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Graduate Student
Association

The University of Melbourne Protest Rule Changes Report

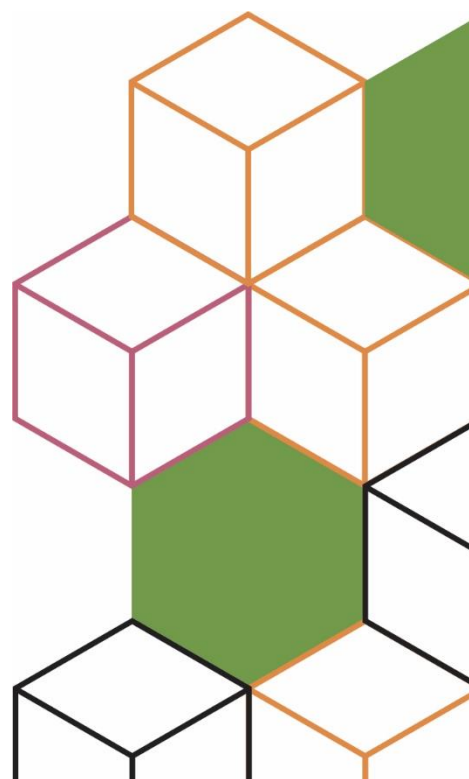


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About GSA

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

Acknowledgements

GSA would like to thank the graduate students who provided their feedback to GSA, through both the survey and the in-person consultation, as well as the elected representatives who have supported this process.

Executive Summary

GSA consulted the graduate student community at the University of Melbourne (UoM) to gather their feedback on the introduction of [new University rules](#) relating to protests on University premises. These new University rules were issued on the 3rd of March 2025, under the Vice-Chancellor Regulation. GSA also used this opportunity to gather graduate student feedback about the University's updated wireless terms of use. GSA collected graduate student feedback through an in-person consultation and a survey. This report is reflective of the responses of the 164 graduate students who completed the survey, as well as the views expressed during the discussions that occurred at the in-person consultation.

The graduate students GSA consulted with were overwhelmingly in disagreement with the University's new protest rule changes. When survey respondents were asked if they broadly agree or disagree with the University's protest rule changes:

- 78.7% of respondents stated that they disagreed with the new rules,
- 14.6% of respondents stated that they agreed with the new rules and,
- 6.7% of respondents stated that they were unsure or felt otherwise.

Overwhelming disagreement with the introduction of the protest rule changes was largely due to graduate student concerns regarding safety, student rights, including freedom of speech, the right to protest and the right to privacy, as well as the student experience more broadly.

Safety

While the University cited safety as a key reason to implement the new rules, survey data indicated that the protest rule changes were not perceived to have had that intended impact. Many respondents reported that they did not feel unsafe prior to the introduction of the new rules. Respondents also reported that they did not feel safer due to the new rules and concerningly, some respondents reported now feeling less safe due to

the introduction of the protest rule changes. 81.7% of respondents disagreed on some level that the new protest rules made them safer, with 59.8% of respondents strongly disagreeing.

Student Rights

Graduate students expressed that their disagreement with the protest rule changes was, in part, due to concerns about the impact of the new rules on student rights. These rights included the right to freedom of speech, the right to protest and the right to privacy. Many graduate students reported they felt that, as a result of the protest rule changes, freedom of speech on campus was now conditional and dependent on support from the University. Graduate students also often reported that the protest rule changes were an attack on their right to protest. The results of the survey indicated that the right to protest is a key value of the graduate student community. For example, when survey respondents were asked to rate their agreement with the statement 'the freedom to protest on campus is a core right for students enrolled at the University', 89.6% expressed some level of agreement. Graduate students also overwhelmingly expressed their concerns about the wireless terms of use update, with many viewing the update as a violation of their right to privacy. Graduate students frequently described the new wireless terms as University overreach and highlighted various concerns, including that the update was unnecessary surveillance that equated to a total violation of their privacy.

Student Experience

In their disagreement to the protest rule changes, some graduate students detailed that they believed the University demonstrated little regard or consideration for their perspectives and values. Many respondents noted that protests on campus are an essential component of student culture, political life, and the university experience. Many graduate students also expressed acceptance regarding occasional class disruption due to protest

activity, suggesting a broad recognition of protest and the disruption it may cause as an integral and valid form of student expression.

