impose, a requirement, condition or practice—

(a) that has, or is likely to have, the effect of disadvantaging persons with an attribute; and

(b) that is not reasonable.

(2) The person who imposes, or proposes to impose, the requirement, condition or practice has the burden of proving that the requirement, condition or practice is reasonable.

Graduate researchers in FEIT, some of them with protected characteristics, reported to us that the implementation of Flexi-Space had caused them accessibility issues. Moreover, these issues had not been adequately addressed, suggesting these researchers may have been disadvantaged by the imposition of this practice. Based on discussions with affected graduate researchers, we are also concerned that the obstacles Flexi-Space poses to a conducive workspace for research may disproportionately affect graduate researchers with disabilities and those who are neurodivergent. We are not positioned to determine whether the implementation of Flexi-Space can be considered a reasonable measure, but believe we must draw attention to its violation of the University's own Principles for infrastructure support, the reasonable cost of providing sole-use desks to graduate researchers relative to the value they provide the University, reasoned

criticisms of Flexi-Space's suitability in a research environment, and the norm of providing sole-use desks in most other faculties.

In our view, such governance issues have damaged graduate researcher's wellbeing, undermined productivity, and could pose significant risks to the University. GSA would like to work constructively with both faculty leadership and Chancellery to ensure graduate students are given the workspaces they deserve, and work together towards an amenable solution for staff and graduate researchers at Australia's leading university.

4. Survey evidence and analysis

4.0a Overview of workspace requirements

A large majority of graduate researchers indicated the need for safe and comfortable work environments, calm and quiet, dedicated desks, privacy, safety, secure storage, and good shared and collaborative spaces. Graduate researchers also indicated a number of requirements specific to either the nature of their research, or their individual needs and preferences, indicating that a one-size fits all approach is not suitable.

Graduate researchers expressed a strong preference for dedicated desks in smaller office spaces, possibly because such arrangements are conducive to many of the needs identified. In contrast, graduate researchers tended to answer that large open plan offices and hotdesking were unsuitable, likely because these tended to undermine access to a number of essential requirements.

In one question, respondents were asked to tick “all the features you consider necessary conditions for an adequate study space for your research”, and were given a wide range of options to choose from. Table 1 below shows the number of graduate researchers indicating each response:

Amenity	No. of respondents identifying it as an essential requirement
Good heating and cooling	81.7% (335)
Plentiful natural light	79.5% (326)
Ergonomic furniture (e.g., high quality office chairs, adjustable desks)	78.5% (322)
A workspace that is calm and quiet	76.8% (315)
A sole-use dedicated desk [OR] A dedicated desk (sole-use or time-shared)*	75.9% (311)
Access to shared social spaces (e.g., a lounge space or seating and table in a kitchen)	66.6% (273)
Dedicated IT equipment for my use	63.7% (261)

Stable access to the same space for the duration of my studies	61.5% (252)
Provision of lockable storage suitable for sensitive research materials	57.3% (235)
Being located near the offices of other graduate researchers from my field	56.6% (232)
An office that is lockable, private and secure	54.4% (223)
Proximity to affordable food and other amenities	44.6% (183)
Being located near the offices of staff from my field	40% (164)
Dedicated shelving and bookcases	39% (160)
Being located near my supervisors' offices	38.3% (157)
A strict cap on the number of other students sharing the same office	36.6% (150)
Specialised equipment (e.g., laboratory, high performance computing, workshops, specialised library collections)	32.4% (133)
Accessibility accommodations (e.g., for a disability, health condition, or sensory issues)	27.1% (111)
An individual office not shared with anyone else	15.6% (64)
Carer/child-friendly spaces	11.5% (47)
Plenty of other students sharing the same office	7.1% (29)
Number of respondents	410

Table 1 – Essential requirements according to respondents.

*On dedicated desks, options were available both for a more stringent requirement (sole-use) or a less stringent option (sole-use or time-shared). 230 respondents ticked *only* the more stringent option of a sole-use desk, 46 ticked *only* the less stringent option, and 35 ticked both. In total, then, 311 identified a dedicated desk as an essential requirement.

Our survey indicates that some, but not all, of these requirements are presently being met. Moreover, the degree to which they are being met varies widely between faculties and individuals.

4.0b Overview of workspace issues

At the time of GSA's workspace survey in August to September 2024, the overall picture for most graduate researchers at the University was looking fairly positive. Most respondents surveyed were happy with their existing workspace: 79.3% considered their present workspace “good” or “very good”, as shown in Figure 1 below.

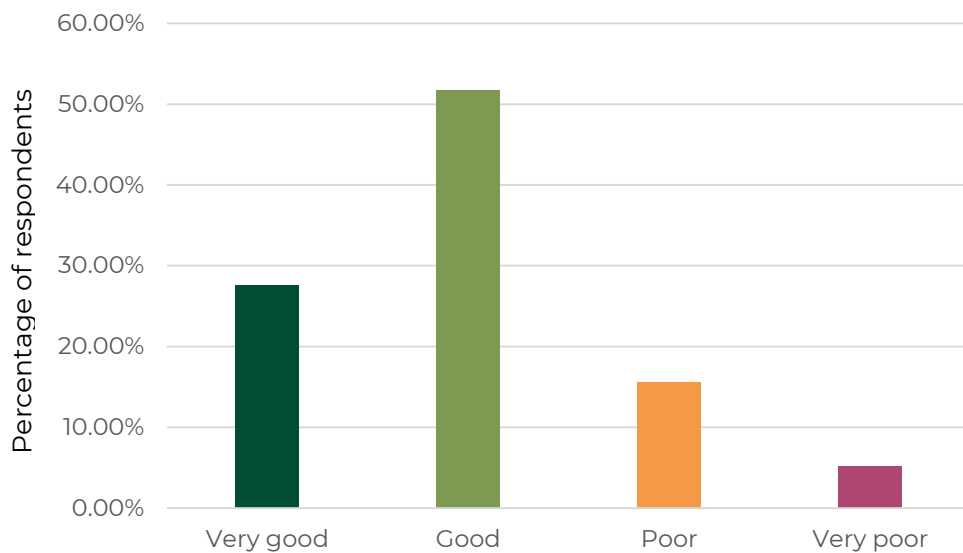


Figure 1 – “Overall, how would you describe your current workspace?”

Over 80% of respondents, moreover, had access to a sole-use dedicated desk. A number of respondents, when asked if they had experienced any negative impacts, gave qualitative feedback that their situation was positive. The following testimonies, for example, came from respondents who rated their present situation “Very good”.

Positive feedback:

Rayan: “[...] I like my space and have always been assigned a desk that meets my needs.”

Skyla: “[...] things are fine as they are.”

Qiang: “The workplace has been sufficient for my needs. It has been particularly valuable when working on writing my thesis.”

Zuri: “I am really grateful for the desk assigned to me”.

Sariyah: “No issues at the moment. I'm very satisfied with the dedicated desk, as I come to work all five days of the week and occasionally on weekends as well.”

Tatum: “Having a dedicated workspace within our Centre helps me focus on my research.”

Memphis, a Masters by Research student in the Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology (FEIT), was particularly glowing:

I believe that the existing workspace meets all my academic and research needs adequately. The facilities provided are comprehensive and well-maintained, ensuring that I have access to everything required for my studies. The layout is functional, promoting both individual work and collaborative activities when necessary. Moreover, the current setup supports a comfortable and healthy working posture, which is essential for long study sessions. Given these factors, I do not see any immediate need for additional improvements. The workspace as it stands is already highly effective in supporting my educational objectives, and I am satisfied with the resources and environment provided.

It is important to acknowledge these positive experiences. It should be celebrated that many of the requirements identified above in section 4.0a are often met, and we should build on strengths. With that in mind, the most actionable material here will emerge from identifying problems – particularly those caused by recent changes with a potential for wider rollout.

A number of significant issues emerged from the survey, as seen in Figure 2 below.

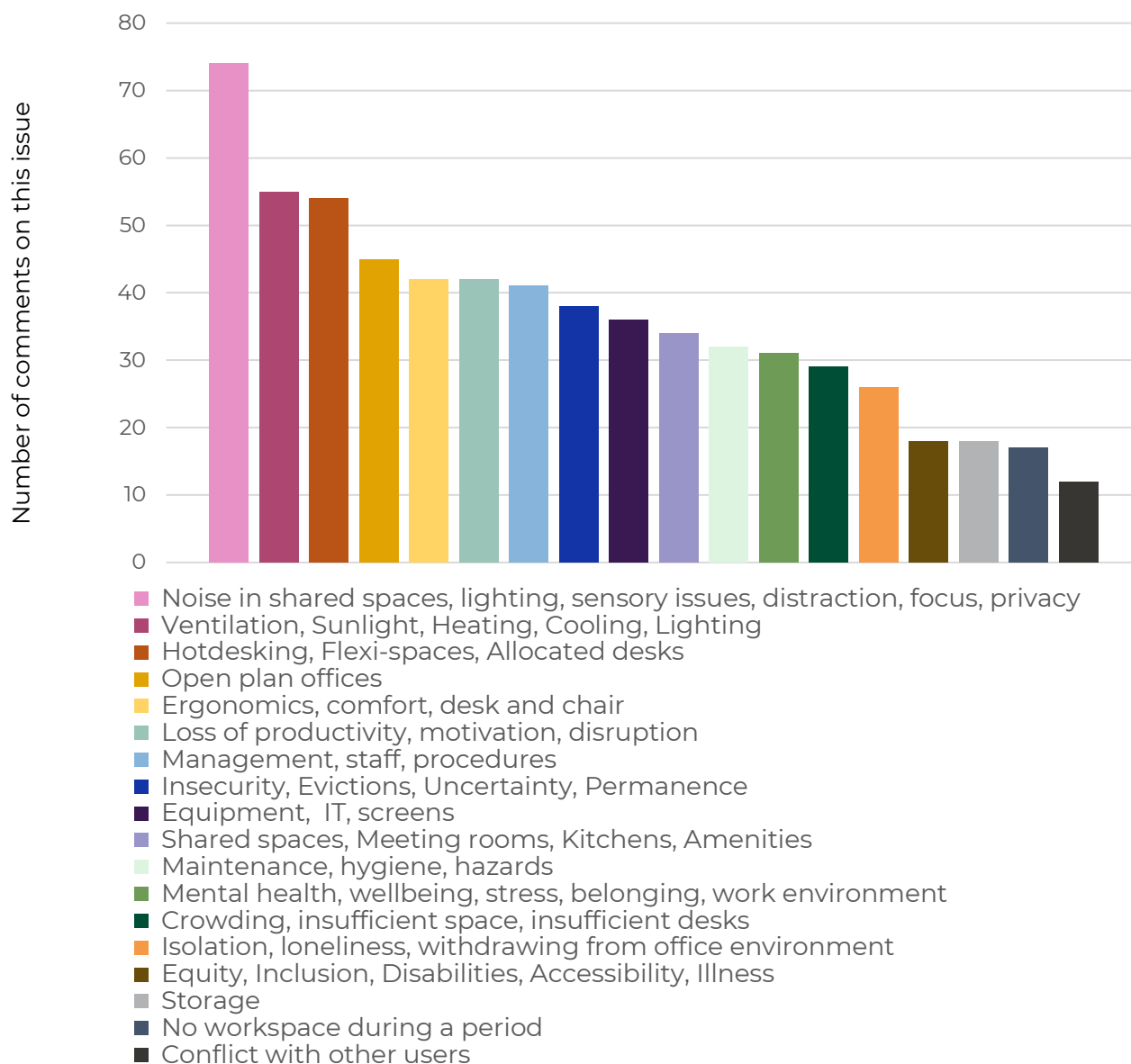


Figure 2 – Themes of workspace impact identified in qualitative feedback

1) Many graduate researchers complained of issues around noise, privacy, sensory issues; open plan offices, and overcrowding. These issues were consistently raised across multiple faculties.

2) Many graduate researchers, including many of those very happy with their existing situation, were concerned about two major sources of precarity: losing access to their existing workspace, and the prospect of being moved to hotdesking. These issues were strongly pronounced in FEIT and the Faculty of Arts (Arts).

3) Respondents raised issues around adequate ventilation, sunlight, heating, cooling and lighting, particularly in the Faculty of Science (Science).

4) Respondents raised OHS concerns around ergonomics, maintenance issues, and their treatment by management. These were tied to issues with existing procedures.

5) Access to adequate shared spaces and amenities varied widely.

7) Respondents raised significant issues around equity, inclusion, and accessibility.

8) Graduate researchers expressed a link between workspace issues and their sense of community, belonging, and place at the University. This emerged particularly acutely where graduate researchers lacked a sense of ownership over their own spaces and University decisions.

9) Several of these issues were exacerbated in some work areas by a top-down managerial style, a lack of co-design, poor communication and a lack of accountability. In certain cases, this led to significant graduate researcher backlash, as in the case of Flexi-Space in FEIT, and the Walter Boas eviction in Arts (see Glossary, sections 4.2b and 4.9b, Appendices C and D).

Some of these issues are likely to have significantly worsened since the research was undertaken. Indeed, several respondents rating their workspace situation last year as “Very good” anticipated negative changes in the pipeline. Mariah, for instance, said “All the good work space environment will end when the Flexi-Space comes, which will largely reduce my production.” Occasionally, where graduate researchers were worried about precarity or shifts to hot-desking, this may also have led these researchers to overestimate their satisfaction with the existing situation, since they were seeking to protect it against undesired changes.

Each section below will consider a particular set of workspaces requirements, and the issues graduate researchers face in attaining them. We will often quote quite extensively from the respondents, since each of them is directly affected, and they often do not have the opportunity to speak with decision-makers directly.

4.1 Privacy and quiet versus noise and crowding

4.1a Requirements: contained offices with quiet, calm, and privacy

Access to a calm and quiet environment is essential to research, think, and write. This is especially the case for long-term, in-depth academic research, as it tends to require deep reflection and sustained attention. Even brief incursions of noise, movement, or other sensory distractions can easily disrupt focus, reducing both the quality of work produced, and the speed at which it can be completed.

It is not surprising, then, that a calm and quiet work environment was one of the most commonly identified requirements of research (76.8% of respondents). It was also the top issue raised in qualitative feedback: 74 respondents mentioned issues around noise in shared spaces, lighting, sensory issues, distractions, focus, and privacy; 45 mentioned issues around open plan offices. Twenty-nine mentioned crowding, insufficient space, or insufficient desks.

Respondents were asked how suitable a range of different arrangements were to their needs as a researcher. One of the best outcomes achieved was for a dedicated desk in an office shared with 1 or 2 other graduate researchers, which 83.2% of respondents considered either “Adequate” or “Completely Suitable”, as shown in Figure 3 below:

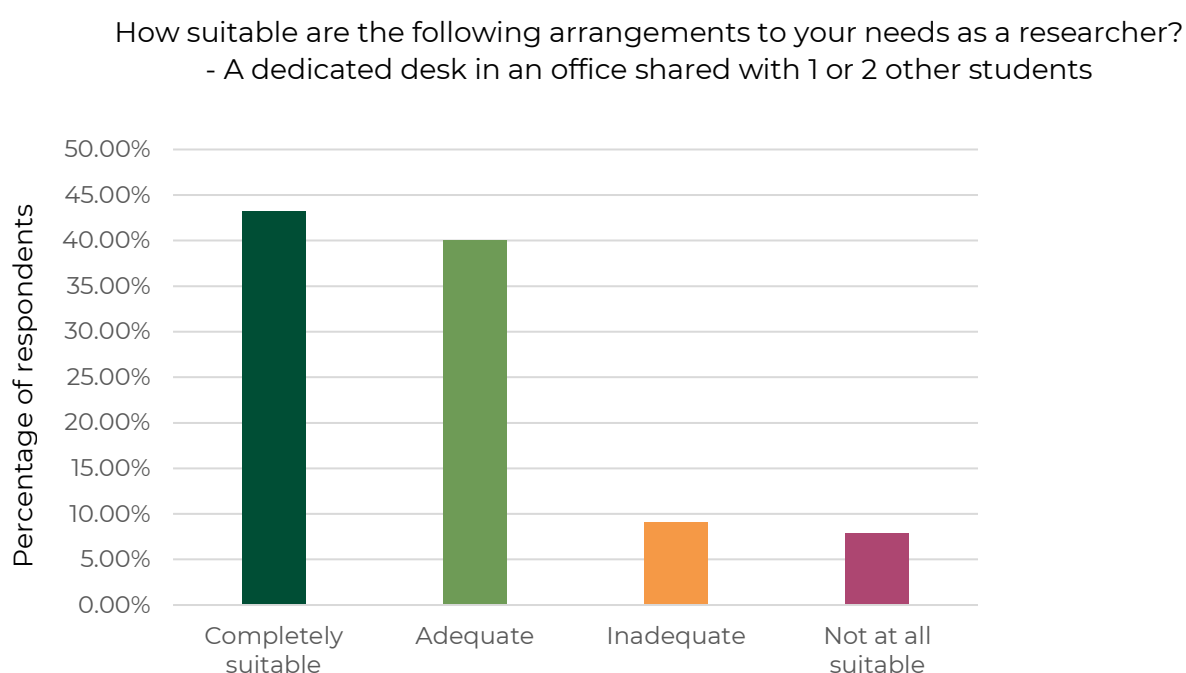


Figure 3 – Dedicated office with 1 or 2 others

The survey also asked about sharing with 3 to 4, 5 to 9, and more than 10.

