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Summary – Graduate Researcher Workspaces Report 2025

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Preliminary notes

This document provides a brief provisional summary of the Graduate Student Association (GSA)'s full Graduate Researcher Workspaces Report, pending publication in early 2025.

The findings of the full report are 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 of full report). 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. 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 D to F of full report.
- Further research, as collated in the bibliography of the full report.

All names of graduate researchers in this extract 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 distinct names is important, nonetheless, both to emphasise that each of these represents an individual researcher, and to avoid any misconception that the feedback reported is coming from a small number of respondents.

Executive summary

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 of graduate researchers 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 for themselves and their peers by signing an open letter opposing Flexi-Space.

1. 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 research students 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 research students 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.

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.

2. Key Findings

GSA's survey found that, across the University, graduate researchers largely affirmed support for a number of existing policy settings: graduate researchers are best served by **24-hour access** to **sole-use dedicated desks** 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 believe that access to **bathrooms, shared kitchen facilities and collaborative/meeting rooms**, comprise essential facilities. Graduate researchers linked sole-use dedicated workspaces with an improved sense of belonging and reduced isolation.

Critically, according to graduate researchers, replacement of sole-use desks with hot-desks does not meet these basic requirements, and is therefore unsuitable for graduate research.

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 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.

i) 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 researchers from using their desks at all. Harlee from the Faculty of Education, for instance, said

> My desk is in the middle of nearly 20 other desks in an open plan office. [...] it is noisy, and it is almost impossible to study without wearing noise cancelling headphones. As I have hearing aids and glasses headphones [are] not comfortable. Therefore 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.

ii) 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 IT (FEIT), where researchers 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 of full report 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 a greater commitment for themselves and their peers by 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).

Researchers in the Faculty of 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.

iii) 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. 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.

iv) 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 MHDS 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 the Faculty of Science noted their office was “filled with junk from past students that has not been cleared out”. Arjun from the Faculty of 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 the Faculty of 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.

v) 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. Researchers 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.

vi) 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.

vii) 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.

viii) 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).[1] 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.

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

Researchers 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, Flexi-Space in Melbourne Connect violates the university's own Principles for

[1] 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)

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 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.

3. Summary of Essential Workspace Requirements[2]

Adequate and appropriate workspaces for all graduate students 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 students 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 graduate 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

[2] 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.

as part-time graduate research students, 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.
- 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 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.
- The University should be proactive in addressing graduate researchers' accessibility needs to ensure equity and inclusion.
- Graduate researchers should have access to a nearby kitchen, meeting rooms, and other shared collaborative spaces.
- 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 researcher workspaces must not be overcrowded. Where possible, they should be self-contained rather than open-plan.

4. Recommendations

The following recommendations were developed from GSA's survey, Townhall, and discussions with graduate researchers, with input from 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, UMSU, and the NTEU.
c. Immediately provide sole-use allocated desks to all FEIT 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 of full report) 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 establishment of a graduate researcher workspace reference group to develop the future principles for all future graduate researcher workspaces. This should include graduate researchers as equal partners remunerated for their time.

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