Graduate students largely recognise the need to balance the rights and safety of all members of the University community, however the significant disagreement of graduate students to the protest rule changes indicates that the new rules fail to achieve this balance. The University is an institution which is supportive of the exercise of lawful freedom of speech.¹ The protest rule changes are inconsistent with these values and challenge the University's responsibility to uphold the right to protest as a key manifestation of freedom of speech.²

Based on the input received from graduate students, this report makes recommendations for changes to improve the University's rules relating to protest on campus, namely that the University should rescind the protest rule changes in full.

Recommendations

While GSA acknowledges that the University's protest rule changes were intended to balance the rights of all members of the University community, the emerging concerns and disagreement from graduate students indicate that the new rules are failing to achieve this outcome. GSA therefore recommends that the University:

1. Rescind the newly implemented protest rule changes.
2. Rescind the newly updated wireless terms of use.

¹ "Freedom of Speech Policy (MPF1342)," the University of Melbourne Policy Library, published February 2025, <https://policy.unimelb.edu.au/MPF1342/>.

² "Freedom of Speech Policy (MPF1342)."

3. Conduct in-depth and transparent consultations and co-design practices when designing policies and directions that impact students
4. Promote and protect the rights of all students to freedom of speech, to protest and to privacy when designing and implementing University rules.
5. Meaningfully consider student protest demands and actively listen to the issues students raise through protest activity.

Introduction

On the 3rd of March 2025, the University of Melbourne (UoM) issued a new University Rule under the Vice-Chancellor Regulation relating to the ‘use of University premises and facilities: conditions regarding protests’.³

The direction outlined new rules relating to protests held on University premises. This included that protests may only be held outdoors and may not be held inside any building being used for University activities. The new direction also included that protest on University premises must not unreasonably undermine an individual’s participation in the University, must not prejudice the fulfillment of the University to foster safety and must not unreasonably disrupt University activities or operations. The new rules apply to any form of protest activity including demonstrations, rallies, sit-ins, occupations and individual acts of protest.

GSA supports graduate students’ right to peaceful protest and to freedom of speech.⁴ Following the introduction of the University’s new protest rule changes, multiple GSA elected representatives reported significant concerns about the new rules among their graduate student cohorts. To ensure that GSA’s position and recommendations on the protest rule changes adequately reflected the concerns of interested graduate students, GSA collected graduate student feedback through an in-person consultation and a survey. The purpose of these two initiatives was to consult on the changes with the graduate student community, to ultimately allow GSA’s response to the changes to be truly reflective of graduate student views and values. The content and recommendations presented in this report are based on this input.

³ “3 March 2025: Use of University premises and facilities: conditions regarding protests,” Vice-Chancellor Rules, published March 2025, <https://about.unimelb.edu.au/strategy/governance/regulatory-framework/legislative-framework/vice-chancellor-rules>.

⁴ “GSA Statement on student’s right to peacefully protest,” Statements, published 5 July 2024, <https://gsa.unimelb.edu.au/gsa-statement-on-students-right-to-peacefully-protest/>.