Satisfaction dropped the more people respondents had to share with. By the time an open plan office (sharing with 10+) was reached, only 41.7% of respondents considered it adequate or completely suitable, as shown in Figure 4:

How suitable are the following arrangements to your needs as a researcher? – A dedicated desk in an office shared with 10 or more other students

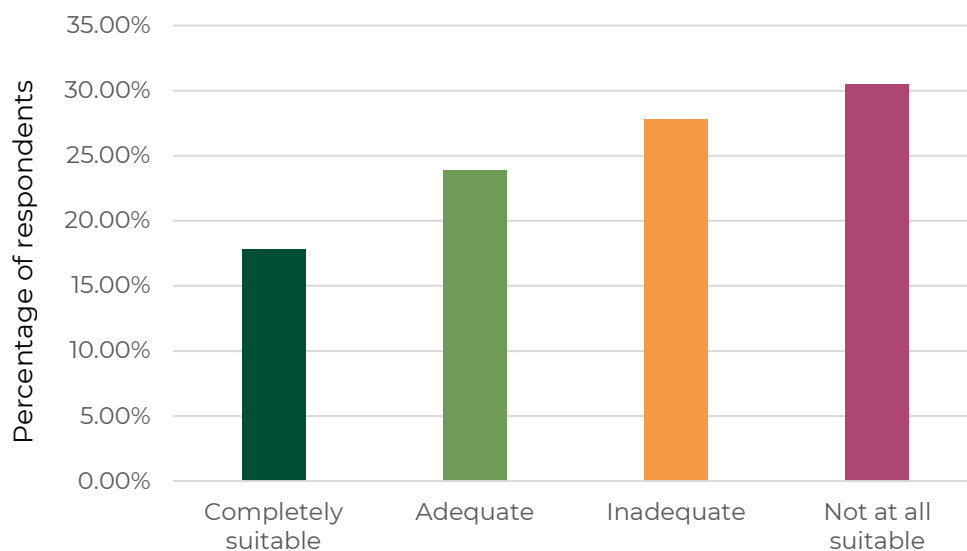


Figure 4 – Sharing with 10+ others

Closely related to this, graduate researchers need a private, safe and secure place to do their work and store their research materials. This is true for many workers, but there are some specific reasons connected to the nature of research work.

First, many graduate researchers deal with sensitive or valuable materials, and to pass ethics requirements and other hurdles they must ensure that these are safely stored. This could range from an engineering researcher working with sensitive technologies, to a sociologist gathering data on vulnerable populations, to a medical researcher working with private health records, to a political scientist interviewing people who would be directly endangered were their identities revealed. This requires a safe place near their desk to store both digital *and* physical materials.

Second, they must have a private and secure place to work with these materials, where passersby and unknown parties are not likely to see their screen or the documents on their desk.

Third, some graduate researchers work long hours with potentially traumatising materials – for instance, primary sources on sexual violence, war crimes, and other difficult topics – meaning it is important from a psychological wellbeing perspective that they have consistent access to a safe, supportive and private work environment.

Fourth, bold, innovative and original thinking often requires privacy and a sense of independence; thus, environments with a large turn-over of people, people passing through, or a sense of being surveilled are prone to undermine such thinking, limiting the quality of research produced.

It is also important to be in a physically secure setting, particularly given that graduate researchers often work outside of normal working hours. Access to campus security, and security protocols out of hours are useful steps to address this.

Provided it is an adjunct, and not a substitute for small offices and dedicated desks, a calm and quiet work environment is likely to be further facilitated both by access to separate social areas and to meeting rooms. Noise-cancelling headphones may help if they're provided, though are not suitable for everyone. Localised control over lighting is also helpful to prevent sensory issues.

Ensuring these requirements are met benefits everyone. With that in mind, it is also a matter of equity, since noise, bustle and sensory issues can particularly affect neurodivergent researchers and people with disabilities.

4.1b Problems: Open-plan or crowded offices with noise, sensory issues and lack of privacy

The most common theme identified in graduate researchers' responses to an open-ended question on impacts they'd faced was "Noise in shared spaces, sensory issues, distraction, focus, privacy", with 74 respondents raising this as an issue in their qualitative feedback. Sometimes, noise was such a problem researchers gave up on coming to campus, going some way to explaining underutilisation issues in some work areas. In this vein, graduate researcher Moses said,

I avoid working on campus wherever possible as I don't have access to quiet spaces or anywhere to keep study materials on campus. It would be beneficial

to have access to a workspace to use sometimes so I'm not so isolated from other graduate researchers.

Similarly, Michelle said, "I am sometimes unable to find a quiet space to study in my building, and if this is the case I complete my study from home". Several respondents noted that noise-cancelling headphones were not a suitable solution for them.

A number of respondents also articulated their issues in terms of privacy. Raff, for instance, said "There is no toilet in the building I am now in and also no privacy for work. Sharing an office with 10+ students is disruptive."

Open plan offices were often implicated here, and were raised as an issue in 45 comments. Damari said that they work in a large open plan space with over 20 people, near another open plan space with a similar number of people. They mention that,

it can be very difficult to concentrate in such a busy, open plan environment. Having said that, I feel grateful to have the office space we have now because a number of [...] PhD students are about to be relocated to [another building] - where we will be in one open plan office with [over 30] people! And the physical space is much smaller than we have now so I highly doubt it's going to be a very conducive environment for focused work.

In terms of improvements, I think that the University really needs to consider the fact that PhD students, especially in their last year, really need quiet, dedicated spaces for focused work and it is incredibly hard to do that in large open plan environments.

Harlee, whose faculty we will not specify for anonymity, described similar issues. They are based in a large open plan office, sitting near a door and elevators:

It has a constant stream of people past it (including students who want someone to help them), it is noisy, and it is almost impossible to study without wearing noise cancelling headphones.

Harlee noted that due to other accessibility requirements they have, headphones are not suitable. As such, they said,

It's more practical for me to study almost anywhere that isn't my desk. I'm sure large, open plan offices can't easily be rebuilt, but it'd be good for them to not continue to be built.

Damari pointed to a case where an open plan office was rebuilt, highlighting that as a design choice, open plan offices often resulted in both underutilisation, and

expensive difficulties in the medium-term. These difficulties would be easy to foresee if graduate researchers were genuinely included in a co-design process:

Another thing that I think is a bit crazy is that the building I am currently in was renovated only 2-3 years ago to transition from smaller offices to make it open plan ... and now they are renovating it all over again to turn it back into offices!! (and disrupting and reallocating people in the process)! As predicted, many people really don't like the huge open plan environment and prefer other workspaces (home offices, other spaces on campus) and so the staff area of the open plan office was hardly being used, hence the transition back to individual/small offices.

Another common theme, overlapping with those above, was “Crowding, insufficient space, insufficient desks”, emerging across 29 comments. Perceptions of crowding were often associated with open-plan offices. In this vein, Rylie said “My workspace is an open plan [...] It is [sic] a bit crowded and noisy sometimes because people always walk past and it is disturbing especially when reading and writing.” Occasionally, this verged on a congestion hazard. For instance, Giselle said,

As I share an open office space with other students from other labs, it can get a little congested with people talking in the middle of the office space and can make it difficult to get in and out of the office space.

In other cases, it was a matter of small, cramped spaces. For example, Kamari said their “desk is at the back of a crowded room of desks/ no light/ window.” To make matters worse, there was a “pile of junk/ broken furniture next to my desk.” Unsurprisingly, they indicated, “I need to work from home [-] as it is not a great space to work” and that they were “Looking for a better space to work at the uni.” Similarly, Ximena noted that, “even physically accessing my desk can be difficult when all desks are occupied.”

Truett reported crowding problems too, and indicated several things that would help – namely, better storage, better access to meeting rooms, and fewer graduate researchers sharing the same office:

No space is allocated for students to take meetings, so zoom (and occasionally in person meetings) are conducted at personal desks, sometimes at the same time, which is extremely disruptive to the collective work environment. 6+ desks in the same room with no windows able to open and chairs nearly bumping into one another when individuals get up to leave a room. No space to store equipment associated with projects so these are kept at desks, making for

crowded and difficult work environments. Often times I feel like I can't comfortably work at my desk, even with noise-cancelling headphones, due to noise.

Would be greatly improved if small rooms could be booked for zoom meetings and these were advertised/encouraged for student use - not requiring bookings go through admin staff or supervisors as larger meeting rooms are at present. Fewer students in rooms would greatly improve working conditions.

Crowding issues were often tied to other issues such as hotdesking and poor ventilation: "I have use of a hotdesk in a lab adjacent space, it is poorly ventilated and crowded," said Cameron, "A desk in a real office space would be nice."

We will consider the question of hotdesking and precarity in greater detail below, since in addition to exacerbating other problems, they create their own unique issues.

4.2 Dedicated desks versus hotdesking and precarity

4.2a Requirements: Dedicated desks and stability

Dedicated desks provide researchers with a sense of place, a tether to the University community, and, if other requirements are also met, the assurance they will always have a conducive environment to work in whenever they need it. This helps researchers build healthy routines and, since it means they will see the same people on a regular basis, helps to build community. Dedicated desks also make a lot of other requirements easier to meet. As mentioned above in section 4.1, it makes sensory issues easier to manage. Lylah, for instance, commented, that they had, "No issues with my allocated desks so far, in fact I love my desk and I would like to retain it for the rest of my candidature because moving around would be inconvenient and actually cause sensory issues."

Dedicated desks are also valuable to assuring sustained focus and attention on complex problems; generally, researchers do not complete any significant component of their research in a single work week, let alone a single work day. As such, it is helpful to have an environment conducive to long-arc, complex, blue-sky thinking. This includes the affordance of a physical space they can organise to keep track of their ideas and research materials, and ensure that each day, they

can pick up where they left-off. The absence of this is likely to damage productivity significantly.

Calm, quiet, and privacy are all likely to be facilitated both by dedicated desks in small offices with lockable doors and lockable storage near their desks. Indeed, 54.3% of respondents considered an office that is lockable, private and secure to be essential their research. 57.3% considered provision of lockable storage suitable for sensitive research materials to be essential. It helps to be seated regularly next to the same people, as this allows for consistent norms to develop among neighbours around what constitutes acceptable levels of noise.

75.9% of respondents identified a dedicated desk as an essential requirement. 61% indicated it was essential for them to have access to the same space for the duration of their studies. In section 3.1, we saw graduate researchers generally considered open-plan offices inadequate to their workspace requirements. However, things got much worse again when instead of dedicated desks in an open plan office, researchers were asked to consider bookable desks and hotdesking. Only 27.6% considered bookable desks “Adequate” or “Completely suitable”, whereas 72.4% considered them “Inadequate” or “Completely unsuitable”. Indeed, a strong plurality chose the strongest term of disapproval available to them, with 44.6% calling it “Completely unsuitable”. See Figure 5:

How suitable are the following arrangements to your needs as a researcher? –
Bookable desks shared with other graduate researchers

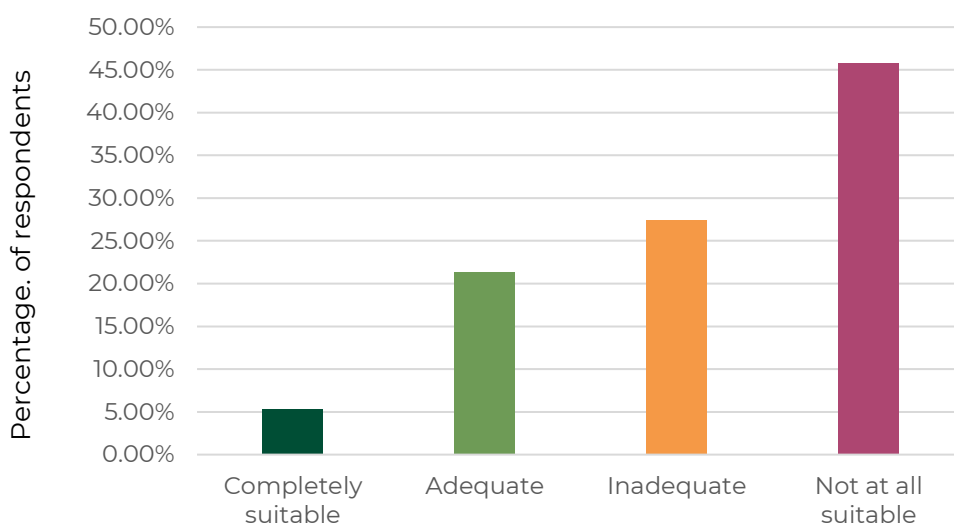


Figure 5 – Bookable desks

Things got worse still when they were asked about hotdesking, but not by much, suggesting most considered this equivalent to bookable desks. See Figure 6 below:

How suitable are the following arrangements to your needs as a researcher?
Hotdesking shared with other graduate researchers

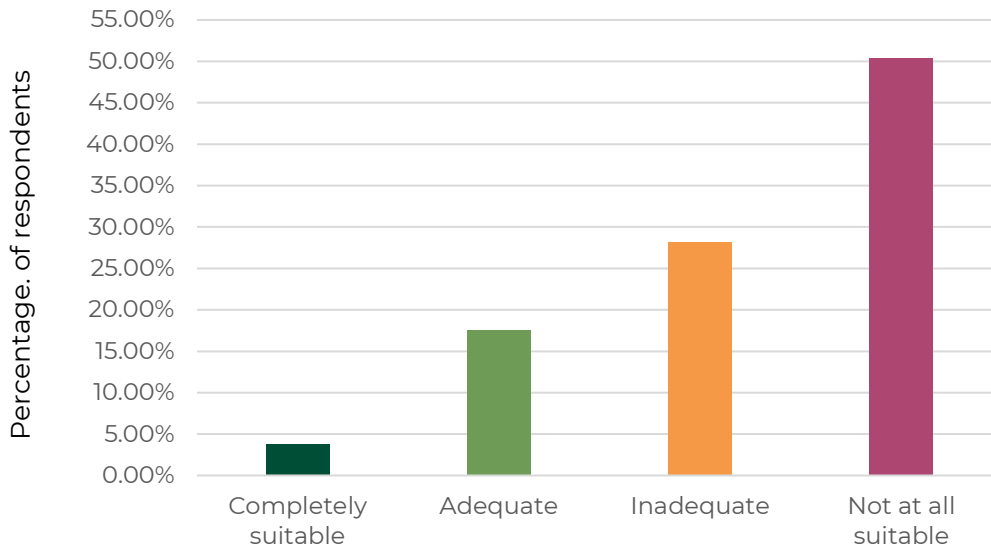


Figure 6 – Hotdesking

The strong preference for dedicated desks was confirmed in qualitative feedback. For example, Brianna said, “I think all Graduate Researchers, especially PhDs, should have access to a sole-use desk, as it provides a safe and accessible place to work. Having to book desks adds an extra layer of stress to an already stressful degree.” Violet expressed a similar attitude, saying that “A dedicated space makes everything easier.”

As discussed below in section 4.2b, extensive negative feedback on Flexi-Space specifically would also indicate that to split hairs between “hotdesking”, “bookable desks”, and “flexi-space” is to draw a distinction without a major difference. We may conclude that whatever name it is given, hotdesking is not fit for the purpose of graduate research.

4.2b Problems: Hotdesking and precarity

Many graduate researchers surveyed were deeply concerned about hotdesking and about the precarity of their existing situation. Consequently, 55 responses to

the open-ended question on impacts to their studies included the theme of “Hotdesking, Flexi-spaces, Allocated desks”. 38 mentioned the precarity of graduate researchers’ workspace situation – sometimes intersecting with other areas of instability in their lives. Graduate researchers disproportionately experience low-income, insecure housing, and poor mental health (Ruming & Dowling 2017; Mills et al. 2024), reinforcing their need for a secure place at University to call their own (see Larscombe et al. 2021; Mackie and Bates 2018; Ryan et al. 2022; Van Rooji et al., 2021.) Indeed, in Arts and FEIT, insecurity and hotdesking were among the *foremost* issues.

4.2b (i) Loss of dedicated desks to Flexi-Space

In FEIT, these two issues were often combined, as many respondents were worried about losing their dedicated desks as a result of the introduction of hotdesking under the Flexi-Space scheme. This is reflected in Figure 7 below:

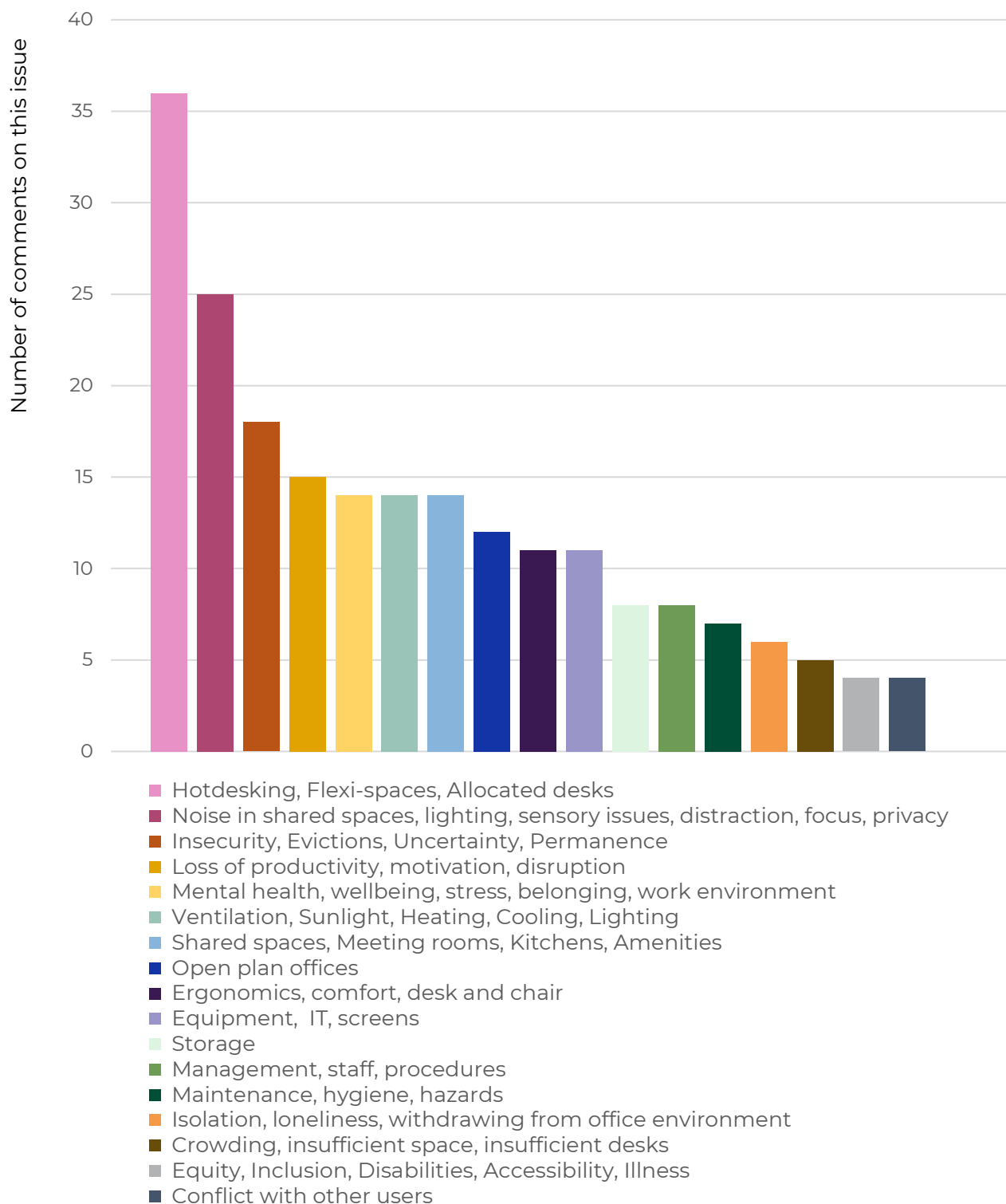


Figure 7 – Themes of workspace impact identified in qualitative feedback (FEIT only)

At the time of the survey, many FEIT respondents expressed anxiety over the introduction of Flexi-Space and bookable desks, correctly identifying these as

instances of a hotdesking model. Julia, for instance, expressed stress and anxiety about the implementation of hotdesking in Melbourne Connect:

Melbourne Connect is looking at bringing in hotdesking. Even just knowing that they're bringing it in stresses me out - my throat closes up when I think about telling them about my academic adjustment plan (AAP) that exempts me from hotdesking.

