

October
2023

Graduate Student
Association

**Submission to the
Student Equity and
Disability Services
(SEDS) review**

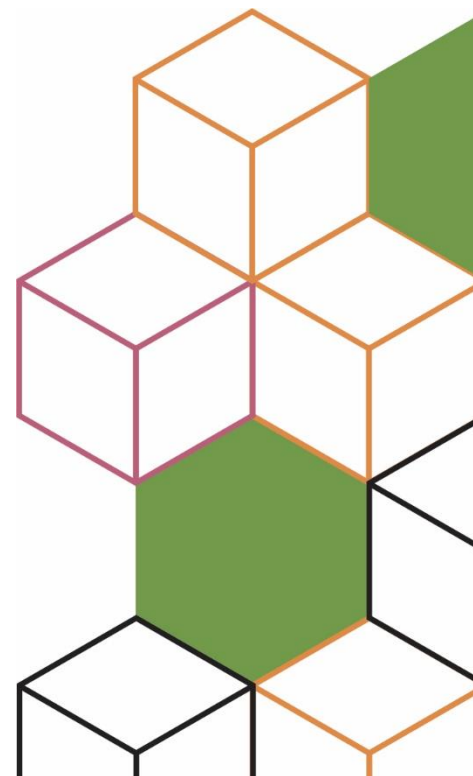


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About GSA

The University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association (GSA), in collaboration with GSA's Disability and Equity Officer, welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Student Equity and Disability Services (SEDS) review.

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 and 10 Representative Council members who are all elected University of Melbourne graduate students. On behalf of over 38,000 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 150 affiliated graduate student groups.

GSA's Disability and Equity Officer represents all graduate students with a disability, chronic illness, impairment, students who are carers and students with general equity concerns.

GSA's vision is for inclusive, empowered graduate student communities that achieve meaningful and holistic university experiences. Our objectives are to achieve and support representation, academic support, transition to work, engaged and healthy communities, and organisational sustainability.

Executive summary

In early 2023, GSA received reports from University of Melbourne graduate students detailing the challenges they faced whilst experiencing:

- disability
- chronic illness
- mental health conditions
- financial hardship
- cultural commitments
- caring responsibilities

Select testimonies have been reproduced in this submission for the purposes of this review, as they relate to SEDS' approach and processes. Also included in this submission is additional information collected after the original reports were presented.

Taken together, these testimonies show that UoM graduate students represented in these reports must navigate complex, overly-rigorous – and oftentimes – ineffective University systems in order to receive inadequate and highly conditional, non-guaranteed support. Current processes for accessing at most, bare-minimum, support measures are time-consuming, can be traumatic and dehumanising, place increased financial strain on students and, in some cases, are completely ineffective in practice. Further, when adjustments and requests for support are not adequately adhered to, this can place students in a worse position than if they had never sought support in the first place. While SEDS is supposed to be uniquely placed to enable equitable access to education, multiple institutional barriers that limit implementation exist that prevent it from doing so.

Students who are unwilling, unable or unaware of how to challenge inequitable decisions and processes risk falling through the cracks entirely. Indeed, some legitimate processes, such as students needing to manually request AEAs for individual pieces of assessment, introduce this possibility of students being left behind without accommodations. This occurs most often when students are placed in the position of being an intermediary between multiple University bodies, without which they cannot access support.