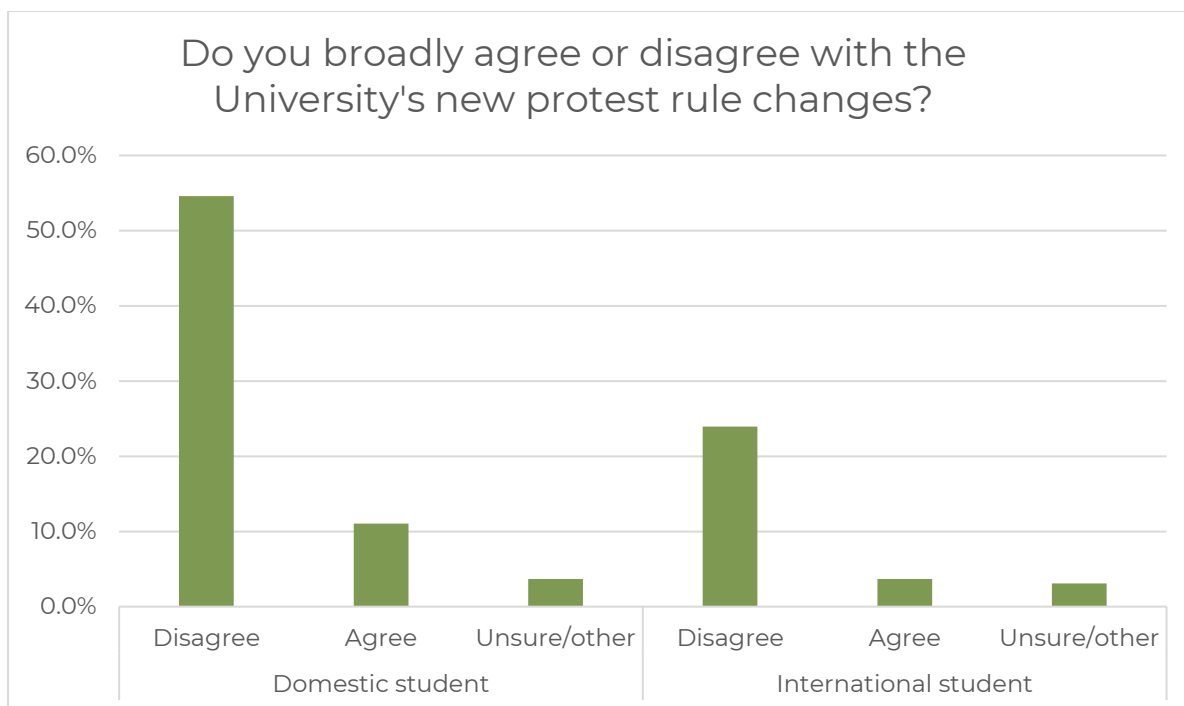
The survey received 164 responses from graduate students across all nine University faculties. Responses from graduate coursework and research students were almost evenly split, accounting for 51.8% and 48.2% of respondents, respectively. Domestic graduate students comprised a larger share of the survey respondents at 69.3%, while international graduate students accounted for 30.7% of respondents.⁵

The results of both the survey and the in-person consultation demonstrate that graduate students overwhelmingly disagree with the University's protest rule changes. For example, when survey respondents were asked if they broadly agree or disagree with the University's new protest rule changes:

- 78.7% of respondents stated that they disagreed with the new rules,
- 14.6% of respondents stated that they agreed with the new rules and,
- 6.7% of respondents stated that they were unsure or felt otherwise.

There were similar levels of disagreement with the new protest rules among graduate research and coursework students, with 83.5% and 74.1% of respective respondents disagreeing. Disagreement with the new protest rules was also consistent across both international and domestic graduate student survey respondents.

⁵ Note: This question was optional and received 163 responses.



Graph 1 'Do you broadly agree or disagree with the University's new protest rule changes?'

This report outlines the primary reasons for graduate students' disagreement to the new protest rule changes, including concerns relating to safety, student rights, including freedom of speech, the right to protest and the right to privacy, as well the student experience more broadly. Graduate students largely recognise the need to balance the rights and safety of all members of the University community, however the significant disagreement of graduate students to the protest rule changes indicates that the new rules fail to achieve this balance.

The University is an institution which is supportive of the exercise of lawful freedom of speech.⁶ The protest rule changes are inconsistent with these values and challenge the University's responsibility to uphold the right to protest as a key manifestation of freedom of speech.⁷ This report makes recommendations for change to improve the University's rules relating to

⁶ "Freedom of Speech Policy (MPF1342)."

⁷ "Freedom of Speech Policy (MPF1342)."

protest on campus, namely that the University should rescind the protest rule changes in full.