Julia went on to mention another graduate researcher at the University of whom they knew, who went to staff about their AAP. These staff were “so horrible to” this other researcher that they suffered significant harm. With that in mind, said Julia,

I don't want that kind of harm replicated on me, or anyone else, frankly, but I don't see any likelihood that they're going to be less harmful in dealing with me. I know how some staff around the uni talk about AAPs, and it's pretty derogatory! I'm weighing up whether to advocate for myself or just give up and accept that I can't work from campus anymore.

Many others expressed a strong desire to keep their desk, and concern about the consequences of losing it. Given that some of these graduate researchers feel that the implementers of Flexi-Space have often minimised or dismissed their views as outlier positions, it is worth allowing many of them to speak for themselves in this report. Below are some of their responses to a broad and open-ended question in our survey, asking if they'd faced any workspace issues during their candidature:

Examples of feedback regarding Flexi-Space

Xenu: “Having a dedicated desk space motivates to come to office and work. Having a flexi space might hinder the enthusiasm to come to office.”

Jasper: “I just want this desk to be my dedicated workspace throughout my candidacy. Not the flexi-desk.”

Lylah: “No issues with my allocated desks so far, in fact I love my desk and I would like to retain it for the rest of my candidature because moving around would be inconvenient and actually cause sensory issues.”

Axl: “We used to have a dedicated desk in Melbourne Connect, but it will be taken away starting in October. For us who need a desk to keep all the stuff that's related to the experiment, it will be inconvenient. Also, as poor international PhD students, we do not have a proper workspace in our apartment, which means we need to work in the office every day. Scrambling for desks can put unnecessary psychological pressure on us.”

Alora: "No, but they currently want to move to flexi-space. I don't want to. As a research to do research for multiple projects and long term projects, I want to have a dedicated desk"

Mina: "Yes, absolutely. One the major problem that we have is, they want to change the policy in Melbourne Connect to Flexi Space, without specific plan and clear aim, which distracts alot. Because I need to change my desk every day."

Jared: "Open space with more than 10 is really stressful and now uni implementing flexi space that we need to book a desk in two weeks advance. This make feel like we are not part of the University. If the people are not coming to uni it's a problem that uni should look why students are not there. As a person who always go to uni have to suffer looking for a desk all the time if the implement flexi space and making us not to attend uni"

Justice: "Switching to flexi space in Melbourne Connect greatly affects the productivity and efficiency in my study. Please let us have permanent desks."

Madelynn: "Everything is fine. But I think changing the desk allocation to flexi-desk is going to affect the situation.

Watson: "No. The only thing is that I love my desk and don't want to change it, share it or having to book for it.

Kole: "No hot-desking, more stability"

Jaylah: "We might be moving from a dedicated space to a booking-based system soon (next month) and I suspect that this might have negative impacts to my study/research."

Huan: "I heard our office will move to flexible next year, which stresses me a lot since I have a lot of experiment stuff and need to have a space to put. If the table is shared which makes I probably need to take this stuff to uni everyday. And the locker not fit some big equipment."

Nalani: "I assume that I will experience the impact, once we move to hotdesking in a month."

Oaklynn: "[...] Melbourne Connect building has decided to recently switch to flexispace mode which is a headache for us.

Belen: "They plan to remove the desk allocation and I'm going to lost the allocated desk in October."

Promise: "they are planning a move towards hotdesking in October and I am at risk of [losing] my desk even though I come in and use it quite frequently (3-4 days a week). This has been quite stressful as I have a lot of my data and

items stored in the permanent [pedestal] next to my desk, and the sense of ownership I have over my workspace is being threaten[ed].”

Kayson: “Remove new Flexi-Space policy that is to be implemented.”

GSA’s survey did not include the term “Flexi-space”, and GSA’s Research Officer had minimal contact with FEIT graduate researchers until *after* the results of the survey indicated this was an issue for them. In October, GSA held a Townhall for graduate researchers, open to all and any issues they wished to raise and discuss. The largest contingent there opted to discuss the Flexi-Space issue. A subsequent letter from graduate researchers to the Dean, sent in November, had 421 signatures, 326 of them from graduate researchers in FEIT.

Moreover, concerns around hotdesking did not only come from people who had never experienced it. Although it is difficult to be sure, other comments in the survey seemed to provide feedback on existing experiences of hotdesking.

Experiences of hot-desking

Zhao: “yes, I need to remember to book my desk every single week and I have a lots of personal things in my box near my desk because I am at uni more than 10 hours a day. so part of my kitchen and drawers are here so difficult to share with someone else. and [if] I feel I am not comfortable at uni I do not come and stay at home so my performance will be reduced”

Gael: “After losing a dedicated desk and moving to an open space, there is too much distractions which affected my productivity. Moreover, a dedicated desk feel like our own zone, which is essential for a phd student, which is not appreciated by the department at all.”

Lillie: “I want to have a permanent desk. It is tiring to book desks every month. I work in Melbourne connect. Someone helps me please. I need a desk. I come to office everyday because my apartment does not have a place to study.”

A number of respondents in the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences (MDHS) were also concerned about a lack of allocated desks. Miguel from MDHS said,

I know I can hot-desk, but these spaces with hot-desks are not suitable for zoom meetings which I still have a lot of. There are also no double screen set ups for these hot desks. There are barely even any HDMI cords so that we can plug our laptop into the available monitors.

Shak said “As I have no dedicated desk in the workspace, sometimes the desk would be taken by others and I have no desk to work on. Maybe more desks could be allocated for researchers.” Allana noted issues with hotdesks and a lack of equipment, and said,

In the future, it would be nice to ensure that every single student gets access to a desk, a computer or screen, and any other equipment they might need regularly. This should fall into the supervisors responsibilities when taking in new students who might not know how to navigate the new work environment.

Jamari from the Faculty of Education (Education) expressed concern that they had no allocated desk at all,

I have never been advised as to where I can work. I have been denied - literally refused - an allocated desk, despite also being employed as a casual tutor in the same area. The reason given is that I am part time. . . . apparently also being employed is insufficient

Kamdyn from the Faculty of Fine Arts and Music (FFAM) said, “Having a dedicated study space for music researchers would be greatly beneficial for myself and my fellow students.” Meadow noted they’d faced no impacts to date, but noted they would soon “lose [their] dedicated desk as Melbourne Connect is transitioning to flexi-work or hot-desking”.

Some efforts have been made to ameliorate the harms of Flexi-Space by allowing local teams to allocate desks. However, this has been undermined by Melbourne Connect’s Clear Desk Policy (see Glossary), since it forces even those graduate researchers *with* notionally allocated desks to clear them every day, reducing their productivity and preventing them from taking meaningful ownership of their space.

This is not to say that desk allocation is always adequate. Part-time graduate researchers, for example, are sometimes excluded. One of the few respondents who supported bookable desks in principle seemed to do so principally because they had never been allocated a desk as a part-time graduate researcher, and they saw bookable desks, rightly implemented, as a means of gaining some bare minimum support. Sophie in FEIT said,

As a part time graduate student, I have no dedicated workspace at all. It is a disgrace. The booking system never works, you book the desk and arrive on site to find somebody else camped in the spot with their jacket over the chair, their

computer, print outs, keyboard mouse, coffee cup - what am I supposed to do? Dump it on the floor? Throw it out? Put it on another yet to be claimed desk for somebody else to do the farce all over again [...] The problem isn't the lack of desk space, it's a [simple supply and demand issue]. Maybe they shouldn't take in more students than they have desks for. I feel like I'm invisible and most days when I come into campus and find somebody camped at my booked resource be that a Focus Room or Flex Desk I turn around go home and secretly hope the place burns to the ground.

We do not pretend these worrying sentiments are representative of the attitudes of the few graduate researchers supporting bookable desks. But it is clear that this respondent has not been adequately supported, and we observe that where it has already been implemented, Flexi-Space has not solved Sophie's problems, generates worrying resentments among graduate researchers and against management, and that these problems might have been avoided altogether if Sophie and other part-timers in their situation had been allocated a desk from the outset.

4.2b (ii) Precarity and forced moves

Even those respondents who do have allocated desks often worry they will be moved on. Raff from Arts, for instance, said, "I am nearly at my two year milestone and I have been moved four times already." Dominik from the Arts said, "My research and writing has been significantly impacted three forced shifts in this academic year alone." In January of 2024, a large scale instance of this took place: all Arts graduate researchers on Level 3 of Walter Boas (approximately 50 people) were given 3 weeks to evict their offices. No prior notice was given, and many supervisors and other staff in the faculty were blindsided by the move as well. It was not initially clear where graduate researchers' new offices would be located, nor when they would be available. The idea of hotdesking was floated by management. It emerged that the decision for this eviction had been taken by executive-level faculty management some months earlier. It was planned that staff from the School of Social and Political Science and from the School of Culture and Communication would move into the vacated offices.

Graduate researchers initially refused to leave, and initiated negotiations with the faculty. Although faculty-level management initially refused to negotiate, ultimately, they met with the researchers. Academic staff, many of whom were blindsided by the eviction, also attended. Initially, faculty executives refused to

concede ground, and the meeting swiftly became confrontational. Shortly after the meeting, leadership of the School of Social and Political Sciences decided not to move staff into Walter Boas after all, allowing over half of the graduate researchers to remain in their offices. Those evicted were given slightly more time, and slightly more certainty as to where they would be moved. However, the decision as to who would stay and who would go was arbitrary, determined by a line drawn near the middle of the building, and the graduate researchers forced to leave were upset, and often dissatisfied with their subsequent offices.

Suffice to say that the substance of this decision, a lack of procedure, poor communication, and an absence of co-design all contributed to conflict between management and members of the University community, scepticism regarding management's procedures, and a deep feeling of instability, impermanence, and insecurity among graduate researchers. This is reflected in the main themes emerging from Arts researchers' comments in Figure 8 below:

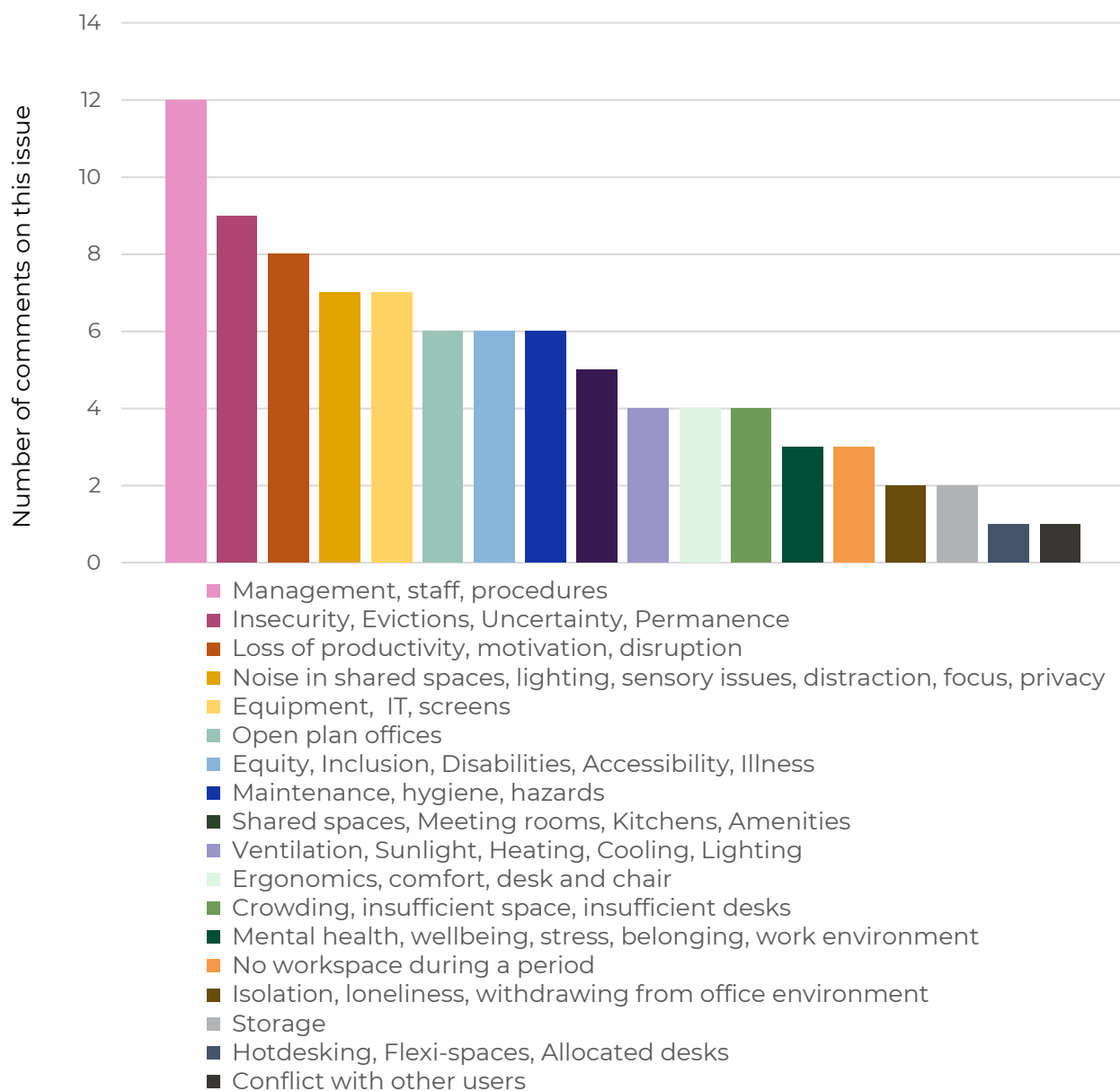


Figure 8 – Themes of workspace impact identified in qualitative feedback (Arts only)

The most commonly recurring theme was discontent with the management and procedures used to make decisions on workspaces. Erin, for instance, was upset both by the direct impacts of the decision on their work, and by its arbitrary nature:

Last year, I filled out a form to secure my space in Walter Boas, just like others did. However, two months later, we were abruptly notified via email that we had to vacate within two weeks. After a great deal of stress, countless emails, and time spent, we finally secured a meeting. The outcome was an arbitrary decision: those on the left side of the floor could stay, while those on the right had to leave. This process has had a significant impact on me, both mentally and time-wise, yet it seems no one is taking it seriously. As a full-time student

already struggling with other issues, losing my office has significantly slowed down my progress while at the time I was at the highest productivity.

Louise, meanwhile, lost precious time as a result of the Walter Boas eviction. In their view, they were enticed to provide others access to their office on false grounds, only to find out it had been repurposed, so they could no longer use it. Their desk situation at the University continued to be unstable for some time afterwards.

Even for those who retained their desks, these management issues created insecurity and precarity for graduate researchers. Amaris noted the main impact they faced on their workspace was “[c]onstantly feeling like it is going to be taken away - little sense of security”. Mara said,

My office is excellent, but the primary issue for me is the insecurity of access to the workspace. Arts faculty management tried to remove me and all other graduate researchers from this office in January 2024, and they have told us (without providing any specifics) that the remaining graduate researchers will be removed in December 2024. As yet, no plan has been communicated about where we will be relocated to in December. Will we have office spaces between December and March 2025? I hope so, as this is time when I would usually do a lot of my PhD work between teaching semesters; as the Arts-GR office said to me when they were trying to remove us from our desks in January, "A PhD is a time-based degree." I am keenly aware of this – as all GRs surely are. We just need regular and stable access to offices in order to complete the work in a timely manner. Ideally we would be guaranteed access to an office for the duration of our candidature.

Nguyen noted,

“[Unreasonable] time consumption by uni bureaucracy [...] the extensive time needed to push back against unfair treatment from the Dean's office in early 2024, the gatekeeping that security indulges in with swipe card access being turned on, then off, then on again; [...]Research: no lockable storage or appropriate facilities where I can safely and securely store sensitive research materials over the long term, this includes no guaranteed longevity to potential spaces and the tumult of always potential upheaval itself being a stress.