In order to better serve students, GSA recommends that SEDS and relevant University leadership:

1. Review the evidence threshold students are required to meet to access support, and how often this evidence needs to be reviewed.
2. Legitimise flexible learning options and remote exams for students through AAPs and AEAs as an additional available support.
3. Give more weight to AAPs and SEDS processes within Faculties and develop communication methods to ensure their implementation.
4. Expand training on equity principles and adjustments to change how students are viewed and treated within the SEDS process.
5. Include COVID/'long COVID' as valid grounds for formalised support.
6. Expand basic medical training so SEDS staff are better equipped to accurately review applications in line with policy.
7. Provide more resources and funding to change SEDS back to a case-worker/care model, as well as an advocate for the students it serves.
8. Develop a consultative "walk-through" process to ensure that AEAs are applied harmoniously and without conflict.
9. Audit how Faculties implement AEAs so that they are in-line with the expectations of SEDS, medical practitioners and legal obligations regarding access and inclusion.
10. Establish effective channels of recourse for students who feel that SEDS or their Faculties are not meeting their needs and/or AEAs.
11. Create and provide students with a comprehensive list of previously available supports, and how they might support learning, rather than placing that burden on students who may otherwise miss out on appropriate and adapted support.

Introduction

Earlier this year, GSA received numerous troubling reports detailing the challenges faced by University of Melbourne (UoM) graduate students when undertaking studies whilst experiencing:

- disability
- chronic illness
- mental health conditions
- financial hardship
- cultural commitments
- caring responsibilities

GSA compiled these testimonies into two reports, which were presented at the Elected Representatives meetings in April and May by GSA's Disability & Equity Officer. Both reports were well-received and recognised by Chancellery. Select testimonies have been reproduced in this submission for the purposes of this review, as they relate to SEDS' approach and processes. Also included in this submission is additional information collected after the original reports were presented.

Taken together, these testimonies show that UoM graduate students represented in these reports must navigate complex, overly-rigorous – and oftentimes, ineffective – University systems in order to receive inadequate and highly conditional, non-guaranteed support. Current processes for accessing, at most, bare-minimum, support measures are time-consuming, can place increased financial strain on students and, in some cases, are completely ineffective in practice. Students have also reported that it is actively traumatic to try and become educated at the University of Melbourne. Further, when adjustments and requests for support are not adequately adhered to, this can place students in a worse position than if they had never sought support in the first place. While SEDS is designed to enable equitable access to education, multiple institutional barriers that limit implementation exist that prevent it from doing so.

Students who are unwilling, unable or unaware of how to challenge inequitable decisions and processes risk falling through the cracks entirely. Indeed, some legitimate processes laid out in the testimonies below introduce this possibility of students being left behind without accommodations. This occurs most often when students are placed in the position of being an intermediary between multiple University bodies, without which they cannot access support.

The testimonies below show that the basis upon which disadvantage is recognised, and support is offered, must be expanded upon. This should include broadening current definitions and requirements around who is eligible for support, as shown in testimonies 20-23, 27-29 & 43. Furthermore, COVID and 'long COVID' should be recognised as legitimate grounds for support, as shown by testimony 25. SEDS should also develop a comprehensive library of supports to recommend to students, so that students are properly and appropriately informed of their options and what might best support them, as demonstrated in testimonies 3, 8, 12 and 29.

Also necessary is a reframing of what support measures should achieve for students. Ultimately, SEDS should legitimise and offer flexible learning and remote exams to students with compelling circumstances to enable students to be appropriately supported, as shown by testimonies 5-7, 11, 16-41 & 43. Necessary accommodations and support should be reframed as opportunities to enable learning, rather than being treated as threats to what a university education 'should' entail, as shown by testimony 1. Students who require these accessible accommodations should not have to bear the burden of other students' potential misconduct. Especially to the extent that concerns around others' academic integrity limits their ability to access necessary accommodations, as shown in testimony 29. In this way, SEDS needs to expand upon what supports students can access, as the current library of supports is already a reduction from what students need in practice. Without adequate expansion of support mechanisms, even if SEDS can meet all students' formalised needs, this will only be a portion of what certain students actually require to equitably engage in their education.

To sufficiently enable access to education for vulnerable groups, accommodations and support measures themselves will also need to be improved. SEDS should offer consistent support based on the impact an assessment task has on a student, rather than its delivery method (e.g. – an essay vs. a take-home exam), as shown by testimony 4. The types of support available should also be expanded to reflect the workforce students will be entering into after graduating, as shown by testimony 8. Broader reviews of the Special Consideration process – and the Assessment and Results Policy itself – is also necessary to ensure disadvantage is not enabled by University policy and procedures, as shown by testimony 13.

