



Impact of Covid-19 on graduate student placements

**University of Melbourne Graduate
Student Association**

May 2020

Executive summary

The following themes emerged in students' responses to our survey on student placements:

- Lack of decision making from University on whether placements are proceeding, cancelled, postponed, or modified;
- Poor, insufficient, or non-existent communication on placement changes and contingency plans;
- Impact of placement cancellations on assignments;
- Inability to participate in online placements;
- Missing out on learning experiences due to cancelled or online placements; and
- Concerns about alternative arrangements not fitting in with students' lives, finances and family responsibilities

There will be no magic bullet to the disruptions on placements caused by Covid-19. However, there are some strategies and policies that the University can implement to balance the considerations of: timely graduations, providing high-quality learning and networking experiences for students, and minimizing uncertainty and stress experienced by students.

We put forward the following recommendations to the University:

1. For the University to provide clear, central information on changes to placements on their Coronavirus webpage.
2. For the University to develop different placement options which students can choose from, to mitigate the impact of modifications on the students' home life, career, and finances. These options should include:
 - a. Taking in-person placement when the opportunity becomes available – this may involve extending the course, taking a leave of absence, or switching to part-time study;
 - b. Completing placement online; and
 - c. Completing placement online and engaging in supplementary in-person experiences at a later date.

3. For the University to engage a service to provide free or subsidized Visa advice to international students who need to take leave or extend their course.
4. For the University to offer further support (e.g. technology bursaries, provision of office space) to students who are unable to participate in online placements.
5. For the University to prioritise students close to completion for placement opportunities (as earlier year students will have greater opportunity to catch up), in line with the Government's recommendation for clinical placements.

We also recommend that GSA assists in information provision by delivering a GradChat webinar with Master of Teaching course coordinators to address common questions on course progression, contingency planning, and available support.

Background

The current lockdown within Victoria has created difficulties for student placements. These challenges are primarily felt by two faculties at the University of Melbourne. The first is the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, primarily for students within the Master of Teaching Program. Secondly the faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Science is facing challenges that vary with different schools within the faculty.

Several graduate student representatives have reported to GSA that the University's communication on placements has been insufficient and that this is creating uncertainty for students. We have conducted this survey to ascertain how the current situation is impacting students' placements.

For students who need to do placement, there have been several outcomes that we are aware of: cancellation, postponement to an unknown later date, online placement, and online simulated placement experiences. There is also a small number of students who have been able to continue their placement in-person.

For other Australian universities for which information is available online, placements are still being run in-person where possible. Some universities are allowing students to opt out of in-person placements if they have health concerns; however, it is unclear how these students are to meet to their course requirements.

The Government has developed principles for clinical placements during the Covid-19 outbreak: safety, continuation, outcomes, collaboration and innovation, prioritising later year students, capacity building, identifying and monitoring risks to students, and maximising recognition of clinical experience¹.

It is expected that there will be a shortage of placement opportunities in the coming years as students completing their 2020 placements in 2021 will have flow-on effects.

About the survey

A survey entitled 'Impact of COVID-19 on graduate student placements' was available on the GSA website from 27 April 2020 to 8 May 2020. The questions were as follows:

1. Your course: [type answer]
2. Your year of study (equivalent full-time): [select from list: First year; second year; third year; fourth or more year]
3. Did you have a placement planned for this year: [select from list: yes, semester 1; yes, semester 2; yes, semesters 1 and 2; no]
4. What has your school or faculty communicated with you regarding cancelled or postponed placements? [type answer]
5. What is the impact of the current circumstances on your placement and your course progression? [type answer]