As multiple graduate researchers mention, both the eviction itself and the sense of precarity it created had significant costs on their productivity, and concern that it would be harder for graduate researchers to complete their theses on time. Similarly, this was often seen as a disruption of productivity imposed by University management. Mavis noted the only impact they had faced was “when they tried to kick us out of Walter Boas, which was stressful and disruptive as I had to move offices twice within a couple of months.”

The Walter Boas eviction and the decision to implement Flexi-Space in Melbourne Connect are both instances of poor communication and problem-solving at faculty executive level, and a lack of co-design undermining graduate researchers' sense of belonging and security, directly reducing their productivity, and creating divisions within the University community. It should be emphasised that while these issues have sometimes created tensions between graduate researchers and the professional staff they work with most directly, in general these two groups have done their best to co-operate to find solutions. The fault, here, lies predominantly with the decisions of executive-level management.

Since the confrontation over Walter Boas, there have been some positive efforts from the Faculty of Arts to take a more collaborative approach, and professional staff have made an effort to listen to graduate researchers' concerns while working with the constraints imposed from above. In contrast, FEIT's executives' have remained intransigent in their implementation of Flexi-Space, and refused graduate researchers' proposals for co-design. Professional staff in FEIT, while sympathetic to graduate researchers' problems, are not able to mitigate these problems issuing from above. On this note, we acknowledge that, unbeknown to us, faculty-level executives may be facing similar constraints imposed by infrastructure decisions made in Chancellery or elsewhere. However, graduate researchers are only able to work with them to address these constraints insofar as they are willing to push back on decisions which negatively affect their faculty, and treat us as equal partners in this process.

Both the Walter Boas eviction and Flexi-Space have been justified in terms of space constraints. With that in mind, it is deeply concerning that some reports indicate landmark buildings may be demolished under the Estate Master Plan, and replaced with "green space". While we acknowledge that in very specific circumstances the demolition of functional buildings could be necessary (for instance, to meet accessibility and safety needs which cannot be feasibly met through renovation and retrofitting), publicly available materials do not make clear how the workspaces removed by these demolitions would be replaced, nor the costs that would be involved. We note with concern that the design consultant which claims to have created the plan cites one of its five main focuses as "finding

ways to do more with less". This is reflected in the University's 2023 [brochure](#) on the plan. One of the "Strategic principles" it identifies is "Achieving greater efficiency and flexibility". This section likewise mentions doing "more with less", and suggests this can be achieved using new, more streamlined types of workspaces:

With different types of workspaces available, the University recognises the need to streamline workspace types and allocations and provide guidelines that balance standardisation and customisation (2023, p. 14).

Moreover, p.21 of the brochure flags a "workspace pilot" in Melbourne Connect. The Master Estate Plan website describes the pilot as follows: "Establishment and testing of workspace principles to explore improved utilisation of space, co-location and consolidation, consistency in type and allocation of space, and use of centralised tools, protocols and services." This would indicate it is referring to the Flexi-Space scheme. Indeed, FEIT's own Workspace Strategy Background Briefing treats the Melbourne Connect Flexi-Space pilot as an exemplar of its "new workspace model (2024, pp. 9-12).

It would not be acceptable to justify Flexi-Space and workspace evictions in terms of unavoidable space constraints, while at the same time making decisions which would lock in such space constraints and workspace practices in future.

4.3 Air, light and warmth

4.3a Requirements: Fresh air, good lighting, and temperature control

Fresh air, natural light, ventilation, and good temperature control are important to occupants' energy levels, productivity, and mental and physical health (see Bhui et al. 2023; Connellan et al. 2013; Mansor et al. 2024). Most survey respondents selected good heating and cooling (86.6%) and plentiful natural light (78.5%) as essential requirements. Moreover, 55 qualitative responses on research impacts were identified within the theme of 'Ventilation, Sunlight, Heating, Cooling, Lighting'.

It is also helpful for graduate researchers to have localised control over artificial and natural lighting, both for a more amenable work environment, and to prevent sensory issues, especially for disabled or neurodivergent researchers. For instance, in areas seeing direct sunlight they mentioned the need for blinds to prevent glare; as regards artificial lighting, some mentioned the need for gentle lighting options, as bright fluorescent lighting can cause sensory issues.

4.3b Problems: Bad air, bad lighting, and poor temperature control

One of the most frequent issues identified concerned light and air, with 55 researchers commenting specifically on the impacts of inadequate ventilation, natural sunlight, temperature control, or artificial lighting. These issues seemed to be particularly frequent in Science, as shown in Figure 9 below:

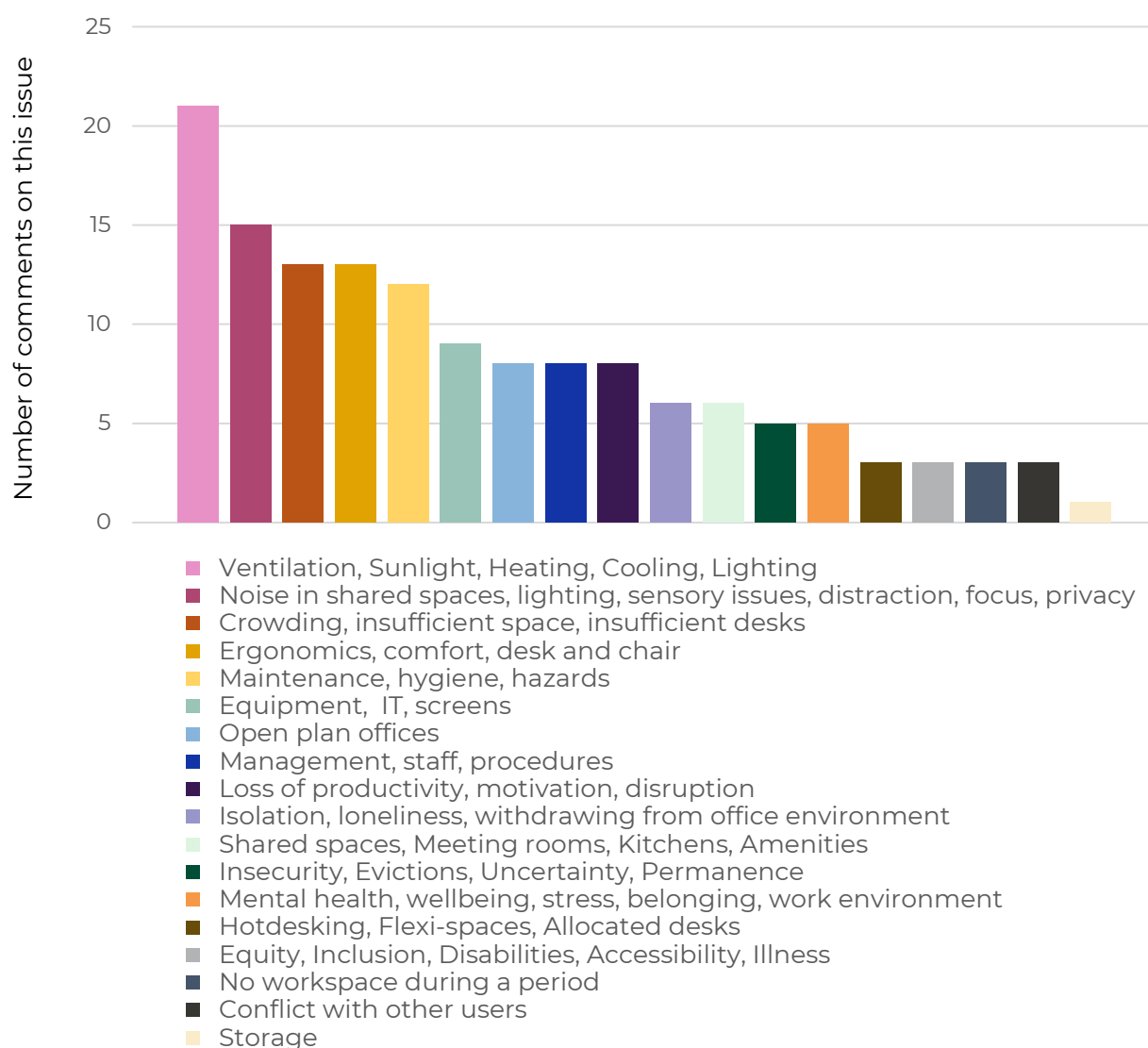


Figure 9 – Themes of workspace impact identified in qualitative feedback (Faculty of Science only)

The lack of natural sunlight and adequate ventilation often corresponded to a lack of windows. Hanna from Science noted, “[t]here are no windows in our office so getting fresh air is impossible. Also we had issues with smells that have made the office unusable.” Connor from the same faculty likewise said, “the office is in the

basement and there is unequal access to a window, with some rows having no natural light at all". Duong, also from the same faculty, said,

There's literally no window in my office. There only one old ventilation fan and an old ac. Both make extremely loud noises and people avoid them as much as they can. It's very stuffy when we have 10 people sitting in the same room. NOT ENOUGH AIR!

With regards to clean air, another graduate researcher in Science, Keenan, requested air purifiers:

Adjustable standing desks, better warmer lighting, AIR PURIFIERS!!!! Covid19 infections remain high and there are no mandatory safety requirements. The least you can do is provide us with clean air while we have to be on campus

While most common in Science, these issues were by no means restricted to that faculty. Lincoln in FEIT said,

I may have to complain regarding the air circulation in the office provided by the University for graduate researchers. The fact that 10 students occupying a small office room with insufficient air circulation may not be a suitable place to study or conduct research.

Simon from FEIT observed, "windows would be nice to allow for some daylight (for humans and plants)" Karina from FEIT agreed, "we do not have windows, that would help enormously with the mental state during work". In the Faculty of Law, Genesis said, "lack of natural light and air flow makes it tiring to work here sometimes." In FEIT, Brantley called for "More ventilation". In the Faculty of Business and Economics (FBE), Declan said "The PhD space has no access to natural light". GSA's Research Officer has also visited an open plan office space for Arts graduate researchers, on the ground floor of the Old Physics building, where there are no windows to the outside (though there is a glass block wall abutting the dim foyer of this building). In ABE, Raul said "Please consider an environment with plenty of daylight, which is important for mental health." Ezra from MDHS said such issues were preventing them from coming into the office:

Yes, my screens are so poor they hurt my eyes, and the space is also poorly ventilated with no natural light. I would love to be working at uni full time but end up working from home most of the time because I'm so uncomfortable at my desk

Some respondents also reported issues with temperature control and harsh lighting. Reina in FEIT said

I find that the lighting in some buildings can be quite harsh. Old metallurgy has lots of natural light which is really nice. However, some buildings like old-eng and biomedical engineering building have less natural light which make it difficult to work because of the harsh lighting. The [lighting] is really tiring on the eyes.

Holland noted a lack of heating:

The heaters do not work properly so its a bit difficult in winter, and some of us bring small heaters on own or just wear our coats, so proper heating would be great. Also it would be great if the cleaning/maintenance services could clean the cobwebs outside the windows as I'm a bit scared of spiders!

Jasmine in FEIT noted an excess of cooling:

Yes - air-conditioning unit blows cold air onto my head most afternoons - even during the middle of winter. Many of us have taken to wearing head gear (beanies, caps, hoodies etc) and/or additional layers of clothing, or work in the meeting rooms, dedicated study spaces or in the common areas to avoid this time of the day. Many students in my area have also brought this problem to the attention of the MC facility managers but our emails are sent back with little empathy and no action. [...] The room temperature seem fine most of the time so it is not clear why the cold air is required. It is most unpleasant and makes it difficult to work at my desk.

Hadassah, also from Science, was scathing:

The PhD workspaces in [a specific building] are not fit for purpose. They are merely repurposed storerooms, they do not have AC or heating and are extremely hot and cold in the summer and winter

Mick from FEIT said "Heating/AC is a big problem both during winter and during summer. Water leaks also present." Ly from ABS said "My only complaints are the temperature in the room, generally freezing and the cleaners leave the door unlocked which is a security problem."

Issues of ventilation, lighting, temperature, and access to sunlight were sometimes caused by dysfunctional AC or a total absence of windows. But they also tended to be exacerbated by crowding and open plan offices. Lennon in Science said

The office is poorly temperature controlled it is too hot in winter (~24°C) and too cold in summer (~ 17°C), to the point where I had to bring a jumper and blanket

to work to stop from shivering. Additionally, due to the large desks the space lacks natural light (with whole rows unable to benefit from the window). I think it is essential these desk are replaced with standing desks as soon as possible.

Landyn from the same faculty made similar points:

The workspace is very dark and has no natural light. There is a large window, but the desks are so high that most of the rows don't reap any benefits of the window, as all natural light is blocked by the towering desks.

Arianne from the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning (ABP) suggested that these lighting issues, exacerbated by large shared offices, often drove them away from their desk:

Personally I find the very corporate / office like setting of my office not ideal. Lighting is fluorescent, I don't have a view out of a window to natural light etc. The 'booth' desk set up can also make me feel quite isolated, I can't see my peers around me. Because of the lighting I can't work at my desk for extended periods of time, so I go to work in other libraries etc. This is not a huge issue but means that I move away from my ergonomic set up, multiple screens, access to my books etc. Very appreciative of having a sit / stand desk and personal storage at my desk however!

Charli in MDHS noted the issues large shared spaces caused in terms of temperature preferences: "So many people are currently sitting in shared working space. A lot of noise and different room temperature preferences are our main problems." Lucille similarly noted issues with different temperature preferences:

Some people in the office like to turn the air conditioning to the maximum in summer and the heating to the maximum in winter. Both make me feel very uncomfortable and unbearable. It would be great if the office temperature could be kept at a constant, comfortable level without being adjusted freely.

Several steps would reduce these problems. First, regular maintenance of AC systems is essential. Second, when designing workspaces, the University should consider a) ensuring plenty of windows, preferably ones that users of the spaces can open; b) avoiding large open-plan spaces, and aiming for more contained environments with smaller numbers of users, where temperature and lighting can be more readily controlled; c) ensuring good insulation; d) incorporating additional ventilation measures to ensure high quality, clean air, such as air purifiers; e) providing locally adjustable lighting.

4.4 OHS, ergonomics, and good maintenance

4.4a Requirements: safe and healthy workspaces

All workers require a safe and comfortable environment to work in. Graduate researchers are no exception.

Respondents identified a number of requirements relating to a safe and comfortable environment. Ergonomic furniture (among 78.5%) was widely identified as an essential requirement.

Safe and ergonomic furniture and screen set-ups are an OHS requirement, since they have a direct impact on physical health (for instance, neck and back health). They also affect general wellbeing and productivity. One of the recurring themes in qualitative feedback was the need for standing desks and ergonomic chairs. Heath, for instance, mentioned that “Height adjustable/standing desks would be very good for ergonomics and morale.”

It is also essential for workspaces, shared spaces, kitchens, and bathroom facilities to be maintained regularly, ensuring they are clean, structurally sound, and free of hazards.

For all these needs to be met equally and equitably, accommodations must also be made to ensure accessibility needs are met – for instance, those of graduate researchers with illnesses or disabilities.

4.4b Problems: issues with OHS, ergonomics and maintenance

Respondents identified a number of OHS concerns. These can broadly be divided into issues of ergonomics, maintenance and cleaning, and hazardous materials.

In their qualitative feedback, 42 respondents mentioned issues with ergonomics and desk set-ups. Although a requirement for good maintenance, hygiene and hazards was not foreseen as an option in the survey, so is not included in Table 1 in section 4.0a, 31 respondents raised issues around maintenance, hygiene, and hazards in their qualitative feedback. Graduate researchers emphasised the need for ergonomic chairs, sit/stand desks, and high-quality monitors. Their absence has, in some cases, caused discomfort and alleged injuries. Ezra in MDHS said “my screens are so poor they hurt my eyes”. Imram from Arts noted “The new curved

screens significantly improved ergonomics. Also lighting was too low to read old screens without eye strain at night. I brought in my own LED flood lights.” Chelsea from FEIT said:

I spend a significant time in front of screens due to the nature of my work [...] Unfortunately, the screens and desk that I have have led to some eye and neck pain. I have had to purchase my own standing desk converter to reduce back and neck pain, and purchase a better screen to slow down eye deterioration. It would be good to have a standing desk (or a converter), and better quality screen (e.g., 1440p resolution, or a wider screen).

Leon from FEIT said “No standing desk caused my neck problem.” Giang from Education requested “Better chairs/a standing option - for back pain”. Kaiden in MDHS said “Many of the chairs not broken or adjustable for appropriate ergonomics, and students moving chairs around as a result to use a functional one. Has been causing a nerve/back condition” Holland also expressed a desire for improved ergonomics:

I do have back and spine related problem which leads to pain in the lower back - so a more ergonomic chair would be helpful - but at the moment it is not a major issue so not a big deal as I'm used to it. I'm also diagnosed with carpal tunnel syndrome, so an ergonomic keyboard and mouse will be desirable although I can live without that too.

With regards to maintenance, multiple respondents, especially in Science, noted sparse cleaning services, the presence of junk and broken furniture, and a dirty work environment. Landyn from Science noted how in addition to lighting issues mentioned in section 4.3b above, their office is “filled with junk from past students that has not been cleared out. Myself and others find it very hard to concentrate because of these issues”. Arjun noted that “The balcony above my desk leak water because heavy rain. And it damage some of our property.” Sevyn wanted a solution for the “pest and roof issue”. Nathan gave a one word response: “uncleanness”. Myles from Science made such requests as the following:

Removal of past students' belongings that have remained after they completed their course. Supply of cleaning products/equipment, as these areas are expected to be maintained by users, not cleaning staff. Cleaning of skylight, covered in cobwebs and has vegetation growing through the gaps.

Responding to the survey’s question on accessibility, Avery said that unused workspaces in their area were “covered in rubbish and dead plants.” They said they had “made multiple complaints to have the spaces cleared up to the department”. However, “other than sending a student reminder nothing has happened in six

months.” They complained of “Very unclean Spaces with mouldy food and mouldy plants,” and inadequate cleaning services.

