

GSA Subject Cancellation Survey – Briefing note

Background

The University of Melbourne is renowned for producing well-rounded, high quality graduates who go on to become professionals in a wide variety of industries. The availability of a comprehensive range of subjects under the Melbourne Model of study is key to this prestigious reputation.

Amidst the Covid-19 crisis, the University has cancelled some subjects which were scheduled to run in Semester 2, 2020. GSA is concerned that this detracts from students' learning experiences and employability.

These subject cancellations were undertaken without student consultation and without satisfactory communication to students. For GSA and the University community, one of the learnings of Covid-19 has been to improve communication and engagement with the student cohort, particularly when unexpected changes are being made. A consultative and engagement model reduces mental health issues for students who are under considerable stress due to Stage 4 COVID restrictions. Students should have the opportunity to participate in consultation to assist the University to identify reasonable outcomes and promote a holistic student experience.

Method

In response to student feedback regarding subject cancellations in Semester 2, 2020, GSA conducted a rapid survey of graduate students to determine the extent and impact of these cancellations. Our survey ran from 27 July to 3 August 2020. The survey was distributed through GSA channels (newsletter, social media) as well as through student groups in different faculties.

The short survey asked students their faculty, course, expected graduation date, cancelled subjects, and the impact of cancellations.

Responses

- We received 57 responses.
- 35% of respondents indicated they are expected to graduate at the end of 2020, 31% mid 2021 and 26% at the end of 2021.
- 72% of respondents are from the Faculty of Arts, 12% from Architecture, Building and Planning, 7% from Law and the remainder from Science, Veterinary and Agricultural Sciences, Engineering and Business and Economics. A significant number of responses came from students in the Master of International Relations and the Master of Urban Planning.

Key findings

- Students reported the cancellation of many elective subjects and some core subjects (see results for full list).
- Many of these cancellations were last minute, leaving students with little time to find appropriate replacements or seek approval to take subjects outside their discipline. One student noted this impacted their work schedule which they had already arranged around their timetable.
- Students can understand when subjects which had travel/fieldwork components are no longer possible. However, they were disappointed when subjects were cancelled with no clear rationale:

“Some core classes cancelled I can understand because they are the overseas classes. But, I am just curious that why some elective class cancelled?”

- Some students were planning to undertake subjects to further specific career goals, and feel that this will disrupt their employability:
“As a result of these cancellations, I will now have to enroll in subjects that do not directly support my intended academic and professional pathways.”
- Near-completion students were particularly impacted by subject cancellation. Several students indicated that cancellations would push back their intended graduation date.
- Students suggested that cancellations have impacted their theses, research projects and specialisations.
- Other students noted the lack of quality and diversity in their courses due to ongoing subject cancellations.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Ideally, cancelled subjects should be reinstated where possible to support students’ learning outcomes and timely completions.

Recommendation 2: Students who are due to complete in 2020/21 should be supported to complete their degrees and graduate on time.

Recommendation 3: The faculties should provide a rationale for why subjects have been cancelled. This information should be distributed to students including through GSA.

Recommendation 4: University and Faculties should proactively provide suggestions on how students’ career objectives can be met through alternative mechanisms.

Recommendation 5: In future, any subject cancellations should be communicated well in advance to allow students time to adjust their study plans.