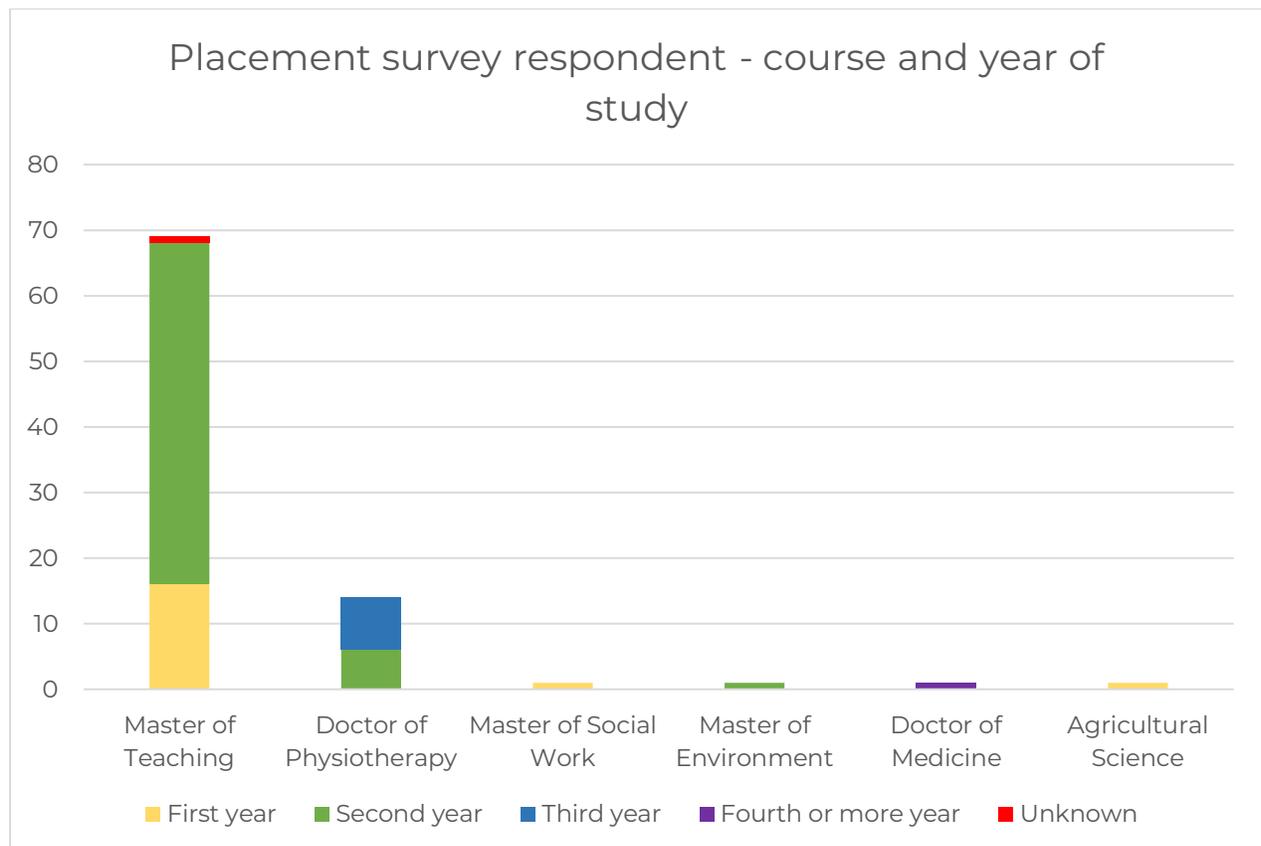
¹ Department of Education, Skills and Employment 2020, National principles for clinical education during the COVID-19 pandemic, accessed from < <https://www.dese.gov.au/covid-19/higher-education/national-principles-for-clinical-education>>

Students were asked to verify that they understand GSA can use the information to make representations to the university and were invited to provide their email address if they wished to be contacted by GSA.

The survey was advertised on GSA's social media channels and through the networks of our student representatives. This included a student representative sharing the survey link in a Facebook group for Master of Teaching students.

Survey respondents

We received 87 unique survey responses. Of these, 79% (n = 69) were from Master of Teaching students, and 16% (n = 14) were from Doctor of Physiotherapy students. We also had one response each from Master of Social Work, Master of Environment, Doctor of Medicine, and agricultural science (unknown title of course) students.