Unfortunately, other faculties also share some of these issues. Muhammad from ABP said

When I started my studies it took more than a month for my desk to be cleared for me to use even though it was not being used. It was filthy and covered with things by a previous student who left stuff unattended for several months. I cleaned it myself in order to start using it because it was taking too long for it to be cleared. I would like this not to happen to other students.

Rosalee in ABP said

I can work well when I am at my desk. I am keeping my desk clean. But the problem is with floor carpet. It's never been cleaned by staff. I don't understand why the authority doesn't appoint anyone to clean the carpet. I don't even know if there is any vacuum to clean it. Then I would have cleaned this by my own.

Mikayla in Arts said

When there have been maintenance issues, these have taken a very long time to resolve with a lack of clarity/delegation about who is responsible for the overall care of the space. For example, printer not working for months, cleaners not removing boxes for years, air conditioning not working properly for most of winter, bee carcasses all over desks and carpets for weeks. Previous advice has been to use snap send solve, but often requests then get redirected across multiple groups with the need to follow up frequently for action/updates

Louise similarly noted delays in response from snap send solve:

The office I am in now is not adequately sealed and has a constant draught of cold air. Repeated requests through snap send solve have gone nowhere despite escalation by [relevant faculty's graduate research office]. I have also been asking for a bookcase since June, it is now September.

George was ultimately deterred from using their workspace at all both by confusing procedures, and a maintenance issue:

I live a long distance from campus but had requested a desk two days a week many months ahead of when I was taking leave from work to concentrate on the PhD. although initially told I would have a desk, as the time got closer it was less clear and in the end, it was not until several weeks into my leave that the desk was made available. I then needed to complete many hours of OHS training to get a swipe card to enter the building, however, there was no key for the office made available to me which meant that I had to find someone to open the office when I arrived. The desk was in a shared office away from other PhD students. The external monitor didn't work so I ended up hunched over my laptop. It was not really clear to me who I should ask questions about the monitor or the office key. One day, when I went to the bathroom, I found that

the toilet had flooded and there was water all over the floor. Despite all the OHS training modules, it was unclear how to respond to this situation. That was the last day I went in as it was much easier to work from home, although I don't get to have contact with other students.

In some cases, maintenance issues crossed into the territory of workplace hazards. Nguyen in Arts, for instance, noted that “the building is in a shockingly poor state (the first aid box hadn't been updated since 2017 until yesterday, there is literally a sticker above a hole in the office wall with masking tape over it telling people there is asbestos in the wall.” Crosby in FFAM said “My availability workspace is full of mould, has no proper ventilation, the carpet is old and dingy, it is cramped and always messy and full of broken furniture.” Moreover, the Melbourne Connect transition to Flexi-Space happened during a spike in COVID-19 cases, during which sanitisation stations were not restocked by the faculty. GSA's Disability and Equity Officer assisted by supplying graduate researchers with PPE and followed up on restocking the sanitisation stations.

The key requirements here are clean and tidy offices, ergonomic screens and furniture, and the isolation and elimination of workplace hazards. Both University management and graduate researchers have a responsibility here. Management is responsible for providing ergonomic equipment, eliminating hazards, proactive maintenance, regular cleaning of buildings, timely responses to issues raised, and clear procedures.

Graduate researchers, in turn, should be proactive in autonomously developing shared norms for their shared spaces (e.g., as regards office etiquette, cleaning up dishes after themselves, not leaving food or rubbish around and so on). The development of such norms is made easier by smaller office sizes, long-term occupancy, and common social areas. Moreover, as seen elsewhere, externally imposed policies, however well-intentioned, can have perverse consequences and build resentment instead of collegiality – such as the Flexi-Space Clear Desk Policy in Melbourne Connect (see Glossary). In contrast, a sense of ownership and agency over a space incentivises users to look after it, and builds collegiality, community, and mutual consideration. Nonetheless, management is both entitled and obliged to intervene to prevent unsafe work environments, and in some cases may be invited to assist in addressing matters of office etiquette which users cannot resolve among themselves.

4.5 Shared spaces and amenities

4.5a Requirements: Distinct social spaces, work areas and food facilities

Many graduate researchers work with others on research, run or participate in classes online, and need to meet with others for various forms of collaboration. Having bookable spaces available for this work is both invaluable for them, and reduces the disturbance to other graduate researchers and staff in office areas. They also need access to social spaces and amenities shared with colleagues, such as kitchens, dining spaces, and lounges. This saves money on food and drink, which is vital for a group which often suffers poverty, especially amid increased cost of living pressures in Australia. It also helps to build community and friendships. These improve wellbeing and mental health, build a sense of belonging in the University community, increase the chances of course completion, and build networks of collaboration.

It is no surprise, then, that 66.6% of respondents identified access to these social spaces as a necessary condition for an adequate study space for their research. For 56.5%, it was also essential to be “located near the offices of other graduate researchers from my field”, indicating the importance of community and collaboration.

4.5b Problems: Clashing or inadequate social spaces, workspaces, and food facilities

In qualitative feedback, 34 respondents raised shared spaces, mentioning both social spaces and amenities, and spaces for meetings and collaboration. Participants suggested the need for separate meeting rooms. It was important for social and collaborative spaces to be separate from offices spaces.

Meeting rooms and collaborative work areas become more important the larger and more crowded the office in which researchers are based, as seen in Truett’s comments in section 4.1b. Arya from Science said there needed to be “Need some focus rooms or isolated space for a student for the online meeting.” Milo in the same faculty said “We need spaces to undertake zoom meetings where we will not disrupt other students”

Aila from ABP said

Our desk spaces are quiet spaces, so I cannot use the space for Zoom calls etc. I have been able to book rooms for confidential Zoom calls but have found them to be locked on occasion. More individual rooms for meetings with extra screens would be helpful.

Mira from ABP said

Given there are 32-34 desks and usually half are occupied, it is difficult to make zoom calls and have online meetings without booking a dedicated meeting room.

Eleanor in FEIT also said “Availability of more meeting rooms in the building would be great as it would allow to have zoom meeting in private without disturbing others in my shared office space.” Washington from FBE said

One improvement/nice-to-have could be quiet areas to work, given it's an open office, the noise levels varies. We do have a meeting room which people can take calls in, however, more spaces around to a quite working space (with monitors) or more drop-in (rather than booking) meeting rooms for calls or meetings would be great.

It was also important that shared spaces were clearly distinct from graduate researchers' primary work areas: Jeremy, whose faculty will remain unspecified, said

I have just relocated to the [a new office space]. There are some issues – since it has just been renovated. The main issue is that the meeting room attached to the large office is not sound proof. It is therefore not confidential and also disrupts other students trying to write. In addition, there are no partitions between desks and with 20+ students in the room, this makes it hard to focus.

As regards issues of focus, in FEIT, tensions emerged over the scarcity of focus rooms. Oaklee said:

I suggest that the University should allow graduate research students to book focus rooms by using student accounts. Some students have overused the focus room, although it is limited to 3 or 4 hours per session.

Davis from FEIT said “Focus room is occupied by some people for long time”. Collin said “Sometimes the place is so crowded and focus rooms are all full and it could be annoying.” Nylah from FEIT said

I hope the focus room can be booked following the rules of no more than 4-hour duration, currently in rush hour of workday, there are always some students occupying the focus room for a whole day for self-study!

It is likely that the competition for focus rooms is exacerbated by graduate researchers' lack of other quiet and private spaces. Indeed, Holden noted that their workspace situation "causes hindrance in focused study" and said "I use focus rooms in [another building in FEIT] whenever I have to focused reading or analysis."

Graduate researchers' access to kitchen and eating facilities varies widely – from excellent facilities, to none at all. Banks from Arts noted there was a need for a "dedicated area" for food and beverages. Moreover, access was unequal: "PhD Arts students at the Old Physics building do not have these, compared to PhD students at other schools/ faculties." Dominik from Arts suggested "Communal dining spaces so grad researchers can interact".

In some cases, existing kitchens and social spaces abutted work areas, causing tensions and distraction. Raff in Arts observed that "the kitchen being in the same room as the office is distracting." Braylee from FEIT said "It is a large open space, including kitchen, hangout area, so if there is a lot of chatter its difficult to concentrate." Jessie noted:

Many spaces are not adequate in terms of ergonomics or access to tea-making facilities. There are two tearooms in our building which is not enough for the amount of people that use the space. One of those tearooms has been deemed a quiet zone due to proximity to the [leadership office]. This was communicated by three passive-aggressive signs saying "Shhhh! Please be mindful that this is an office working space and the [leadership office] has some sensitive meetings through the day. Please be respectful and aware of your surroundings." This is within a communal zone and thus totally inappropriate to ban water cooler conversation. Additionally, conversations had between [staff] are louder than that of in the tearoom. Furthermore, students had access to tea and kitchen facilities near their shared office space, however, this now is blocked by card access and allocated to another lab space. I actually expect the [staff] will soon gatekeep the existing tearoom facility due to their perceived noise violations.

Respondents also expressed desires for a common area beyond just a kitchen and lunch room. Kylen, for instance, said that while they wanted a smaller office, they wanted to be around other graduate researchers:

Ideally I would like to have a smaller office, maybe a room shared between 4 students. But it is important to be near other students so graduate researcher rooms should be close to each other and students have access to a common area (other than the kitchen/lunch room) for reading or collaborative work etc. Like a mini-library

Overall, access to good meeting rooms, collaborative spaces, focus spaces, kitchens, and social spaces varied widely. Where problems do occur, these will need to be solved with close attention to graduate researchers' input and local conditions. However, the guiding principles here are fairly straightforward. First, minimise open-plan offices, which create more pressure on other resources, where possible. Second, ensure all graduate researchers have access to good kitchen facilities and another social/collaborative space. Third, ensure graduate researchers have access to enough meeting rooms near their offices to keep up with demand. Fourth, ensure that shared spaces are distinguished and sound-proofed from primary work areas.

Improvements in shared spaces, in addition to fostering creativity, are likely to help with another crucial set of concerns: loneliness, community, and mental health, which we will consider further in section 4.8.

4.6 Equipment and technology

4.6a Requirements: Suitable equipment and technology support

Graduate researchers' equipment needs will vary by function of their specific research. Nonetheless, it seemed most respondents required dedicated IT equipment for their use (63.7%). A large number also needed more specific equipment. For example, 39% indicated a need for dedicated shelving and bookcases. Moreover, 32% of all respondents indicated a need for specialised equipment (e.g., laboratory, high performance computing, workshops, specialised library collections). This varied by faculty, however, indicating a one-size-fits-all approach is not suitable. For example, in the Faculty of Arts, the number considering dedicated shelving essential jumped to 47.4%. In FEIT, the need for specialised equipment jumped to 85.9%. This would indicate that equipment needs will vary depending on a researcher's field, project, and personal requirements.

4.6b Problems: Equipment and IT issues

Equipment and IT issues were not a major focus of respondents, though this may owe to a paucity of questions on this topic. Nonetheless, some graduate researchers mentioned issues accessing the equipment they needed to conduct

their research. Most often, this reflected similar concerns to those covered under section 4.4 on OHS: ergonomic chairs, desks, and IT equipment (e.g., desktop computers and high-quality monitors). A number of respondents expressed concern that they had low-quality monitors, or no computer. Phillip in Science said “We don’t have any computer or pc in the office or even cable to connect out laptop to monitors”. Nasir in Science and Jaylin in FEIT also mentioned a lack of the cables or converters they needed.

In MDHS, there also seemed to be some IT issues associated with hotdesking. MPhil graduate researcher Alanna said hotdesking

complicated things when I needed a desk next to prepare for experiments as these hot desks did not have equipment like screens or PCs. At one point I managed to get a screen that worked for my laptop from the IT department (btw when I started I wasn't even consulted if I owned a laptop or if I needed a computer to work, this was just assumed and no big efforts were made by my supervisors and lab manager to solve this.). This was not an ideal solution as hotdesking meant I couldn't use that particular screen to work. Eventually, all hotdesks were provided with at least a screen, but these were outdated and I had to frequently asks for the adapter to IT so I could connect to them. In the new lab's offices, there are enough desks, computers and screens, but it's pretty much the same equipment so I often have to contact IT when I can't connect to the screens.

A few graduate researchers mentioned some IT difficulties, which further IT support in workspaces might help with.

In some cases, however, graduate researchers were concerned about their access to specialised spaces and equipment. Ishaan in FFAM said

24/7 access to studios for post graduate students is a must. We are lagging behind other art schools. There are far too many rules about how to use the studio. The studios are too small to work in. Sharing a small space is not conducive to making good art. The stables are a failure, they do not provide working artists with the space they need to produce good art. We need private spaces, lockable doors, and 24/7 access. We also need a proper air recycling system so that we can work in dusty materials such as [specific work materials]

This should help clarify that equipment requirements vary widely by discipline and project, such that a one-size-fits-all approach is not suitable.

4.7 Equity and accessibility

4.7a Equitable access, universal design, and accessibility support

The University of Melbourne, under the Equal Opportunity Act 2010 (Vic), must proactively remove barriers to participation through its positive duty to eliminate discrimination, and ensure graduate researchers have equitable access to the resources necessary for academic success. These requirements may emerge from such protected characteristics as disability, health conditions, neurodivergence, and parenthood. Compounding factors, such as socioeconomic status, access to housing, domestic violence, social capital, and international status can significantly affect graduate researcher's needs – for instance, by affecting their access to community support or conducive workspaces outside of the University.

Given these complexities, a one-size-fits all approach does not work. A requirement that relatively few respondents specify, such as the 15.6% mentioning the need for an individual office or the 11.5% mentioning the need for carer/child-friendly spaces, could prove a necessary equitable adjustment for some graduate researchers. Moreover, accessibility accommodations (e.g., for a disability or a health condition), while required by less than half of respondents, potentially quite common, with 27.1% of all 410 respondents indicating they considered accessibility accommodations “necessary conditions for an adequate study space for your research”. ‘Reasonable adjustments’, as specified in the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth), must be provided to ensure equal access to education.

With that in mind, there are many things that both contribute to making spaces more equitable and accessible to people with diverse needs, while also better meeting the needs of all graduate researchers. Dedicated, sole-use desks, for example, were considered important by a vast majority of survey respondents, and are also identified in qualitative feedback as important to neurodivergent respondents and respondents with disabilities. Moreover, these provide invaluable stability for graduate researchers facing poverty, housing insecurity or the challenges of moving to Melbourne from abroad. This can be understood as an instance of the ‘Curb-Cut Effect’, a phenomenon whereby accessibility features put in place to benefit a specific group or purpose have benefits for the wider population. (See Glossary).

4.7b Problems: Equity and accessibility issues

Implicitly, equity and accessibility issues have risen in connection with many of the problems raised in this report. Sensory issues, excessive noise, and disruptions of routine, for instance, may disproportionately impact neurodivergent graduate researchers. Lack of access to an adequate workspace with storage, moreover, is likely to disproportionately impact graduate researchers who are new to Melbourne, face housing insecurity, suffer from domestic violence, or live in poverty – potentially exacerbating existing inequalities. Issues with ventilation or hygiene are especially salient for immunocompromised graduate researchers. Cramped, crowded offices are more likely to pose issues for graduate researchers with mobility impairments – and so on.

Of those surveyed, 32 (7.8%) responded “Yes” to “Do you have accessibility requirements of any kind that are not currently being met? (e.g., disability, health condition, sensory issues)”. Of these, 27 provided details on these issues in a follow-up question. These two questions were optional, 7 responses to the Yes/No question were left blank, including one which mentions neurodivergence in the more general question on impact. Often, even in those 27 which provided details, the fullest picture emerged through combining their responses to the accessibility and the impact question. Here, we will draw on both the accessibility and impact responses from those answering “Yes”. Since the information here has a higher risk of identifiability and is potentially sensitive, faculty information is withheld except where it is central to the substance of the feedback given. To avoid the possibility of identifiability via cross-referencing, the pseudonyms previously used are not provided, even if these respondents’ feedback has been used in other sections as well. Respondents will instead be referred to as “RESPONDENT” A, B, C and so on.

In several responses, it was ambiguous whether respondents referred to accessibility-specific issues, or just general ones. RESPONDENT A, for instance, noted “Mold and roof leakages”, and RESPONDENT B mentioned “There's a roof leak and I saw a mouse the same day I collected my keys”. RESPONDENT C said “I wanted to change to bigger computer screen.” Most, however, clearly concerned equity and accessibility issues.

Several graduate researchers raised issues distinct from any mentioned so far. For instance, RESPONDENT D specified a chronic condition they live with, and said “occasionally find it too difficult to get to campus due to my condition and cannot use the desk”. They also mentioned that “When I first got my desk I didn’t have swipe access for almost a month”. RESPONDENT E said “The accessible entrance is through a swipe card access point which I [do] not have access to”. Similarly, RESPONDENT F reported a physical disability, and said that “I requested a desk. I never got given desk access arrangements.” Some graduate researchers may have benefited from access to individual offices, where a ‘reasonable adjustment’ under the EOA 2010 (Vic) and DDA 1992 (Cth) would ensure the administration help provide this. RESPONDENT G noted that they had issues with natural light due to a sensory processing disorder, and noted that in the past, when they had an [assistance animal] the University “had no concept of what they were doing in regards to accessibility.” This concern pertains to the University’s Disability Inclusion Action Plan (DIAP) 2023-2026, goals 2.8, 2.11, 2.12, 3.1, 3.6, 5.1. RESPONDENT H said they had “no space to properly attend to my chronic condition” and “no bathroom appropriate to my gender” on their floor.

RESPONDENT I raised concerns around equity in resource allocation in relation to their status as an international student:

I have been advised to use headphones to manage the noise issue by other students who get headphones from the faculty, yet I have been informed that there are no headphones available for distribution. This situation feels inequitable, particularly since other students have been provided with headphones. I request that the availability of headphones be reviewed and that I be provided with the necessary equipment to facilitate my studies [...] As an international student, I feel that the allocation of desks and other resources is not equitable. I am concerned that the services and resources provided are not on par with those available to other students or faculties. Given the significant financial commitment made by international students like me, I find this discrepancy particularly disappointing.