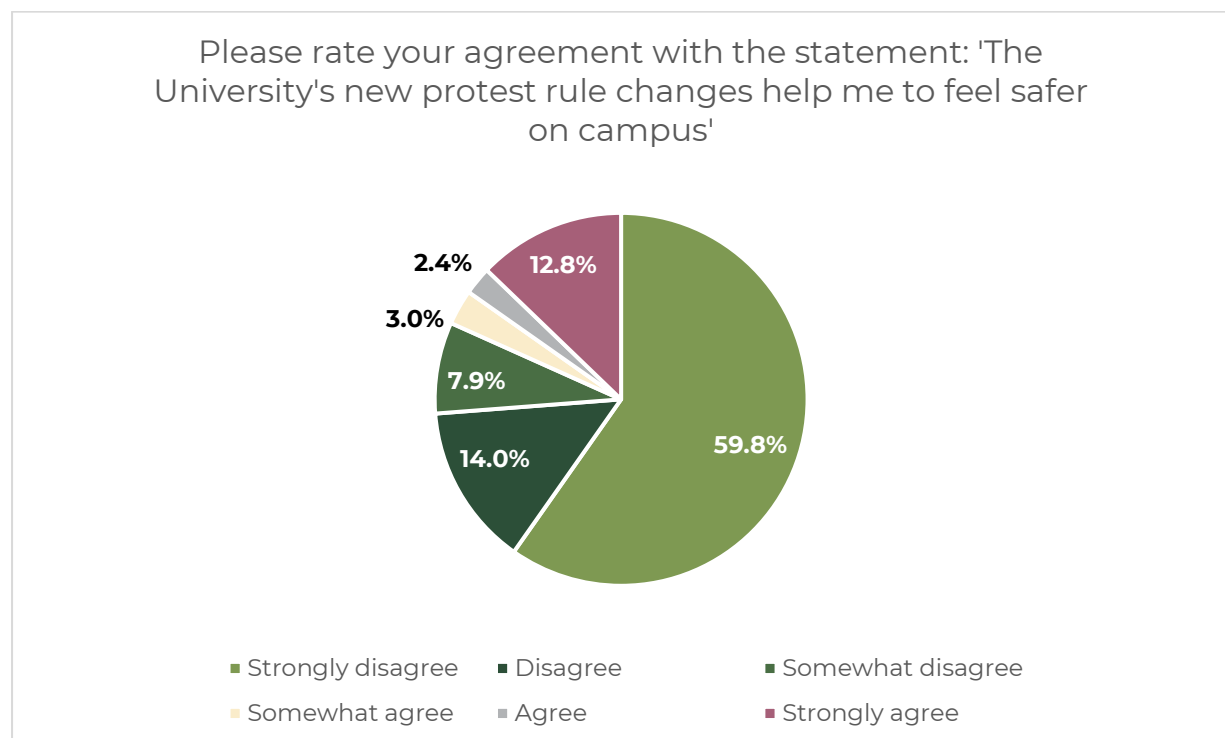
“Universities have always been a safe place to protest and develop our political identities and values. Peaceful protest is a legal right for citizens of Australia, and I resist the universities decision to violate that right. This rule change feels alienating and reeks of censorship.”

- A domestic graduate coursework student

Safety

Not feeling safer due to the protest rule changes

Graduate students frequently cited safety when explaining their disagreement to the University's new protest rule changes. While the University's new protest direction was said to be instituted partly to ensure the safety and security of individuals while they are on University premises, and to seek to prevent intimidatory or harassing behaviour, graduate students are largely not reporting that impact. For example, 59.8% of survey respondents strongly disagreed with the statement 'the University's new protest rule changes help me to feel safer on campus'. Many survey respondents who disagreed with the protest rule changes reported that they did not previously feel unsafe on University premises when indoor protest activity was occurring.



Graph 2 'Please rate your agreement with the statement: 'The University's new protest rule changes help me to feel safer on campus''

"I always feel safe with all the protests around campus."

- An international graduate coursework student

"I have never felt threatened or unsafe by the actions of protesters at the University of Melbourne...."

- A domestic graduate coursework student

"As a First Nations person, these new protest laws do not make me feel safer - they make me afraid to speak up."

- A domestic graduate coursework student

Feeling less safe because of the new protest rules

Concerningly, some graduate students reported that as a result of the new protest rule changes they now feel less safe on University premises than they felt prior to the introduction of the new rules. Graduate students who reported feeling less safe because of the protest rule changes identified that they believed they were no longer safe to engage in any peaceful protest activity on campus. These graduate students reported feeling silenced due to the protest rule changes and that they felt it was now unsafe to express opinions freely when on University premises. International graduate students who attend the University and originate from countries where protest activity is actively suppressed often expressed particular concern at the University's adoption of a similarly suppressive rule. Some graduate students also reported that they considered the University's claims of safety in initiating the new protest rules as a guise for seeking to repress all protest activity on campus.