Themes

Insufficient decision making for Master of Teaching placement

Students from the Master of Teaching program reported that decisions made on placement arrangements were rapidly changing, leading to frustration and a lack of certainty.

One second-year student provided the following timeline of communication on placements in March and April:

“9th March (Placement subject communication) – Placements to go ahead as scheduled, beginning 1st May. Practical prep day to go ahead as planned. 17th March (MGSE) – placements paused

18th March (Placement coordinator and course Coordinator, communicated via subject updates) – Second year placements scheduled go ahead as planned. Practical prep day to go ahead as planned.

19th March (Mark Selkrig, Master of Teaching Sec course coordinator; MTeach (sec.) communication) – placements anticipated to go ahead as planned

24th March (MTeach (Sec.) communication) - placements anticipated to go ahead as planned

9th April (MTeach (Sec.) communication) – placements postponed until later in semester 1; 18th – 22nd May dates proposed. Placement prep. day still to be held Thursday, 30th April.

26th April. Victorian Government reduces number of required placement days for graduate Teacher Candidates from 60 to 45 days. Second Year MGSE students have currently completed 42 days total in previous placements.

27th April (Placement subject communication) - Prac Prep Day has been postponed. The timing of the new Prac Prep Day will be scheduled for later this term and will be announced in email updates later in the week.

29th April (MGSE (Sec). Placement communication; John Quay) – placements to go ahead as planned, including placement in an online context. Aim to ensure placements completed in Semester 1. Further information to be provided in the coming days.” (Second year MTeach)

Several other students commented that the confirmations followed by cancellations were foreseeable:

“They only cancelled our prep day 4 days before. We've all known schools aren't going back this term but they still keep banging their heads against the wall and say placement will happen. Pulling the plug early is better than late communication. They need some initiative.” (Second year MTeach)

“There's a lot of messages, conflicting things. ‘Placement is going ahead’, ‘placement prep day is postponed’. It is hard to know what is going on and I feel that they just need to make a decision whether it is happening or not instead of changing dates and formats etc.” (Second year MTeach)

“Very little. Frustratingly little. Postpone, new dates, postpone, new dates. I understand it is impossible to give an adequate and solid plan given the fluidity of Covid's impact, but perhaps transparency on the options being explored? A lot of the messaging has felt like ‘situation normal but delaying everything’” (Second year MTeach)

Poor communication to students

Poor communication from the University was noted by 39 respondents, and a total lack of communication was alleged by seven respondents. This is related to the above issue of a lack of decision making – if there is no plan, there is nothing to communicate to students. Students are then subject to an information vacuum, which contributes to their stress and anxiety.

Several first year Master of Teaching students noted that they were informed their placement was cancelled in a timely fashion. However, following that notification, communication on next steps has been limited or non-existent.

First year Master of Teaching students are required to complete their first semester placement before proceeding to second semester. Due to the lack of

communication following the placement cancellation, these students are entirely unaware of how their course progression may or may not be impacted:

“I assume we can still take second semester classes if we have not completed placement 1 but not sure.” (First year MTeach)

“We need to have completed 60 hours for this course in order to continue, but we’ve had no information around what will happen if placement can’t continue.” (First year MTeach)

Similarly, second year students are unclear on if their graduation date will be pushed back as a result of postponed placements:

“I cannot graduate from my course without my placement as it is the final component. There is a chance placement won’t go ahead but there has been no communication about contingency plans from uni.” Second year MTeach

Six students reported that they were undertaking the accelerated pathway for the Masters of Teaching program (18 months instead of two years). Of these, five were unsure of the impact on their course progression, with no communication from the faculty on this matter, and one had surmised that they would not be able to graduate on time.

The possibility of delayed graduation was mentioned by 25 survey respondents, many of whom were uncertain if this was a likely outcome in their case as communication had been so limited.

Several students commented that they needed some certainty on placement dates due to their own home or work circumstances, for example, needing to notify their workplace if they are going on leave to complete placements.

Impact on assignments

Fourteen students reported that the loss of placement would have an impact on their assessments.