RESPONDENT J expressed concern that their unfavourable desk allocations may have been affected by racism.

Most accessibility issues were closely connected with issues affecting the wider cohort as well. This is in line with the Curb-Cut Effect (see Glossary) and the underlying precepts of universal design: in many cases, making spaces more accessible for people with disabilities is beneficial to other groups as well. The

obverse, of course, is that making spaces less accessible for those with disabilities is often detrimental to other groups as well. For example, open plan offices posed a number of sensory issues. A few graduate researchers mentioned that fluorescent lights gave them migraines or headaches; RESPONDENT K mentioned such lighting made it hard to focus because of ADHD; another said

I am neurodivergent with sensitivity to overhead lighting, and the fluorescents in our study spaces are invasive. I work in the dark, but sometimes this is not possible (ie. I need to read something in hard copy). I also find working in such close quarters impossible, so can only use the rooms if nobody else is around.

RESPONDENT L was likewise likely to struggle in large, bright open-plan offices: "I am diagnosed with ADHD so noisy, busy and brights spaces are extremely hard for me to maintain the focus I need for reading and writing in particular."

For some graduate researchers, even smaller shared offices are not completely suitable, thought by implication larger offices would be much worse again. For instance, RESPONDENT M said "I have [a chronic condition] and need to suddenly nap at random times. I do not have a surface I can reasonably do this on and have to improvise, which entails being in my co-workers way (literally having to step over me to use the room)." RESPONDENT N said

There is nowhere safe to reset, like a sensory room of some sort. I have autism and share my office with [other graduate researchers] who are lovely and understanding but I need to make sure that I am not overly disruptive to them, and sometimes I need to be alone to be able to regulate

In most instances, poor accessibility at the University seems to reflect inaction on the part of management. In other cases, however, innovations are being implemented which are likely to actively harm accessibility. The implementation of Flexi-Space hotdesking in FEIT, for instance, is likely to disproportionately affect researchers with no access to an adequate workspace at home; neurodivergent and disabled researchers; and researchers facing instability and precarity in other areas of their lives. For RESPONDENT O, Flexi-Space had a direct impact on their ability to have their disability requirements met, reducing accessibility:

Massive issues with trying to get my accommodation needs met. The process was very slow and confusing and delayed my progress by [a large period]. Huge impact on wellbeing.

'Flexi-desk policy being implemented by the FEIT faculty is terrible. No attempt is made to action feedback. Inappropriate responses when asked about accessibility. Any actual discussion are shut down by the [member of change team]. No flexibility is considered with the initial plan. This will have a huge impact on GRs who come to uni most days to work. The [member of FEIT management] showed no care or concern when asked if any extension or compensation would be given to students who come in every day and have to continually set up and pack up

In RESPONDENT P's view, "the whole vibe of the work environment has been compromised due to the hotdesking. Everyone is stressed, and saddened that we are being treated so poorly." They had a number of suggestions both to improve the situation, and to address the issues Flexi-Space was intended to solve:

- I think there is a way to address the utilisation of the space (lots of desks not being used), without screwing over the GRs who are in most days of the week.
- A compassionate approach by management for workplace environment - at the moment, the part of the faculty that handles the workplace seems to treat students and employees as a nuisance.
- Remove the passive-aggressive health signage - telling people to eat better- and provide them with the means to do so
- make the workplace and the environment actually accessible

Since the survey, we have also heard anecdotally that researchers in Melbourne Connect have been denied accommodations (for instance, to get an allocated desk via OHS assessments) or forced to go through lengthy and opaque processes, with little guidance offered to graduate researchers or their supervisors on how to request accommodations or assistance.

The rigid approach reflected in the implementation of Flexi-Space likewise undermines accessibility in other areas. Indeed, genuine flexibility, responsiveness and compassion – which prioritises substantive equity over rigid procedure – are often essential to addressing accessibility needs. This is not just a principle that needs to be observed with regard to Flexi-Space. It is a general principle which should apply in a range of situations across all faculties. RESPONDENT Q, for instance, from another faculty, said

I have an equity plan in place for chronic illness, which states that I need to work slower. The only way to do this is to take period of unpaid leave and continue working slowly in the background. When I have done this in the past, I've had rude encounters with some (not all!) admin staff about not being allowed to use

my desk or work on campus because if I'm on medical leave I'm "too sick to work so shouldn't be on campus." This is a frustrating and reductionist take on what it means to manage a chronic illness while studying. I'd like to see a more flexible and compassionate approach to managing desk access for people with disabilities.

Given the feedback above, we can infer both some general principles that will assist in addressing unique circumstances, and some specific measures that will improve equity and accessibility in widely shared circumstances. Concrete measures include making smaller spaces with fewer graduate researchers the norm; clear delineation between quiet, social and collaborative spaces; localised control over lighting; and the guarantee of dedicated, sole-use desks for all graduate researchers who want them. General principles include eschewing a one-size-fits-all approach or algorithmic procedure, and pro-actively seeking solutions for individuals' unique circumstances; considering the Curb-Cut effect and universal design (see Glossary) whenever designing new spaces or initiatives; and including graduate researchers in the democratic co-design of any initiatives affecting their workspaces.

4.8 Community and wellbeing

4.8a Requirements: Community, belonging, and a sense of place

Graduate researchers' loneliness, community, belonging and mental health are relevant to the University both because they owe these researchers a duty of care, and because these factors have a major impact on whether they complete their studies (e.g., see Larscombe et al. 2021; Mackie and Bates 2018; Ryan et al. 2022; Van Rooji et al., 2021).

Graduate researchers' mental health, productivity, and likelihood of completion all benefit from community, belonging and a sense of place (e.g., see Larscombe et al. 2021; Mackie and Bates 2018; Ryan et al. 2022; Van Rooji et al., 2021). Although these can be supported by staff initiatives, they cannot be manufactured top-down, and are generally undermined by micromanagement and externally imposed change. Instead, the conditions must be cultivated in which room is made for graduate researchers' own agency and creativity. Consultation with graduate researchers indicates that the following conditions would help facilitate this:

- allowing graduate researchers a sense of security and ownership over their spaces;
- creating favourable conditions which minimise resentments and interpersonal conflict;
- a guarantee of adequate dedicated desks for all graduate researchers to reduce resource conflict;
- smaller office sizes to avoid conflict over noise levels and temperature;
- access to collaborative spaces to avoid conflict between those seeking a quiet environment, and those needing to talk with others;
- creating opportunities for ongoing low-stakes, incidental contact via access to a long-term dedicated desk;
- ensuring a responsive administration to mediate conflicts and deal with any harassment or abuse; and
- allowing graduate researchers agency in determining the nature of the spaces they work in, and valuing them as democratic participants in the University community.

4.8b Problems: Loneliness, non-belonging, and mental health risks

As the feedback of graduate researchers in the sections above should already make clear, workspaces have a significant impact on issues of community and wellbeing. Plentiful natural light and comfortable work conditions contribute to wellbeing. Democratic co-design, ownership over spaces, and incidental social contact build a sense of belonging and community. Access to quiet, productive workspaces reduces stress. Conversely, lack of access to fresh air and natural light, uncomfortable conditions, isolation, insecurity, and undemocratic decision-making tend to harm wellbeing.

The resulting issues are often deeply personal, and are sometimes harder to discuss than the material conditions they're related to. Nonetheless, a number of respondents mentioned loneliness, isolation and withdrawal. Ly from ABP said

I work in a lab that is the domain of my supervisor - I have requested a desk in the grad area, but there has never been one available. I am happy to work in the lab, although sometimes suffer from loneliness. My only complaints are the temperature in the room, generally freezing and the cleaners leave the door unlocked which is a security problem.

Similarly, Elyse in Science said

I would like to suggest that students from one research group get allocated to the same room or at least same floor. The fact that we all get allocated in different rooms is unbelievable. When I joined the group I felt very lonely because I didn't even know where the others had their offices. Also putting us together would increase productivity because we actually talk to one another and help each other (remember we all working on related things, genius!) and it would foster friendships. This seems to be specific to my school [...] From experience these things are handled much better in other schools and universities. [Conclusion]: people that work together should sit together!!

Interestingly, the feedback from Moses in FFAM would suggest that a lack of quiet workspaces and dedicated storage actually contributes to isolation:

I avoid working on campus wherever possible as I don't have access to quiet spaces or anywhere to keep study materials on campus. It would be beneficial to have access to a workspace to use sometimes so I'm not so isolated from other graduate researchers.

Colson in ABP said: "I would prefer more interactions between students." The one negative impact Angie in MDHS mentioned was "Seclusion from other students." Laylah, based in Science at Burnley, said

I'd love to spend a semi regular day or so a week at Parkville. [...] it can feel a bit separate and isolated at Burnley and there are often seminars and things I'd like to attend in person at Parkville. It would be nice to have an occasional space that semi regular people like me could use at Parkville to have an opportunity to be part of the larger Parkville grad researcher community.

Yareli mentioned how the absence of a dedicated space on campus contributed to their isolation early on in their PhD:

For at least the year of my PhD, I did not have a desk at the Werribee campus (where I am based). This was during COVID, but there were periods of time where we did not have restrictions and I had no place to work on campus. I also had essential work on campus during COVID that I needed to carry out, and did not have a desk to work at. [...] My lack of a workspace impacted my research and I felt disconnected from the campus and other researchers at Werribee because I had no workspace. Future PhDs should be guaranteed a workspace and office equipment at the minimum before they begin their projects at the University.

As noted in section 4.2, graduate researchers' mental health and sense of belonging also suffered from forced evictions, insecurity, and a lack of sole-use

dedicated desks. Mavis from Arts noted that the Walter Boas eviction was “stressful and disruptive.” It is worth repeating Julia’s comment on hotdesking in FEIT: “Even just knowing that they’re bringing it in stresses me out - my throat closes up when I think about telling them about my academic adjustment plan (AAP) that exempts me from hotdesking.” Similarly, Axl notes that “Scrambling for desks can put unnecessary psychological pressure on us.” Jared mentioned how it made them feel “like we are not part of the University.”

Conversely, connection and community helped insulate respondents from other negative factors. Emilia of MDHS, for instance, said

I initially started with a dedicated workspace with a whole group of PhD students [...] which was really great. Then in [a month of] 2022 I was given two weeks notice to vacate my desk space and no alternative desk space was offered. I am very lucky I was part of a team that managed to find a desk for me. I am not sure what I would have done without this help.

Mental health services, while valuable, are not enough when management practices are actively undermining graduate researcher wellbeing. One respondent said:

I have received UoM psychological counselling that the workspace is hostile and that I should actually not work there. I feel increasingly marginalised by the University and its staff while the University pretends to spruik values of community and collaboration. The University's Counselling and Psychology services advice was that the [workplace] was passive-aggressive and not creating an environment conducive to productivity and that I should spend time either working from home or to seek alternative office arrangements.

Issues of belonging and wellbeing do not have a single, simple solution. However, ensuring secure dedicated desks near researchers in the same field, safe and comfortable spaces, equitable access, universal design, and a democratic relationship between graduate researchers and management would all serve as protective factors.

4.9 Governance and co-design

4.9a Requirements: Co-design, clear processes, and democratic accountability

One further requirement emerged from the qualitative data from the survey, from extensive consultation with researchers, from GSA’s Townhall in October 2024, and

from researcher views voiced during the Walter Boas eviction (Jan 2024) and the Stop Flexi-Space Campaign (Oct 2024, ongoing as of Mar 2025). This was the need to include graduate researchers in decision-making processes around workspaces; to ensure clear processes, communication and compliance with University policies; and to ensure that, given the University is a public interest institution, decision-makers are primarily accountable to those most affected by their decisions.

Often, this requirement is best met by putting substance over form. When things are going well, graduate researchers will not always want to engage in extensive design processes, particularly where they are not paid to do so. Good faith inquiries, however, will usually reveal their preferences quite clearly, as these are not very complicated. Conversely, it is entirely possible to create an appearance of extensive “consultation”, while in reality railroading graduate researchers into something they do not want.

A good litmus test when it comes to making changes is: are the graduate researchers excited, indifferent, anxious or hostile towards the coming change? In the absence of compelling and rigorous evidence to the contrary, they should be presumed the best judges of their own research requirements. Any attempt to undermine this principle or dismiss the preferences of researchers as obstacles to be circumvented would tend to indicate a failure to meet this requirement. This holds equally true of blunt dismissals, attempts to frame graduate researchers’ preferences as subjective and emotional as against objective and rational management decisions, and more therapeutic approaches which perform “listening” or subtly pathologise pushback drawing on the lexicon of management consultancy (e.g., such terms as “change anxiety”, “change resistance”, and “change fatigue”).

4.9b Problems: Governance issues, lack of co-design, and undemocratic decision-making

Meeting the needs of all graduate researchers at a large institution like the University of Melbourne is a complex task. In many cases, where needs are not met, this is a matter of information gaps or under-resourcing. Such issues must be addressed, but a spirit of co-operation and good faith should be the presumption here. However, a more worrying set of themes has sometimes emerged from the

issues above: namely, graduate researchers across multiple faculties reporting issues of unresponsiveness, poor communication, lack of transparency, lack of procedural fairness, lack of co-design, and an unwillingness to work with graduate researchers to address issues. In some cases, graduate researchers' reported their concerns were not adequately accounted for, and that there was little meaningful attempt to understand and address the issues they raised. Such feedback would be worrying in any organisation, but is particularly salient in a publicly funded University which is meant to serve the public interest and which, in principle at least, still follows a professorial model. Taken together, these issues indicate a need for a more democratic, responsive and participatory approach.

In some cases, graduate researchers complained of dismissive attitudes, abrupt and harmful decisions, a lack of compassion, or poor communication. Clara, for instance, said:

I was kicked out of my office with less than one week notice when I was on bereavement leave. Since then, I've spent roughly 2 hours moving the desks of [multiple people] to a new office space with no help from admin or University services. These people were in other countries so were unable to move themselves. Since then,[...], we have been yelled at, interrogated about why we need to be in this new space, told that we shouldn't have more than one monitor (which we have supplied ourselves) as some people do not have any. I was also told I could not swap desks with someone despite both of us being in the same space and agreeing to swap. It has created a very uncomfortable atmosphere and disrupted a lot of work time.

One respondent reported:

There have been a few incidences surrounding poor communication. Up until recently, desks were allocated by students finding a vacant space and moving in. One student was reprimanded recently for claiming a desk under the direction of their supervisor when they had not realised that the previous way of "claiming" a desk was no longer in practice. Another student who complained about unsatisfactory ergonomics was made to stand next to another student with similar build. The other student was asked what their strategies were for sitting at a desk that was not satisfactory with the implication that this student can deal with it why can't you. Another student had their accessibility issues inappropriately refuted when they said they needed more time to move office and that they required assistance. The behaviour of the staff member was ableist and generally dismissive.

These cases would be concerning enough on their own. But graduate researchers report instances of poor communication and lack of co-design at the level of faculty executives. Such cases suggest a potential governance problem at the University.

In the case of the Walter Boas eviction in Arts, the decision was made by faculty executive leadership (see Glossary, section 4.2b, Appendix C). In the meeting with affected graduate researchers, they acknowledged that this decision was taken without consulting academic staff or graduate researchers, who did not learn of the decision until months after it was made, and weeks before its implementation. Ultimately, following strong pushback from researchers and staff, the decision was partially rescinded, reflecting an acknowledgment that it was inappropriate. Indeed, even the implementation of the reversal did not appear to follow any formal processes: namely, the researchers occupying the North half of the building had to leave, and those in the South were permitted to stay. Graduate researchers, especially those made to leave, expressed distress over the decision's seemingly arbitrary nature.

Whereas the relevant member of the Faculty of Arts' executive leadership at least acknowledged their responsibility for the decision, in the case of Flexi-Space, the source of the decision has remained opaque (see Glossary, section 4.2b, Appendix D). Graduate researchers were encouraged to bring any concerns to the Flexi-Space change management team. However, graduate researchers felt that the change management team did not undertake genuine co-design or consultation, and it became apparent that their authority was solely over the implementation of the scheme. GSA representatives were directed to multiple members of the change management team. However, these members revealed they did not have the authority to suspend the scheme. When GSA representatives and affected researchers formally escalated the issue to the Office of the Dean, they did not clarify whether they had the authority to reverse the scheme, owing to larger infrastructure changes at the University. Moreover, aside from the Dean of FEIT, none of the staff members involved in implementation of the scheme have any publicly-facing contact details on the University website, indicating a worrying lack of transparency.

In addition to a lack of transparency, the Flexi-Space hotdesking scheme may pose a governance risk on multiple grounds. First, Flexi-Space is clearly opposed by a large majority of graduate researchers in FEIT. Out of 131 valid responses from FEIT graduate researchers responding to GSA's workspaces survey, 78.6% considered hotdesking "Inadequate" or "Not at all suitable". 73.3% likewise considered

bookable desks “Inadequate” or “Not at all suitable”. Extensive qualitative feedback, presented above, reinforces that they consider Flexi-Space inadequate. The largest contingent at GSA’s townhall for all and any graduate researcher issues was FEIT researchers opposed to Flexi-Space. Moreover, around 36% (321) of all FEIT graduate researchers made the greater commitment for themselves and their peers of signing an open letter opposing Flexi-Space. The letter was signed by 420 across the University, including over 45 staff, most of whom from FEIT.

Second, graduate researchers have told us that FEIT management has made little or no effort to action FEIT graduate researchers’ many constructive suggestions. In consultations with the change management team throughout 2024, in a faculty forum with the Office of the Dean, in their letter of complaint, and in the meeting with faculty executives, graduate researchers have made numerous suggestions which would address some of the underlying pressures driving the Flexi-Space scheme, while preventing its more detrimental impacts (see Appendix D for an example of this). FEIT management, however, has shown no signs of adopting or implementing these suggestions. Many FEIT graduate researchers with whom GSA representatives consulted, moreover, expressed deep frustration concerning the “consultations” held by the change management team, in which their feedback was largely talked around or treated in a condescending, therapeutic manner. This is consistent with the change team’s framing of opposition to Flexi-Space as “change anxiety, resistance, and fatigue” to be overcome (see FEIT Flexi-Space Pilot, Aug 2024, ‘Change Impact Assessment’, p.24).