"I do not feel these changes are in the interest of student safety or wellbeing. If anything, I feel they are likely to cause undue distress and exacerbate mental health challenges for students given their capacity for peaceful protest is now impeded."

- A domestic graduate research student

"...ever since the introductions of these rules, I feel like I need to be cautious at how I express my opinions on campus, when I had full confidence of being open about my opinions prior to the rule changes."

- A domestic graduate coursework student

"It feels as though the decision is not related to student safety (I did not once hear anyone complain about student protestors or feeling unsafe) but rather pandering to those who may be threatening to withdraw support or funding for the university or perhaps threaten legal action."

- A domestic graduate coursework student

"Shame on the university for disguising their suppression of fundamental rights with "concerns for safety"."

- A domestic graduate coursework student

Student Rights

Freedom of speech

Many graduate students who disagreed with the University's new protest rule changes identified that they were concerned about the implications of the changes for freedom of speech on campus. The University has previously supported freedom of speech, not only through pursuing academic freedom but also through supporting student protest as a manifestation of free speech.⁸

"The new protest rules restrict freedom of speech too much."

- A domestic graduate research student

"It blocks freedom of speech..."

- A domestic graduate coursework student

Many survey respondents reported that they felt that as a result of the protest rule changes, freedom of speech on campus was now conditional and dependent on support from the University. The vague wording of the new protest rule direction was often cited as contributing to this belief, as well as the threat of punitive punishments, with graduate students reporting that they felt the University could choose to restrict any protest activity that they found objectionable. Many graduate students also identified that they believed the new protest rules would result in making it harder to conduct protest activity against University decisions. Some graduate students also likened the University's new protest rules to recent efforts from the Trump administration to suppress free speech on US university campuses. Graduate students frequently reported that the protest rule changes were anti-democratic and authoritarian in nature, particularly given the current international context.

⁸ "Protest! Archives from the University of Melbourne," Archives and Special Collections, accessed May 2025, <https://library.unimelb.edu.au/asc/whats-on/exhibitions/protest!-archives-from-the-university-of-melbourne>.

"...If the university is genuinely concerned by the interests and wellbeing of students and staff, this should be expressed by welcoming student voices in all forms, not by introducing measures to make it more difficult to speak against the University... I feel ashamed and disheartened that the University has responded with a move towards more authoritarian practices."

- A domestic graduate research student

"The new protest rule goes against our right as students to free speech. As a student body, it already felt difficult to get across the opinions and thoughts to the University, especially if they went against university policy..."

- A domestic graduate research student

"This whole decision seems to be inspired by the actions taken by the Trump administration against some American Universities which aim at limiting freedom of speech"

- A domestic graduate research student

"They are so broad that they have the potential to target any form of protest, having a chilling effect on free speech on campus."

- A domestic graduate coursework student

The right to protest

Many survey respondents and consultation participants reported that the protest rule changes were an attack on their right to protest. The right to protest is a cornerstone of Australian democracy and the University itself has a rich history of student protest and student activism. Graduate students were often acutely aware of this history, as well as the important achievements and societal change this protest activity had contributed to. Survey results indicated that respondents strongly value this history and the importance of their current right to protest. Some respondents, for example, explained that even though they may not personally join a protest, they nevertheless believed that the right to protest must be unrestricted for those who wish to participate. Graduate students frequently perceived themselves and their student cohort as politically engaged and expressed

their disappointment with the University for discouraging their right to protest through the protest rule changes.

"The right to protest is an extremely important aspect of our democracy. Student protests have historically led to very important changes. They need to be fostered not limited."

- A domestic graduate coursework student

"The right to protest and expressing our values is a key component of Australian culture and this should be respected by the University."

- A domestic graduate research student

"Australian students have had a long and proud history of standing up against discrimination and oppression. These new rules would have made a number of significant historic student protests illegal - including student protests against the Vietnam War, in support of the 1967 referendum and against South African apartheid. They also open up future possibilities for further attacks on students' civil liberties. They should be opposed in their entirety."

