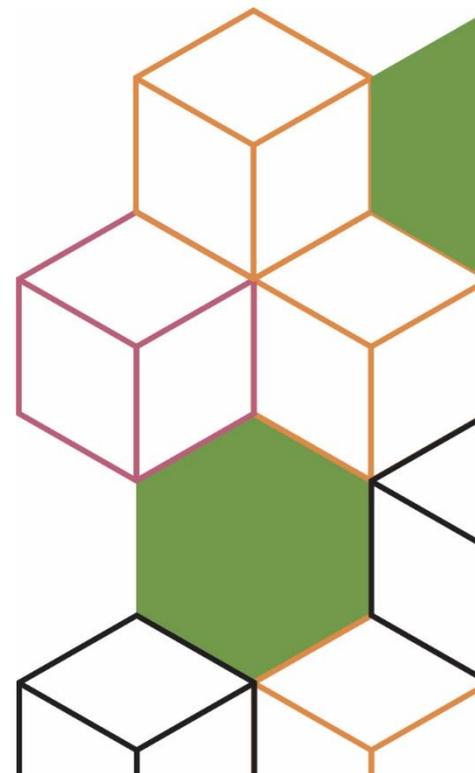


May
2021

Graduate Student
Association

**Submission to the
University of
Melbourne on
Academic Skills
Division change
proposal**



Background

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, 18 Representative Council members and 20 Faculty Council Members, who are all elected University of Melbourne graduate students. On behalf of over 29,000 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 147 affiliated graduate student groups.

GSA's vision is for inclusive, empowered graduate student communities that achieve meaningful and holistic university experiences. Our objectives are to support representation through our policy, advocacy and campaign activities, academic excellence, transition to work, support engaged and healthy community activities, and address organisational sustainability.

The University of Melbourne has proposed changes to the Academic Skills Division as part of its Pandemic Reset Program. Academic Skills assists students to attain academic continuity and supports their academic performance through workshops, one-to-one support, and other coaching and mentoring strategies. Academic Skills advisors can also provide coaching to enhance and develop English Language skills.

GSA sought feedback from graduate student representatives and GSA staff on the proposed changes to the Academic Skills Division. We circulated a briefing paper on the proposed changes to our network of graduate representatives and to GSA staff, requesting feedback about students' engagement with Academic Skills and their concerns about the proposal.

We note that the University's consultation is focused on staffing impacts and that there is a need for the University to consider how the changes will affect the support services available to students.

Based on the feedback received, on behalf of the graduate students, GSA suggests amending the change proposal to align staff advisor hours to meet students' demands. In GSA's view, the current plan to reduce advisors by 1.0 FTE will not meet students' requirements.

Analysis

Achieving academic excellence

The consultation paper states that the proposed reduction in staff hours is due to a decreased international student intake.¹ Despite fewer international students, there is currently a scarcity of one-on-one appointments. This presents difficulties for coursework students, who have a limited window of time during the 12-week semester in which they can seek help on assessments. One student noted that they faced an almost two-week wait for a one-on-one appointment.

¹ University of Melbourne 2021, 'Pandemic Reset Program Consultation Paper – Major Workforce Change University Overview: Phase 2', accessed from the University of Melbourne Staff Hub, p. 3.

Students and staff communicated concerns that reduced staffing at Academic Skills would exacerbate this unmet demand:

“This is quite worrying. Considering a lot of students have reduced contact with lecturers and teaching staff now, the role of Academic Skills staff is becoming increasingly important.”

“Much of the work that academic skills do is Academic Literacy, and this is not dependent on nationality. Many students coming to university need assistance with university expectations and how to write academically, and a lack of international enrolments will not change this.”

Feedback from international graduate researchers also emphasised the value of Academic Skills workshops. Facilitators need to do the same amount of preparation time regardless of the number of students registered for the workshops. Therefore, GSA does not believe that lower international enrolments would justify reducing staff hours for workshop delivery.

Students’ perceptions of limited academic support are reflected in the Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) Student Experience Survey, which found that the University of Melbourne declined by 24% in its learning resources in 2020.² Learning resources refer to academic materials, spaces and services offered to students. The QILT survey also found that the University experienced the largest decline in students’ rating of their overall education. To ensure students are supported to achieve academic excellence, the University should evaluate the need for Academic Skills appointment and raise staff hours accordingly.

Creating accessibility

GSA is concerned that a reduction in Academic Skills services will adversely affect students who require a higher level of support. A reduction to academic support would widen inequalities between different groups of students. In response to the proposed changes to Academic Skills, one coursework student expressed:

This makes me so angry. Students that don’t have access to university colleges already miss out on learning and support opportunities.

This student is referring to the tutorial programs and academic support provided to students living in Residential Colleges at the University³. Students outside of the college system can only access support through University resources such as Academic Skills. To ensure academic success is accessible for all students, the University should increase the capacity of support services.

Promoting academic integrity

GSA received feedback on the importance of Academic Skills in proactively teaching academic integrity. Students and staff have reported that students are referred to Academic Skills to learn how to reference sources and avoid plagiarism. One student, who is a panel member for misconduct hearings, reflected that Academic Skills is beneficial for students that struggle with academic writing and

² Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching March 2021, ‘2020 Student Experience Survey’, accessed from <https://www.qilt.edu.au/docs/default-source/ses/ses-2020/2020-ses-national-report.pdf?sfvrsn=a3ffed3c_2>.

³ Colleges University of Melbourne 2021, ‘Why choose college?’, accessed from <<https://www.colleges.unimelb.edu.au/why-choose-college/>>

integrity. Based on the feedback received, we are concerned about a loss of capacity to provide students with guidance on academic integrity.

Recommendations

Based on our consultation, we endorse the continued provision of support from Academic Skills in the following areas:

- *Academic integrity* – Students are sometimes required to undertake academic skills training to adhere to academic integrity standards that may differ across universities and degrees.
- *Enhanced writing skills and language development* – As students transition from their undergraduate to postgraduate degree, or honours to PhD program, there is a need for guidance and support from academic advisors to enhance these skills. Currently, students are referred to Academic Skills by tutors and lecturers for support and English language and academic writing skills.
- *Organisational skills and time management* – Students seek support from academic advisors for additional organisational and time management skills to handle their academic load and build motivation.

Our further recommendations are that the University should:

- Evaluate the demand for one-on-one Academic Skills appointments and increase staff hours accordingly.
- Seek and consider student perspectives and needs by proactively conducting consultations within the Pandemic Reset Program.