Third, FEIT management’s conduct may go against principles of universal design. As implemented, we also have concerns as to where Flexi-Space would sit in relation to s9 of the Equal Opportunity Act 2010:

(1) Indirect discrimination occurs if a person imposes, or proposes to impose, a requirement, condition or practice—

(a) that has, or is likely to have, the effect of disadvantaging persons with an attribute; and

(b) that is not reasonable.

(2) The person who imposes, or proposes to impose, the requirement, condition or practice has the burden of proving that the requirement, condition or practice is reasonable.

Graduate researchers in FEIT, some of them with protected characteristics, reported to us that the implementation of Flexi-Space had caused them accessibility issues. Moreover, these issues had not been adequately addressed, suggesting these researchers may have been disadvantaged by the imposition of this practice. Based on discussions with affected graduate researchers, we are also concerned that the obstacles Flexi-Space poses to a conducive workspace for research may disproportionately affect graduate researchers with disabilities and those who are neurodivergent. We are not positioned to determine whether the implementation of Flexi-Space can be considered a reasonable measure, but believe we must draw attention to its violation of the University's own principles for infrastructure support, the reasonable cost of providing sole-use desks to graduate researchers relative to the value they provide the University, reasoned criticisms of Flexi-Space's suitability in a research environment, and the norm of providing sole-use desks in most other faculties.

Fourth, the move to a Flexi-Spaces Policy in Melbourne Connect goes against the University's own Principles for Infrastructure Support, potentially placing the Dean of FEIT in violation of section 4.28 of the Selection and Admission Policy. This section states that "The dean is responsible for ensuring that appropriate supervision, facilities and resources are able to be provided to the applicant in accordance with the principles for infrastructure support." The principles for infrastructure support state that "All full time graduate research students should be provided with shared office accommodation that includes a sole-use desk, lockable filing cabinet and bookshelf facilities. Part time graduate research students should have access to a work space, and at least shared use of a desk."

Fifth, graduate researchers have relied upon a promise by the University (via its publicly available Principles for Infrastructure Support) when choosing to undertake their research at this university. This promise has arguably been resiled upon, and graduate researchers, in choosing to accept an offer at the University of Melbourne (and in many cases to move to Australia), could arguably be seen to have reasonably relied on this promise to their detriment.

Sixth, we are concerned that, in light of the governance issues above, the shift to Flexi-Space poses a risk of reputational damage to the University, particularly in the midst of public scrutiny of the tertiary sector.

In our view, governance issues around workspaces have damaged graduate researcher's wellbeing, undermined productivity, and could pose significant risks to the University. More broadly, we are worried that the various issues of process identified reflects a wider breakdown of accountability processes at the University, a lack of co-design, and a growing breach between sections of executive management and the values of the University community.

GSA would like to work constructively with both faculty leadership and Chancellery to ensure our members are given the workspaces they deserve, and work together towards an amenable solution for staff and graduate researchers at Australia's leading University.

We believe that the recommendations we provide in the following section provide a strong starting point for such cooperation.

5. Recommendations

The following recommendations were developed from GSA's survey, Townhall, and discussions with graduate researchers, supplemented with relevant peer reviewed research.

1. Immediate action to address current issues, including:
 - a. A moratorium on all further implementation of hotdesking and bookable desk systems at the University until the Flexi-Space review is complete.
 - b. Suspension and review of Flexi-Space in FEIT to facilitate a co-designed, user-led solution to issues of underutilisation in FEIT. The review team should include graduate researchers from each FEIT department, including those living with disability and specific access needs, as well as representatives from GSA, the University of Melbourne Student Union, and, since some staff are also affected, the local branch of the National Tertiary Education Union.
 - c. Immediately provide sole-use allocated desks to all FEIT graduate researchers committed to attending campus 3 or more days a week while not on leave.
 - d. An inspection of all existing graduate researcher workspaces to ensure adequate ventilation, natural light, and temperature control, starting with those in the Faculty of Science. Where immediate changes are not able to be immediately made, recommendations should be noted for implementation as a priority.
 - e. An inspection of all existing graduate researcher workspaces to ensure all reasonable requests for ergonomic furniture (such as sit-stand desks), high quality monitors and desktop computers are met.
 - f. Increased investment in property services, to ensure timely responses to any issues.
2. Conduct an extensive review of workspaces at the University of Melbourne to create a policy which commits to and builds on conditions already outlined in the existing *Principles for Infrastructure support*. This includes:
 - a. A recommitment from the University to the conditions already outlined in the existing *Principles for Infrastructure support*, and to

their interpretation as stipulating provision of a sole-use, dedicated desk to each graduate researcher.

- b. Ensure this policy includes measures for:
 - i. adequate natural light and ventilation,
 - ii. temperature control,
 - iii. regular building maintenance,
 - iv. the provision of ergonomic furniture,
 - v. quality IT equipment,
 - vi. increasing graduate researchers' access to meeting rooms, collaborative spaces, focus rooms, shared kitchen and dining areas, researcher lounges, and focus rooms.
 - vii. Efforts to place graduate researchers near their peers.
 - c. A commitment to prevent crowding, to reduce dependence on open-plan offices, and to move towards smaller, more self-contained office spaces for graduate researchers.
 - d. Review of all workspace practices across the University to ensure they comply with relevant laws, policies, and best practice principles for universal design (see Glossary) and equitable access. Incorporate identified recommendations into this policy.
3. A commitment to improved governance and more democratic decision-making through incorporating co-design, robust graduate researcher input, and transparency into decision-making processes concerning graduate researcher workspaces. This should include:
- a. establishment of a graduate researcher workspace reference group to develop the future principles for all future graduate researcher workspaces. Graduate researchers in this group should be treated as equal partners remunerated for their time;
 - b. ensuring staff, students, and graduate researchers have a real say in high level infrastructure decisions potentially affecting workspaces at the University, such as the Estate Master Plan and the FEIT Workspace Strategy.

Glossary

Clear-desk policy: A policy associated with hot-desking and with Flexi-Space in Melbourne Connect, whereby researchers must clear all items from the desk they use at the end of the day. Any items left behind (including papers, books, IT equipment and personal possessions) are cleared away. In theory, these are stored for collection, but researchers in the Faculty of Engineering and IT (FEIT) allege that a number of their items have gone missing. As Mohezar et al. highlight, “The adoption of “hot-desking” is associated with a clear desk policy, which entails users to clear the desk used after each day of work, which is not easy to enforce” (2021, p.116).

Curb-Cut Effect: A phenomenon whereby accessibility features put in place for the benefit of a particular group or purpose also create benefits for the wider population: “The term was coined when architects and engineers began to realize that sidewalk curb cuts mandated for the benefit of those with wheelchairs and walkers were also used by bikers, parents with strollers, skateboarders, delivery personnel, and pedestrians in genera.” (Hogan 2003, p 14; see also Heydarian 2020; Reid 2022).

Direct vs. indirect discrimination: As stipulated under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth), direct discrimination occurs when a person is treated unfairly due to a protected characteristic (as defined by the Act). Indirect discrimination occurs when a policy, although seemingly neutral, disadvantages certain groups. Exceptions exist on grounds of reasonableness and necessity.

Flexi-Space: A hotdesking initiative initially piloted in Levels 1 and 8 of Building 290 (Melbourne Connect) and Level 3 of Building 176 (Space Lab), which includes bookable desks and rooms. Rolled out, since late 2024, across the rest of Melbourne Connect. The FEIT executive plans rollout for Fisherman’s Bend and all future FEIT workspaces.

Hotdesking: A broad and general term for workspaces in which workers are not allocated a fixed desk or office. An advertorial in The Guardian describes hotdesking as a “flexible workplace trend” whereby “workstations are used in a flexible way, without allocating a set space to employees”. Hot-desking can include “Hotelling”, in which “employees book unassigned seating in advance.” The article notes that “Most employers choose to invest in a booking system or app to make this easier.” It can also include “Office neighbourhoods”. Indeed, “grouping workstations by team or department is another way to structure hot desks.”

According to Maraslis et al. (2016), “the term ‘hot desks’ is most commonly used in order to express ‘desks that can be used each time by a different user’” (p.145). The Changing Employer Practices Survey (White et al. 2004) defined hotdesking “as the situation where ‘staff have no fixed personal workspace and use any available desk as needed” (Felstead 2012, p. 33).

Hot-desking has often been subject to critique. For instance, as Geoff Esland put it in 1996, “One of the more extreme examples of current cost-reducing strategies is the practice of so-called ‘hot-desking’ whereby employees are deprived of their right to a designated office and desk [...]” (p.15). See also Hirst 2011.

Protected attributes: Personal attributes protected from discrimination by law. Under the Equal Opportunity Act 2010 (Vic) , for instance, these include age; breastfeeding; employment activity; gender identity; disability; industrial activity; lawful sexual activity; marital status; parental status or status as a carer; physical features; political belief or activity; pregnancy; profession, trade or occupation; race; religious belief or activity; sex; sex characteristics; sexual orientation; an expunged homosexual conviction; a spent conviction; personal association (whether as a relative or otherwise) with a person who is identified by reference to any of the above attributes. As regards disability, relevant attributes could include physical, intellectual, sensory, neurological, and psychiatric disabilities, chronic illnesses and diseases (e.g., epilepsy, cancer, HIV/AIDS), mental health conditions (e.g., anxiety, depression, schizophrenia), neurodivergence (e.g., autism, ADHD), mobility impairments (e.g., requiring a wheelchair or prosthetic), sensory impairments (e.g., blindness, deafness), temporary or permanent conditions (e.g., acquired brain injuries, chronic pain), disability-related aids, equipment, or assistance needs (e.g., guide dogs, communication devices).

Stop Flexi-Space Campaign: A number of staff and graduate researchers have opposed the rollout of Flexi-Space for some time, and have sought to make constructive suggestions as to how its worst effects might be mitigated. However, management has mostly failed to implement staff and researcher feedback. In consequence, a more active campaign against Flexi-Space emerged around October 2024. This included a letter of petition signed by around 36% of FEIT’s graduate researcher population. A number of staff and graduate researchers both in and beyond FEIT also signed the letter.

Universal design: Ensures activities and aspects of society are accessible to all people, including those with disabilities, ensuring multiple modes of access. Principles include: Equitable use, flexibility, simplicity, perceptibility, error tolerance, low effort, and accessible space..

Walter Boas eviction: In January 2023, the Faculty of Arts sought to evict all graduate researchers from their offices on Level 3 of Walter Boas in order to make room for staff. The faculty provided graduate researchers with short notice and no clarity on where they would be moved. The researchers initially refused to leave. Ultimately, the University agreed to allow around 60% of the researchers to stay, while delaying the eviction of the other 40% slightly until new locations had been secured.

Appendix A – Data sources

Data for this report is drawn primarily from GSA's Graduate Researcher Survey. This survey was distributed via GSA's newsletter to all graduate researchers, via social media, via graduate researcher networks, and via faculty graduate research teams.

467 responses were received. The data was cleaned so as to only include responses by unique individual graduate researchers at the University of Melbourne, who provided consent to the GSA to use their data in anonymised form. After data cleaning (removing, for instance, incomplete responses and responses by participants who were not graduate researchers at the University of Melbourne), 410 valid responses remained.

The largest responses were from the Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology (131 responses) and the Faculty of Science (97 responses), providing stronger sample sizes and reliability when drawing inferences on issues specific to these faculties.

Substantial responses were received from MDHS (39 responses), the Faculty of Arts (38 responses), the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning (36 responses) and the Faculty of Education (31 responses).

We received fewer responses from the Faculty of Business and Economics (19), the Faculty of Fine Arts and Music (13), and Melbourne Law School (6). Caution should be applied when drawing inferences on issues specific to these faculties.

Faculty	Count
Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology	131
Faculty of Science	97
Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences	39
Faculty of Arts	38
Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning	36
Faculty of Education	31
Faculty of Business and Economics	19
Faculty of Fine Arts and Music	13
Melbourne Law School	6
Grand Total	410

Appendix B – Extract from University of Melbourne's Principles for Infrastructure Support

[Non-GSA, external document]

URL: <https://gradresearch.unimelb.edu.au/getting-started/facilities/principles-for-infrastructure-support>. Accessed: 28/02/2025

Specific facilities and resources

All full time graduate researchers should be provided with shared office accommodation that includes a sole-use desk, lockable filing cabinet and bookshelf facilities. Part time graduate researchers should have access to a work space, and at least shared use of a desk. It is acknowledged that some departments face major space and accommodation problems. The University is committed to improving the availability of office facilities for all graduate researchers.

With due regard to security and safety, there should be 'after hours' and ideally 24-hour access for graduate researchers to their offices, labs or shared work space.

Graduate researchers must have access to on-campus computer facilities, internet and email.

'Off campus' graduate researchers must have reasonable access to University internet services and other resources required to support their research and thesis preparation.

Departments should each year determine what levels of general maintenance, consumables and travel support will be provided to graduate researchers, and inform their graduate researchers and supervisors accordingly. Provision of infrastructure such as photocopying, printing, mail, telephone use and travel costs for research, should be commensurate with the requirements of research topics and thesis writing.

Graduate researchers should be encouraged to present their work at conferences, and academic units are encouraged to contribute to conference registration and attendance costs. Academic units should contribute toward doctoral candidate attendance to present at national conferences at least twice or at an international conference at least once during candidature. Research masters candidates should be supported for at least one national conference.

Where possible, academic units should offer suitably qualified graduate researchers the opportunity to tutor, demonstrate or engage in other professional development activities, provided these activities do not impact negatively on timely completion.

Appendix C – Letter from Walter Boas occupants to the Faculty of Arts' Executive Director (Jan 2024)

[Non-GSA, external document]

Dear [Executive Director] and Faculty,

Ahead of our meeting, we the undersigned wish to clarify some of our key concerns, their rationales, and the outcomes we wish to work towards with you, so as to form a foundation for our discussion.

We were alarmed to receive emails from SSPS, SCC and Arts GR on 8 January 2024, which outlined a plan to displace all continuing graduate researchers from our offices in Walter Boas with only three weeks' notice. While we appreciate that the University of Melbourne is facing difficulties in providing adequate workspaces for its staff, the proposed decision does not accommodate our unique needs as graduate researchers, to whom you also hold a responsibility. We further remind you that we are your emerging (if not already employed) workforce, and that your dedication to improving staff working conditions, alongside the commitment to providing [opportunities to engage in professional development](#) to graduate researchers, extends to us in both present and future capacities.

The suggestion that we move imminently and the manner in which the issue is being handled is emblematic of the lack of regard and condescension with which arts graduate researchers are frequently treated at the University of Melbourne. We are extremely vulnerable structurally, being at the bottom of the academic stack and not having appropriate representation at any level of the university hierarchy. We are not consulted on issues that concern us and when we are, our input is diminished or not taken seriously. We are gravely concerned to see this attitude being reflected at the level of Faculty and ask that you step into the leadership role by taking this opportunity to work with us for a better outcome. We have an immediate logistical issue to work on together (the offices), but also a set of underlying concerns identified in the content of the correspondence from Arts GR, the Schools and Faculty thus far.

Our structurally vulnerable position means that we are subject to the dysfunctional ends of many difficult decisions at The University. The Walter Boas does not only provide an essential physical place to work from under these harsh conditions, but is also a stand-in for so many of the other resources we are drained of. This unique space is foundational to forming a cohort, sharing teaching resources, supporting each-other in our learning and creating vital connections in what is otherwise a very lonely experience. There are many unseen benefits to working together in this dedicated space which far outstrip a one-dimensional assessment of space.

The proposed decision to vacate Walter Boas by the 29 January will disrupt our research, negatively impact our mental health and wellbeing, reduce our productivity, undermine academic community, risk data loss, undermine the safety of sensitive research materials and research participants' information, undermine the University's commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion and jeopardise our chances of timely completion. We are deeply concerned about the cumulative short- and long-term impacts of the proposed decision and request that we revise the current proposal together to find better outcomes.

We detail these issues point by point below.

1) **Accelerated timeline for vacation:** the decision came with minimal notice, and no consultation with the dozens of researchers who occupy this floor. This exacerbates the

negative consequences of an already adverse measure, since it gives us little time to rearrange our study plans or make alternative arrangements. The lack of consultation with the occupants of Walter Boas disregards recommendations made by the [Australian University Mental Health Framework](#), which strongly underscores the relationship between student wellbeing and the need for collaborative, consultative University decision-making processes.

2) **Transparency and communication:** the decision seems to have been poorly planned and communicated. We are left wondering how long ago these decisions were made and why we were not consulted, or even contacted, ahead of time. A number of events make us concerned about the transparency of this timeline including the forms sent out by Arts GR in October 2023 inviting graduate student to reapply for the Walter Boas work spaces; the recent installment of carded entry to the floor and increased surveillance of the building and floor; the recent installation of new computer equipment; the notice given of construction work to students in office 327 with the promise of return to office, and increased site visits from prospective staff looking to move into our spaces while we are still working in them. We are deeply concerned that coercive tactics have been used to defraud particularly vulnerable graduate researchers of their office spaces through lies and deception.