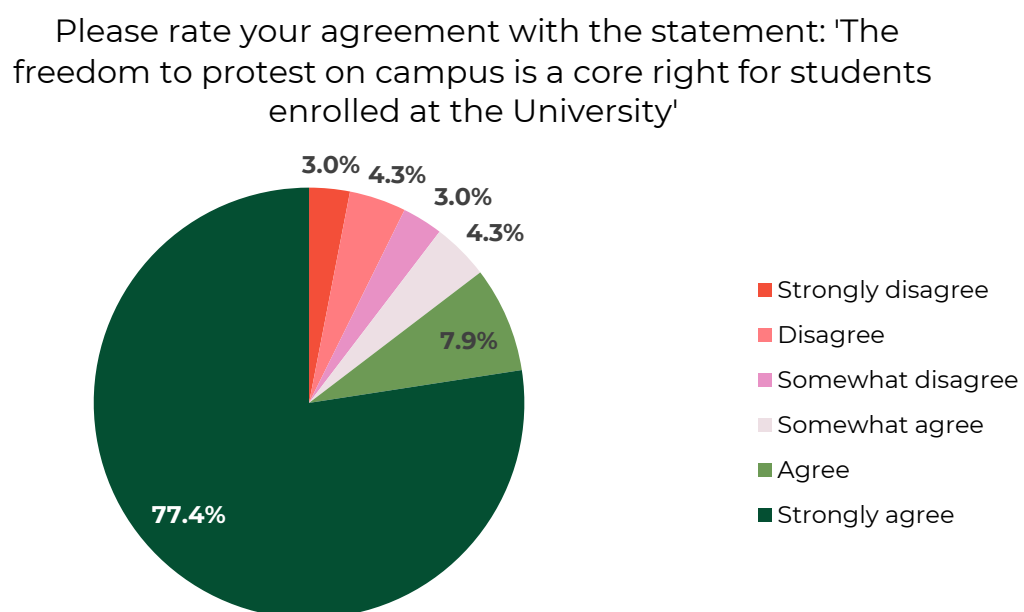
- A domestic graduate research student

"...Although I never join any protest here in the University, I support anyone who do it. I believe University should be a safe place for everyone to express their idea with mutual respect to others. So, I do not support the new protest rule."

- An international graduate coursework student

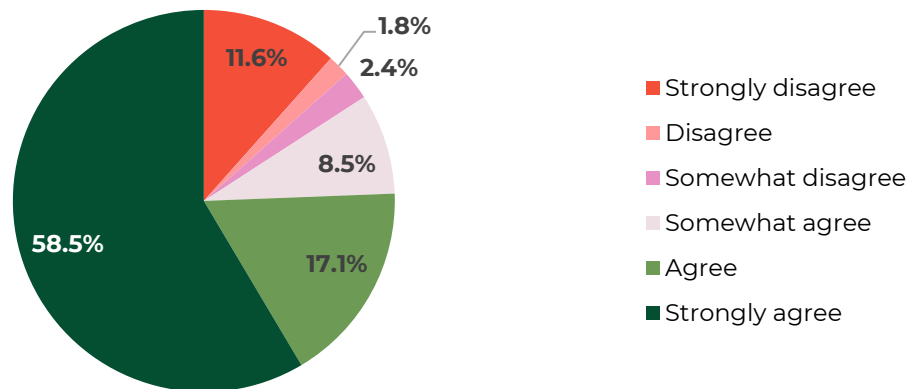
The results of the survey strongly indicate that many graduate students find that the University's protest rule changes diminish their right to protest. When survey respondents were asked to rate their agreement with the statement 'the freedom to protest on campus is a core right for students enrolled at the University', 89.6% expressed some level of agreement, with 77.4% of respondents strongly agreeing. The results of the survey also indicate that respondents support indoor protest being allowed on

University premises. For example, when survey respondents were asked to rate their agreement with the statement 'at the University of Melbourne, students should be allowed to protest indoors', 58.5% of respondents strongly agreed and 84.1% expressed some level of agreement. Those who disagreed with the statement predominantly raised concerns over class disturbances, however this opposition was minor compared to the overwhelming agreement respondents expressed towards indoor protests on University premises.