For Master of Teaching students, this is because they were supposed to collect data while on placement to be used in an assignment. These students have been supplied with an example data set, though some students are disappointed that they will not be able to collect their own data. Some Master

of Teaching students also expressed worries about being assessed on their online placements, seeing as they have not been specially trained for online teaching.

One physiotherapy student expressed frustration that some of their peers had been able to complete placement and related assessments, while they were to complete and be assessed on online placement, which they felt put them at an unfair disadvantage.

Inability to participate in online placements

Some cohorts have had their placements moved online. While some students saw this as a welcome development, there are issues of access and equity. Seven students in our survey reported not having sufficient home resources to access online placements, due to lack of internet or space at home.

“I do not have access to a strong enough internet connection to engage with online learning. I have had to use a mobile hotspot to take zoom classes but this is not a feasible long-term option due to data limits. I am unsure how I will be able to participate in placement at all if it is delivered online.” (Second year MTeach).

“I would much rather have an opt-in option for an online placement in semester 1. Living regionally, I do not have access to NBN and my 4G modem is currently at its maximum capacity and cannot be upgraded further, yet my internet is already struggling for me to get through zoom tutorials. How am I supposed to run an online class when my internet already cannot support me attending a class without streaming video? There is also no place in my house to talk all day in a class without disturbing other family living/studying at home.” (Second year MTeach)

Caring responsibilities and online schooling also impede students' ability to participate in online placements:

“I have 2 daughters, age 6 & 7. I am their primary carer who is supervising their remote schooling since the beginning of lockdown. If I do online placements, it would clash with their online studies (as we have limited number of ICT devices in the household) and I would be unable to monitor to them.” (Second year MTeach)

“I have 2 young children and my husband is still working in the office so I am the one at home with them and my eldest is in prep so I am homeschooling her. I don't know how I could do a placement while schools are shutdown as I can't have grandparents mind them considering the risks and they are all in their 70s. I am not considered an essential worker so I can't send them to school as they have very strict rules on who gets to go to school to be minded, plus I would also have to find before and afterschool care places for them. I am very concerned about my ability to do placement.” (Second year Physio)

Not having access to a private or quiet study space is also a problem:

“If the current placement plan goes ahead I don't have the space for teaching remotely as my partner is also a teacher and using the only available space in our house to teach her own students.” (Second year MTeach)

These students did not indicate that any support or flexibility has been offered to them to continue their studies in the circumstances.

We are aware there is also an issue of students with clinical placements not having a private space to participate in telehealth placements, which creates a problem with confidentiality of patient information. However, this was not reported by any survey participants.

Missing out on learning experiences

Placement is a valuable opportunity for students to gain hands-on, practical experience in their field. In our survey, 21 students expressed concerns about missing out on learning or networking experiences as a result of online or cancelled placements.

Among physiotherapy students, several commented that the school is doing their best but there are inherent limitations in the quality and experiences they are being provided. Several commented that they were missing out on seeing patients as a result of their telehealth-based placements:

“The replacement simulations/telehealth have only provided minimal opportunity for clinical experience in comparison to real life placements. For example: 6 weeks (96 hrs) of placement this semester has been

replaced by a maximum 5hrs of actual patient interaction.” (Third year Physiotherapy)

“The simulation placement allows us to fulfill the requirements for this placement, which is great as we will likely graduate on schedule. However it has affected the professional experience we would have gained from a placement in this area. So far, technical difficulties and patient absences have prevented ANY actual patient contact. So I wouldn't consider this clinical experience, and would definitely be keen for the uni to organise supplementary clinical time at a later time if at all possible.” (Third year Physiotherapy)

“My main priority is ensuring that the course finishes within the same timeframe however I'm concerned that I'm not developing the hospital-based skills as well as the limited networking opportunities with potential clinical schools and supervisors.” (Third year Physiotherapy)

One first year Master of Teaching student felt that their cancelled placement may have impacts throughout the rest of their degree:

“Being given data sets to use is one thing but placement isn't just there for the collection of data. It's also supposed to show me what teaching is like. I can't adequately say I know anything about teaching practice, much less write about it, when I got two days worth of learning peoples names essentially. I have felt completely lost for the last month basically. I am very concerned at my ability to keep up at all through this degree starting off from this footing.” (First year MTeach)

Accommodating students' needs

Placement opportunities are largely being postponed or moved online. It is crucial that each subject or course with placement offers both options to students, who may have to choose one or the other depending on their personal circumstances.