3) **Inadequate solutions:** The University has requested a majority of Walter Boas occupants to vacate our offices by **29 January 2024**. The email communication provided a range of short-term solutions that do not reasonably account for the number of students currently relying on the office space and IT facilities of Walter Boas, or the basic requirements that we have for our research. Further, most of the short-term solutions presented are unavailable until March or April 2024 prompting some serious questions - where are graduate researchers supposed to work in the interim? Where are graduate researchers to store their research materials? What about the agreements we made in our ethics proposal for the safe storage of data and protection of sensitive materials - both digital and tangible? The alternative solutions proposed fail to provide the long-term stability and consistency necessary to produce specialised postgraduate research. Here we point to the [GSA Council Policy Statement - study spaces for graduate students](#) and the [University of Melbourne Principles for Infrastructure Support](#) which both state:

All full time graduate research students should be provided with shared office accommodation that includes a sole-use desk, lockable filing cabinet and bookshelf facilities. Part time graduate research students should have access to a work space, and at least shared use of a desk. It is acknowledged that some departments face major space and accommodation problems. The University is committed to improving the availability of office facilities for all graduate researchers. With due regard to security and safety, there should be 'after hours' and ideally 24-hour access for graduate researchers to their offices, labs or shared work space.

Similar principles are also cited in the [Council of Australian Postgraduate Association - Minimum Resources for Postgraduate Study](#).

The proposal to place graduate researchers in open-planned, bookable and/or hot-desking spaces of unspecified sizes does not provide adequate workspaces for long-term research. **We emphasise that hot-desking and/or bookable spaces are inimical to the demands of**

postgraduate research. We echo the University's Principles for Infrastructure Support and request a long-term solution that incorporates the following:

- A. Dedicated, private and secure office space** - Regular access to dedicated, private and secure office spaces is integral for three reasons. First, [evidence](#) shows that graduate researchers are disproportionately vulnerable to housing insecurity, employment insecurity, and cost of living pressures. Many of us do not have access to a dedicated workspace in our place of residence. As such, it is essential to have a stable, dedicated workspace to go to if we are to be given a fair and equitable chance to complete our research. Second, long-term research requires deep concentration. Chaotic, discontinuous, crowded and open-plan workspaces are wholly unsuited to this, and reduce both efficiency and quality in our work. Third, as students of cultural studies and social sciences many of us deal with confronting, potentially traumatic subject matter, including sexual violence, war crimes, family abuse, racism, and societal conflict. Our safety and wellbeing in dealing with these materials requires a secure and private workspace, and is further fostered by a strong and stable academic community that is simply unachievable in insecure working environments.

- B. Secure and accessible storage for research materials** - the combination of locked offices, plentiful shelving, and lockable cabinets in Walter Boas provides important storage solutions to a practical concern. Long-term research projects require us to constantly draw upon and add to extensive notes, reference documents, and collected research materials. It is also a matter of ethics and security. Many of us are working with sensitive and confidential material, for which we were required to complete data plans, secure field note storage solutions and other such protections of our interlocutors' information, personal items and identities in our ethics applications. A lack of storage, a rushed move, or a 'flexible' workspace all create serious risks of breaching privacy and ethics and losing data.

- C. The provision of IT facilities** - As postgraduate research students, we require the provision of desktop computers to undertake our research. As stated above, this is a matter of accessibility, diversity and inclusion. [Recent evidence](#) shows that graduate researchers are disproportionately vulnerable to housing insecurity, employment insecurity, and cost of living pressures. Many cannot afford to buy adequate IT equipment to undertake their research. We need to be able to reliably access these basic materials at any time we deem necessary to carry out our work in order to conduct our research in a timely manner.

- D. The provision of shared, communal space** - [Evidence](#) shows that workplace community is promoted by a combination of private offices and shared communal spaces, whereas [hotdesking and open-office planning tend to undermine a sense of social cohesion and connectedness](#). Low-stakes incidental encounters in these settings, help to build friendships, a cohort, support networks and a sense of academic community. A sense of community and belonging has been consistently [cited](#) (also [see](#) here) as an essential factor contributing to the wellbeing of graduate researchers and

has been repetitively emphasised by Heads of School at this university. It is also reflected in the [Australian University Mental Health Framework](#) and the [University of Melbourne's Tips for graduate researchers from Counselling and Psychological Services staff](#). Walter Boas is essential in this respect, this setting has helped us to build a strong and supportive community which we value. We fear our displacement will undermine this community built up over years of study and multiple generations of graduate researchers, and that the new spaces proposed will not foster an adequate substitute.

4) **Disruption to research:** vacating the Walter Boas would be deeply disruptive to our studies in practical terms. In the short-term, the instability of the situation has already made it difficult to continue our regular work-flows and existing work plans. The move itself, moreover, would be time-consuming, particularly given that nowhere has been proposed for us to store our research materials or have a stable basis for our work. In the long-term, a lack of access to workable office space will negatively impact our productivity. No proposals have been made by the University to extend stipends based on the expected disruptions and delays caused by this process.

5) **Impact on wellbeing of graduate researchers:** vacating the Walter Boas would be deeply disruptive to our studies in terms of our mental health, focus, and stability. Mental health is [the major factor](#) that prompts students to discontinue their studies or not complete their theses in a timely manner. Undertaking a PhD is a necessarily precarious and destabilising process: it gives onto uncertain future prospects while requiring rigorous self-critique and personal transformation. In Saida Hodžić's words, "it is the labor of building a new world for [our]selves while being remade in the process, this under conditions that include both moments of wonder and forms of duress." Navigating this internally tumultuous process requires external stability, which is found in dedicated workspaces and a consistent academic community that all throughout candidature. A recent University of Melbourne [study](#) explicitly argues that the mental health of postgraduate research students can be improved via enhanced access to facilities and workspaces. Removing these and increasing the uncertainty of our work conditions is dangerous to our wellbeing, mental health, and productivity.

6) **Other SSPS and SCC graduate researchers:** We are concerned by similar issues faced by students outside of Walter Boas, and intend to support SPSS and SCC postgraduate researchers not currently allocated study space in Walter Boas in advocating for similarly adequate workspaces. Our longer-term concerns are also informed by the University's Estate Master Plan, [which flags the demolition of yet more office space without a clear plan to compensate for it](#).

7) **Timely completion** - [Studies](#) show that the sense of belonging, community and [proximity to peers](#) positively contribute to students' commitment to completion. Taken together, these issues will make timely completion, or completion at all, of our theses much less likely, further posing a financial and reputational risk to the University.

We would be happy to provide individual examples of how these concerns affect us, though want to emphasise that we are seeking a joint, not an individuated, solution.

Defining an acceptable office space

Given the concerns we have listed above, we thought it would be useful to outline what we consider the key characteristics of an adequate workspace for long-term academic research. Again, these conditions are aligned with both the [GSA's Council Policy Statement - study spaces for graduate students](#) and the [University of Melbourne Principles for Infrastructure Support](#):

- A secure, permanently assigned room containing a sole-use desk for full-time students, and a shared-desk for part-time students
- Desks that accommodate a desktop computer, a large monitor and keyboard, and a range of books, papers, and research materials
- A secure, lockable room - with no more than 5 researchers in it
- Shelves and lockable storage
- Rooms with windows and adequate natural light
- The provision of an up-to-date computer and large monitor for all students requiring them

Proposals

Based on our concerns and our definition above, we propose the following:

All students presently located at Walter Boas remain in their present offices until completion of their theses;

1. The Faculty of Arts move to assure adequate workspaces for all graduate researchers, aligned with our definition above; and
2. The appropriate representative of the University advise us:
 - a. When this decision was first made,
 - b. why we were not included in any consultation process,
 - c. establish adequate measures for consultation with SPSS and SCC graduate researchers in all decision-making going forward and
 - d. work to better the prevailing culture of disregard towards arts graduate researchers

We hope that this letter helps to clarify our concerns and goals ahead of our meeting and provides grounds for a fruitful dialogue.

We reiterate our intention to resolve this issue in a constructive, collaborative manner and look forward to a genuinely consultative meeting with you.

Sincerely,

[Names of the 39 signatories redacted, as this issue is now closed]

Appendix D – GR Letter to Dean of FEIT (Nov 2024)

[Non-GSA, external document]

Dear [name and title of Dean],

Congratulations on your appointment as the new Dean of the Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology (FEIT). We are confident that you will do all in your power to serve the interests of the faculty, its teaching staff and graduate researchers, while upholding its reputation and values.

As such, we the undersigned are contacting you to urgently request your intervention in suspending the implementation of the Flexi-Spaces Policy at FEIT spaces dedicated to graduate researchers, including but not limited to Melbourne Connect.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We are requesting an immediate suspension of the Flexi-Space implementation, as it is not appropriate for the demands of post-graduate research.

This letter highlights the procedural issues with regards to the Flexi-Space project, and details the substantive issues with flexi-desking raised by our FEIT Graduate Researcher community.

Finally, we have suggested next steps we hope you will follow in order to develop and co-design an appropriate solution that supports our researchers while acknowledging the limitations the faculty is currently facing.

This proposal to transform the current sitting arrangements to an open-planned, booking based hotdesk format is non-conducive for pursuing productive and motivating graduate research study. **We emphasise that this policy of hot-desking and/or bookable desks is detrimental to the demands of postgraduate research.**

This position is supported by the Graduate Student Association (GSA)'s recent survey of 413 graduate researchers across the university, 132 of whom are from FEIT. Across the university, 78% of respondents considered hot-desking "Inadequate" or "Not at all suitable" to their research needs. 72% considered bookable desks "Inadequate" or "Not at all suitable". In FEIT, these figures were 79% and 73%, respectively.

The move to a Flexi-Spaces Policy in Melbourne Connect poses issues of both procedure and substance.

PROCEDURAL ISSUES

1) Conflict with existing policy: This move is inconsistent with the [GSA's Council Policy Statement - study spaces for graduate students](#), and the [University of Melbourne's Principles for Infrastructure Support](#). These latter principles state that,

"All full-time graduate research students should be provided with shared office accommodation that includes a sole-use desk, lockable filing cabinet and bookshelf facilities. Part-time graduate research students should have access to a work space, and at least shared use of a desk."

These principles are publicly available, and likely constitute a representation to any prospective graduate researchers, one on which a reasonable person would rely in making their choice of

where to undertake their research. This could lead to detriment against this person if these principles were resiled upon.

2) **Lack of co-design:** The Flexi Desk policy was made without a collaborative approach with affected graduate researchers or their representatives. We have sought multiple times to voice our suggestions on how its negative consequences could be ameliorated, and further proposed alternative solutions. However, these seem to have been ignored.

3) **Poor methodology of pilot scheme review:** The review of this pilot scheme depends on scarce response data and conflation of staff and graduate researcher data. This data has questionable baseline comparisons, and other methodological issues. The positive aspects identified in this scheme (such as access to a coffee machine) mostly have no intrinsic connection to Flexi-Spaces, and would be compatible with dedicated desks. The review also presumes a one-size-fits all model. On the contrary, the Flexi-Spaces policy is not generalizable to all groups of researchers. Our repeated requests for the review's underlying data have been ignored on multiple occasions.

4) **Uncertainty and lack of communication:** The policy administrators haven't told us what exactly to do, where our team is going to be located, and so on. They haven't figured out how storage will be organised despite being asked. They have given people a deadline of November, but it is not clear what needs to be done henceforth.

SUBSTANTIVE ISSUES

1) **A need for dedicated, private and secure office space:** Regular access to dedicated, private and secure office spaces is integral for four reasons.

1. Firstly, [evidence](#) shows that graduate researchers are disproportionately vulnerable to housing insecurity, employment insecurity, and cost of living pressures. Many of us do not have access to a dedicated workspace in our place of residence. As such, it is essential to have a stable, dedicated workspace to go to, if we are to be given a fair and equitable chance to complete our research.
2. Secondly, long-term research requires deep concentration. The instability of trying to find a new desk periodically is wholly unsuited to this aspect, leading to a reduction in both the efficiency and quality of our work. It is essential to have stable access to a dedicated desk whenever we need it, including after hours, on weekends, and between other tasks and meetings.
3. Third, some of us work with confidential information. Protection of these materials is contingent on a secure and private workspace.
4. Finally, some students work with datasets / materials that require access to high speed internet and / or supercomputing power that is not available if they work from home.

2) **Secure and accessible storage for research materials:** Long-term research projects require us to constantly draw upon and add to extensive notes, reference documents, and collected research materials, some of which are confidential in nature. Hence making this a matter of ethics and privacy. Frequent transitions, lack of dedicated storage and/or a 'flexible' workspace thereby create serious risks of undermining privacy, breaching ethics, and losing

data.

3) Mental health: Poor mental health has been reported to be a [key contributor](#) to friction in academic progress. In some cases, it can even potentially lead to course discontinuation. Undertaking a PhD program is a necessarily precarious and destabilising process. It gives onto uncertain future prospects while requiring rigorous self-critique and personal transformation. Navigating this requires external stability, which is found in dedicated workspaces and a consistent academic community throughout one's candidature. A recent University of Melbourne [study](#) explicitly argues that the mental health of postgraduate research students can be improved via enhanced access to facilities and workspaces. Removing these and increasing the uncertainty of our work conditions is dangerous to our wellbeing, mental health, and productivity.

4) Community and sense of belonging: [Evidence](#) shows that community, trust, and co-operation in places of work are promoted by a combination of private offices and shared communal spaces, whereas [hotdesking tends to undermine a sense of social cohesion and connectedness](#). Low-stakes incidental encounters in the former settings help to build friendships, a cohort, support networks and a sense of academic community. A sense of community and belonging has been consistently [cited](#) (also [see](#) here) as an essential factor contributing to the wellbeing of graduate researchers and has been repeatedly emphasised by Heads of School at this university. It is also reflected in the [Australian University Mental Health Framework](#) and the [University of Melbourne's Tips for graduate researchers from Counselling and Psychological Services staff](#). [Studies](#) show that a strong sense of belonging positively contributes to students' commitment to completion. Our dedicated desks are essential in this respect. They have helped us to build a strong and supportive community which we value.

5) Equity and Inclusion: The shift to Flexi-Spaces negatively affects many students in FEIT. It disproportionately impacts vulnerable groups such as students with disabilities, [neurodivergent students](#), international students with fewer connections in Melbourne, and students experiencing poverty and housing insecurity. Booked desks and hotdesking in open-plan offices are especially unsuitable for these groups. Consequently, it contravenes the University's [Diversity and Inclusion Strategy](#). Exempting students on the basis of an Academic Adjustment Plan (AAP) is an inadequate solution to this problem for several reasons:

a. This approach places the burden on students to seek band-aid solutions to the harm, rather than taking reasonable steps to prevent harm and enhance equity. This is against best practice for equity and inclusion. One respondent to GSA's survey, for instance, noted that, "Melbourne Connect is looking at bringing in hotdesking. Even just knowing that they're bringing it in stresses me out - my throat closes up when I think about telling them about my academic adjustment plan (AAP) that exempts me from hotdesking." In light of the potential harms of this process, the student is "weighing up whether to advocate for myself or just give up and accept that I can't work from campus anymore." A number of related cases were filed in GSA's survey.

b. Many students face housing difficulties and rely on permanent workspaces in Melbourne Connect as the only secure, safe places to study and carry out research.

c. Many students have disabilities that are yet to be clinically diagnosed which affect their studies. These students will be negatively affected, and face little recourse. AAP's require a formal diagnosis, with the cost often making this prohibitive to students, not to mention the time it takes and the trauma that may be experienced. Recognising these barriers, groups such

as the neurodivergent community welcomes people who self diagnose. The University of Melbourne's wider policy environment is meant to be shifting to acknowledge this reality, and create inclusive environments for all.

d. There are substantial accessibility issues with the communication materials and the app. Some students are colour blind, and all the colour coding for both the apps and maps that have been provided are not suitable for colour-blind users.

e. Most international students hold a student visa, which, except where they meet the onerous requirements for study away, approved by their supervisory panel, requires them to be physically present in Australia. Moreover, since 2022, the university has emphasised a need to return to campus, and a vibrant on-campus experience as a key element of its strategy. As Professor Nicola Phillips highlighted in an all-staff email on 5 December 2022, "The role of campus in enriching students' experiences and enabling students' opportunity is critical, and, like you, I believe that we owe it to the next generation to afford to them the fullest experience of university life." With this in mind, the Flexi-Space plan creates the peril of driving graduate researchers away from working on-campus, and ultimately undermining the value proposition which makes onshore study worthwhile for international students.

f. It risks isolating students from their peers, and forces them to inadvertently share their private information.

6) Timely completion: Taken together, these issues will make timely completion, or completion at all, of our theses much less likely, posing a financial and reputational risk to the University.

7) Reputation risk: To attract top researcher talent while competing with globally ranked universities, University of Melbourne's FEIT depends on its reputation for providing strong research support. This move will undermine that reputation.

8) Health and safety risk: Most of the FEIT workstations provide many options for ergonomic customisation, allowing the user to adjust their setup for their individual needs. We are concerned that the time taken to ensure new workstations are ergonomically set up will become onerous resulting in an increase in avoidable workspace injuries. This is in addition to the mental health concerns raised above.

NEXT STEPS

With these concerns in mind, we request that you:

- a)** put an immediate halt to the implementation of Flexi-Spaces at Melbourne Connect and other FEIT buildings that house graduate researchers;
- b)** recommit to providing graduate researchers with dedicated desks, in accordance with the university's and GSA's Infrastructure principles;
- c)** meet with us as soon as possible to discuss this matter; and
- d)** initiate a separate review of the implementation of Flexi-Spaces. This review should not be conducted by the existing change team, and should include oversight from GSA or its representatives and affected students. Allowing for necessary steps to ensure confidentiality, GSA representatives and graduate researchers in FEIT should have full access to the resulting data.

We kindly request a written acknowledgment of this complaint. We would highly appreciate that you respond in the next 10 working days, and provide subsequent updates on the progress and outcome of this matter.

We would also be grateful if you could provide information on how to access an internal review if we are not satisfied with the initial decision on this.

We do appreciate the need to address existing issues with workspaces, and to make the most of their usage. We have a number of constructive suggestions to put forward.

Any solution, however, must be genuinely co-designed. This has not been the faculty's approach thus far.

Looking forward to discussing this with you further.

Kind regards,

The undersigned

[In the original letter sent to the Dean of FEIT, of which GSA has a copy, the full names of the signatories were listed below: 326 FEIT graduate researchers, 48 graduate researchers from other faculties, and 47 staff, running to 10 pages.]

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