Graph 3 'Please rate your agreement with the statement: 'The freedom to protest on campus is a core right for students enrolled at the University''

Please rate your agreement with the statement: 'At the University of Melbourne, students should be allowed to protest indoors'



Graph 4 'Please rate your agreement with the statement: 'At the University of Melbourne, students should be allowed to protest indoors''

The right to privacy

GSA's survey and in-person consultation also collected feedback about the University's recent update of the terms of use for the University's wireless network system. The changes mean that the University may monitor the wireless network for several purposes including investigating use or misuse in connection with a breach of law or University policy, obtaining analytical data and investigating suspected unlawful or antisocial behaviour. Since Monday 7th of April 2025, all users connected to the University's wireless network have been required to consent to the University's terms of use.

Graduate students overwhelmingly expressed their concern about the wireless terms of use update, with many viewing the update as a violation of their right to privacy. Graduate students frequently described the new wireless terms as University overreach and explained various concerns, including that the update was unnecessary surveillance that equated to a total violation of their privacy. Many graduate students were also concerned about the University's potential misuse of their data. Graduate students

frequently lamented that there were limited options to opt out of consenting to the new wireless terms, due to the necessity of needing to access Wi-Fi when on University premises. Many graduate students felt particularly dismayed due to the lack of actual consent students were able to give to the changes, as well as a lack of explanation and a perceived inability to decline the terms of use. International students raised concerns that the monitoring of their data could have implications for their immigration status. Some graduate students also expressed concern regarding the legality of the University's terms of use update. Organisations including Amnesty International, Human Rights Legal Centre and others have raised serious ethical and legal concerns about the University's wireless terms of use changes.⁹

"...I didn't feel as though I could say no because I need the internet on campus..."

- A domestic graduate coursework student

"The new protest rule including its subsequent surveillance within University's internet access is so scary."

- An international graduate coursework student

"I am not even sure if this is legal, they basically use it as a surveillance system to track students."

- An international graduate coursework student

"I oppose the updated terms of use for the university WiFi. The uses to which my data can be used are over-broad and vague and give the University extraordinary amounts of power. It's a complete violation of our privacy rights!"

- An international graduate research student

⁹ "University of Melbourne urged to drop repressive anti-protest and surveillance policies," Amnesty International, published 16 April 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org.au/university-of-melbourne-urged-to-drop-repressive-anti-protest-and-surveillance-policies/>.

Student Experience

Perceived disregard for students

In their disagreement to the protest rule changes, graduate students detailed that they felt that the University demonstrated little regard or consideration for their perspectives and values. Graduate students expressed that the protest rule changes embodied this disregard, while also representing the University failing to prioritise and listen to their students. Some graduate students were disappointed that despite paying high fees to attend the University and providing significant input to the University through research and activities, the University had disregarded their perspectives and rights when choosing to implement the protest rule changes.

“Why does a university exist if not to serve the students”

