Covid-19 related student issues report
12 – 27 May 2020

Summary of newly reported issues

We have received few newly reported issues through our website in the last fortnight. However, feedback has indicated that students may not be aware that we are still seeking stories through this mechanism. We have made new social media posts to raise the profile of this option.

Emergency Support Fund wait times

We have received several comments through social media and meetings with students about the length of time for Emergency Support Fund applications to be approved. Students are not receiving timely application outcomes and are potentially experiencing serve financial distress – impacting their mental health and capacity to complete their studies.

Recently, a message has appeared on the University's Emergency Support Fund advising:

"There has been a high number of support grant applications which has resulted in a processing delay. We are working hard to process all applications as soon as we can, but you might receive your application outcome outside the previously advised timeframe."

Seeing as end of semester assessments are quickly arriving, we suggest that Category 1 – IT Upgrade and Study Support applications are processed expediently. We furthermore recommend that a new estimate be developed for when students will receive the outcome of their application. This information should be distributed to applicants by email and on the website.

Recommendation one: That *Category 1 – IT Upgrade and Study Support* applications to the Emergency Support Fund are processed urgently, and that an estimate of processing times is given to applicants.

Placement report

GSA recently distributed a report on the impact of Covid-19 on graduate student placements. The report utilised responses to a survey from 87 students, with most responses coming from students enrolled in the Master of Teaching program. Students expressed their frustration at a lack of clear decision making from the University regarding whether placements would go ahead, and if they did what adjustments would be made. This was compounded by poor communication about changes to placements. Students were concerned about the flow-on effect of placement changes including missing learning experiences, impact of placement cancellation on assignments, challenges in participating in online placements, and alternative options not fitting in with students' lives.

We have continued to receive some student submissions regarding internships.

GSA has recommended that the University develop a clear and central place to display information on their Coronavirus information website. Students should be provided with various alternatives options when traditional placement arrangements cannot go ahead including online alternatives, allowing students to take a leave of absence, or providing supplementary opportunities in the future. Students should also have access to further support in the form of office space, or a technology bursary to assist them if online placements are required. Due to some students potentially having to postpone their graduation date to obtain enough placement hours, the university should consider engaging a service to

provide free or subsidized visa advice to international students. Finally, when placements can resume students who are closer to their completion date should be prioritized as they will have less time to catch up hours then earlier year students.

Recommendation two: For the University to develop policy and support for students with cancelled or modified placements, including:

- **Providing clear, central information on changes to placements on their Coronavirus webpage;**
- **Developing 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 deferred placements, online placements, and online placements supplementary in-person experiences at a later date;**
- **Engaging a service to provide free or subsidized Visa advice to international students who need to take leave or extend their course;**
- **Offering further support (e.g. technology bursaries, provision of office space) to students who are unable to participate in online placements due to resourcing;**
- **Prioritising 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.**

Matters pending

Extensions for graduate researchers

Graduate researchers are awaiting advice from the University on the level of support which will be available to them due to Covid-19 related research disruptions. This wait is itself a source of anxiety for graduate researchers seeking certainty as to how much candidature time they will be able to access.

GSA is continuing to receive stories from students who are concerned about the lack of communication and empathy from the University regarding their situation. A significant portion of these are coming from students who are unsure if they are eligible for leave.

The timely provision of information is essential so graduate researchers have some certainty about their enrolment.

As communicated in previous digests, the outcomes of graduate researchers' Covid-19 leave applications have been an issue. We have suggested that information on how a Covid-19 leave application outcome can be reviewed, be added to the University's webpage on Coronavirus FAQs for graduate researchers.

GSA Council previously endorsed a petition from a group of graduate researchers requested universal extensions. To our knowledge, a reply has not been received from the University. We suggest it would be better communication practice for the University to acknowledge and reply to the petition's senders.

Recommendation three: That the University develops and communicates extension policies for graduate researchers.

Recommendation four: That the University includes guidance on how to request a review of a Covid-19 leave application, on the webpage containing Coronavirus FAQs for graduate researchers.

Emergency support fund applications

Students have raised concerns regarding the process for applying for the University's emergency support fund. Students have labeled the application process as invasive and are particularly concerned around the income reporting required in the application process.

We are currently investigating options for supporting students to complete the applications.

Semester one exams

End of semester assessment is a key area for GSA to focus their advocacy efforts due to alternative arrangements being put in place by the University. The University has published advice regarding seven different options for end of semester assessment which recommends against the use of proctoring software. Not all faculties are utilising the alternative recommendations. GSA is currently seeking to find out whether this is a choice by the faculty, or if it is required for accreditation in some courses from external bodies.

Some MDHS students, particularly in the Medical School, are worried about the use of proctoring software for their exams. Students are concerned about multiple dimensions of the use of this software including:

- Students will be allowed a bathroom break of 60 seconds and must tell the 'camera' that is where they are going. After the exam someone will review the incident of the student leaving the camera to determine if they took a suitable break. We do not know the consequences for students taking a bathroom break in excess of 60 seconds.
- Software requires them to be on camera for the entire exam, this footage is then held on a non-university server (it is unclear if this is in a foreign country).
- Anti-virus software may have to be disabled for the software to work placing the student's computer at risk.
- Students currently outside of Australia may not be able to access the service.

The University has advised against the use of remote proctoring services:

"In using these systems the University has found them to have a number of technical limitations. These services require relatively high bandwidth and they are intrusive to the operating systems of students' computers. Notably these services also cannot be delivered in China.

After testing these systems University remains concerned about their robustness in the area of academic integrity.

For these reasons, the University is not recommending or supporting remote proctoring or invigilation systems for examinations at this time."[1]

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[1] [1] University of Melbourne 2020, 'Assessment options for Semester 1, 2020', accessed from <https://le.unimelb.edu.au/advice-and-support-for-staff-moving-to-online-teaching-learning-and-assessment/assessment-options-for-semester-1-2020>

As the University is not supporting the use of this software, there is a policy and information provision gap.

Several students have expressed concern relating to access to suitable computers and internet connections for completing online assessments. Loan laptops are a possible solution to part of the problem; however, students will need to find a way to pick up the laptop. Access to a stable internet connection and a private, quite space to complete exams is a challenging ongoing issue.

A clear, accessible and central information source needs to be provided to students for information regarding end of semester exams. Ideally this would be linked to the Coronavirus information page.

Recommendation Five: A centrally managed 'End of Semester Assessment' webpage should be established to clearly articulate information to students.

Recommendation Six: Schools that are required to use proctoring software for accreditation reasons must clearly communicate the reasons to the students.

Recommendation Seven: An alternative assessment option should be provided to students who object to the use of proctoring software, or do not have adequate space or technology to complete the exam virtually.

Emerging issues

Exams in other faculties

GSA expects an increase in students seeking support after the exam timetable is released on the 25th May and more information about exam formats is distributed.

Transitioning back to campus

A small number of graduate research students have been invited back to campus to utilise study spaces. It is expected more graduate researchers who have specific requirements will be able to apply to return to campus in the coming weeks.

Misconduct

GSA has continued to organise trained graduate student representatives to attend student misconduct hearings when required. A total of six requests were fielded across April and another six in May. It is expected more requests will be received closer to the exam period. Generally, requests are sent on a hearing by hearing basis. Recently, the Faculty of Arts has decided to trial a system of scheduling all hearings in a series of blocks spread across the semester.