For example, some students will need to postpone their placement to a later date, whether their placement runs in-person or online:

“At this current point in time, due to a family member's death and the impact of coronavirus, I am seriously considering whether I should not

undertake placement this semester (and apply for consideration to be moved to later in the year) - I'm not sure I have the resiliency for it. However, I am also concerned that many other people will attempt to apply for a placement next semester instead and I am hesitant to overload the placement team with that request. It's really uncertain about how this will impact my course progression, because we have received so little information from the university." (Second year MTeach)

"I have 2 daughters, age 6 & 7. I am their primary carer who is supervising their remote schooling since the beginning of lockdown. If I do online placements, it would clash with their online studies (as we have limited number of ICT devices in the household) and I would be unable to monitor to them." (Second year MTeach)

One student reported that they will be unable to delay their placement:

"I am pregnant and due in October, will not be able to have placement pushed back much further." (Second year MTeach)

One student also reported being stuck interstate, and therefore unable to participate in in-person placement should it be offered:

"Other students have no idea when placement will commence. No isolation rules have been lifted in Victoria so it is worrying seeing students sent back to placement so soon. I am stuck in QLD and won't be able to return to VIC until boarder restrictions are lifted." (Second year Physiotherapy)

The financial impact of a delayed graduation was mentioned by several students. Six students also commented that it is unfair that they are being charged full fees for their cancelled or online placement subjects. For example:

"We will have to extend our course and probably do placement during schedules breaks. As an international student, this has a huge impact on me as I will have to pay for housing, food, etc. for another (probably) 6 months as well as not be able to work during the normal uni breaks, which means less money to help supplement all of these fees and more student loans. This also means it's going to be even longer until graduation and earning full-time income. One of my placements was also cancelled midway and the quality of education was diminished after

the first week. This is really unfortunate because it was in the area I hope to specialize in down the track. I also chose to take the final examination and forfeit the opportunity to finish this placement because I can't afford to pay the fees for the course again or take the time to do another 5 weeks of placement. It's unfair that I'm put in the position where I have to choose between the quality of my education and saving time and money, because it's been made pretty clear that the university isn't going to offer any financial help." (Second year Physiotherapy)

Undoubtedly there are many other students who have personal circumstances which would prevent them from participating in some placement formats. It is suggested that several options be offered to students so that they are able to complete their course as well as benefit from the learning opportunities of placement experiences.

Non-compulsory placements

Some courses have the option or requirement for students to undertake industry-based learning experiences, but these experiences are not a compulsory accreditation requirement for students to enter their field.

For example, students in the Master of Music Therapy program complete clinical placements as music therapists. This is a course requirement imposed by the University rather than an external accrediting body. Similarly, second-year students in the Master of Film and Television program are expected to execute a major film production project.

Consultation with student representatives has indicated that students in the Faculty of Fine Arts and Music would largely prefer to undertake practical, industry-based experiences at a later date – even where this would extend their course completion dates. These students value the learning experiences and networking opportunities over a timely course completion.

Outside of this survey, we have also been contacted by two students (one from Agricultural Science, one from Environmental Science) who are required to complete an internship as a University-imposed course requirement. These students are required to secure their own internship, and have been having

difficulty doing so under the circumstances. It is suggested that these courses offer their students further support in finding internships, including by placing students who have been unable to find their own internship.

Recommendations

We put forward the following recommendations to the University:

1. For the University to provide clear, central information on changes to placements on their Coronavirus webpage.
2. For the University to develop different placement options which students can choose from, to mitigate the impact of modifications on the students' home life, career, and finances. These options should include:
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