- A domestic graduate research student

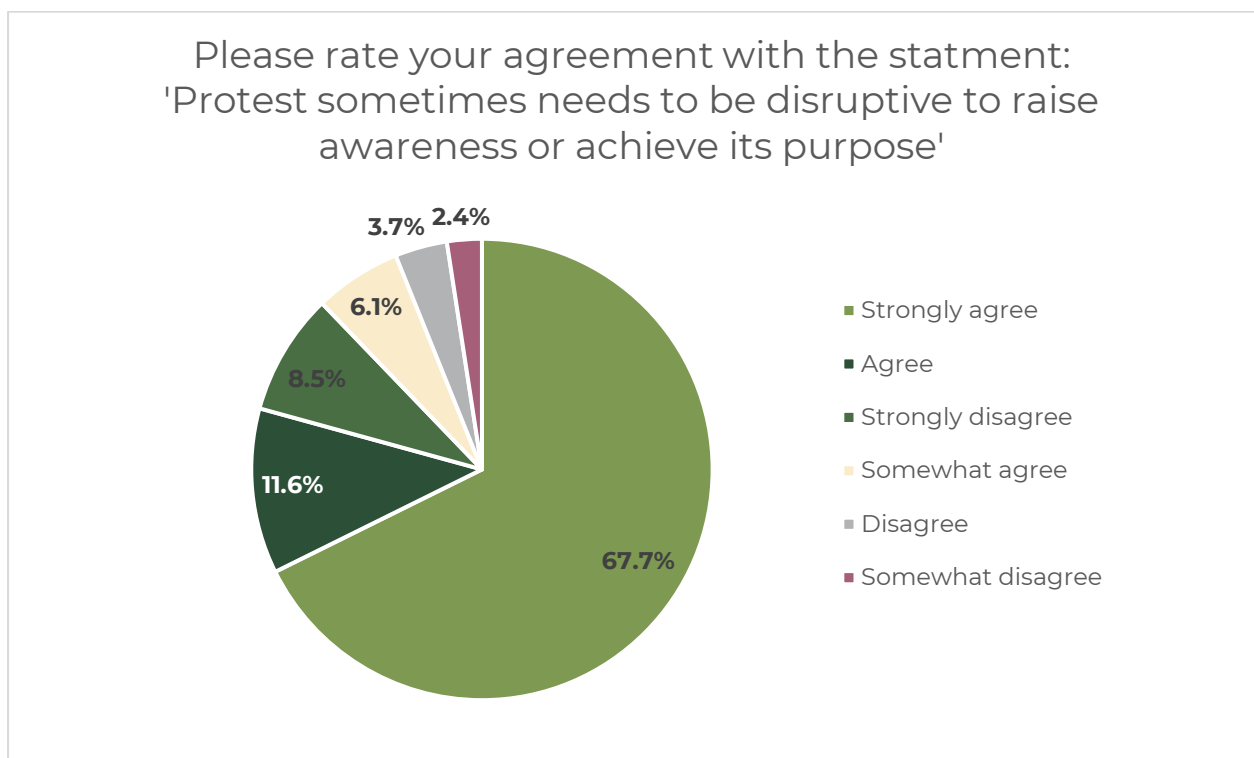
“...So University of Melbourne, just listen to US, your students!”

- An international graduate coursework student

Acceptance of occasional disruption due to protest activity

Graduate students often reported that they were largely willing to accept occasional disruption to their classes due to protest activity on University premises. Most graduate students explained that they considered protest itself to be an inherently disruptive exercise, as disruption was required in order to bring attention to the subject of the protest. When survey respondents were asked to rate their agreement with the statement ‘protest sometimes needs to be disruptive to raise awareness or achieve its purpose’, 85.4% of respondents reported some level of agreement. As the University’s protest rules prevent protest on University premises that ‘unreasonably disrupts’ University activities, many graduate students reported that in targeting the disruptive nature of protest the University was

in effect seeking to stifle all protest activity on campus.¹⁰ Many respondents noted that protests on campus are an essential component of student culture, political life, and the university experience. Many graduate students reported that they value their time at university for allowing intellectual exploration and political engagement, accepting protest activity as part of this experience. Consequently, they viewed the protest rule changes as somewhat antithetical to the purpose and experience of a university education.



Graph 5 'Please rate your agreement with the statement: 'Protest sometimes needs to be disruptive to raise awareness or achieve its purpose''

"Protests are made to be disruptive and as a place that claims to promote freedom of speech and critical thinking, the University should not prohibit it."

- An international graduate coursework student

¹⁰ "3 March 2025: Use of University premises and facilities: conditions regarding protests."

"...Protests are meant to disrupt, they are our only way of communicating with a University that is not listening to the students and staff."

- A domestic graduate coursework student

Recommendations:

While GSA acknowledges that the University's protest rule changes were intended to balance the rights of all members of the University community, the emerging concerns and disagreement from graduate students indicate that the new rules are failing to achieve this outcome. GSA therefore recommends that the University:

1. Rescind the newly implemented protest rule changes.
2. Rescind the newly updated wireless terms of use.
3. Conduct in-depth and transparent consultations and co-design practices when designing policies and directions that impact students
4. Promote and protect the rights of all students to freedom of speech, to protest and to privacy when designing and implementing University rules.
5. Meaningfully consider student protest demands and actively listen to the issues students raise through protest activity.