The outputs that SEDS produces – Academic Adjustment Plans (AAPs) and Alternate Exam Arrangements (AEAs) – should also be reviewed. While AEAs are useful, a new process to implement them should be developed, in consultation with students, as shown in testimonies 1, 2, 6, 7, 9 & 12. In their current form, the depth and complexity of AEAs can be poorly understood when passed on as a document listing isolated needs. Processes around documentation thresholds will also need to be reviewed to ensure that staff understand the documentation provided (and whether it needs to be replaced. This can limit the burden placed on students and to ensure AAP provisions are made by Faculties, as shown by testimonies, 2, 14 & 15. AAPs and AEAs should also be given greater legitimacy, particularly when they are being implemented by bodies other than the central teams, as shown by testimonies 2, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 15 and 45.

When students have concerns about their requirements not being met, have been refused support, or have experienced direct disadvantage, mechanisms to address these issues are limited. Formal grievance processes are another administrative burden that students have to bear. Independent bodies like GSA and UMSU are also not equipped to handle individual or immediate cases. Instead of leaving students to navigate the limited options they have (or accept inequitable outcomes), the University must meet its commitments to equity and inclusion and ensure that the student voice is heard through effective accountability measures. Current processes include informal registration of issues with bodies or people who direct or implement incorrect or harmful decisions made regarding AEAs/AAPs. This is not an effective, transparent or trustworthy method for accountability.

For students to be adequately informed and supported early in their studies, SEDS itself must be better resourced, as shown by testimonies 1, 8, 12, 29 & 33. SEDS' role should also be redefined to be an authoritative voice for students in need of adjustments and other support. SEDS should proactively support and advocate for students to receive their approved supports, especially in instances where Faculties and other University bodies fail to acknowledge these needs, as shown in testimonies 2, 3, 5-10, 12, 15, & 42. Importantly, this responsibility should not rest with students themselves. Nor should they be disadvantaged by inconsistencies in University processes.

Ideally, SEDS should be an active participant in enabling equitable access to education for students facing adversity and marginalisation. Taken as a whole, these testimonies show the need for a robust, holistic service that takes an authoritative role in supporting and

advocating for students. To achieve this, current processes, policies and the role of students must be redefined.

A note on the student testimonies

Some testimonies were received verbally and, as such, were not recorded verbatim. Several testimonies were edited for spelling/length/clarity and to remove identifying information (often at the student's request). Every effort has been made to represent all testimonies as faithfully and accurately as possible.

Graduate students' experiences with exam adjustments

The following testimonies have been extracted from GSA's "Concerns regarding mandatory in-person exams" report.

TESTIMONY 1

No steps have been put into specifically notifying or even mentioning students with disabilities, chronic illnesses or other impairments in any announcements regarding the return to in-person examinations. Further, by Week 5 the University still cannot provide students with answers about what alternate exam arrangements will be available, and which will not. As a result, students do not have Academic Adjustment Plans that adequately reflect their needs. Not to mention that the majority of students with disabilities, chronic illnesses and other impairments in particular will not be familiar with how their disabilities, chronic illnesses and other impairments will interact with in-person exams, and are being left to "figure it out" and risk not being able to perform at their best because they are not familiar with their needs. This is not withstanding that the University of Melbourne is known to incorrectly apply alternate exam arrangements to disastrous results. For example, in 2016 I sat two in-person exams. My AEA's were not overly complex, especially with common-sense applied. Yet in both semesters, staff at the University of Melbourne failed to deliver both an exam and an exam environment that met any of my needs appropriately. Both instances led to me contesting the outcomes of my exams with UMSU Advocacy. If needed, I am happy to supply a summary of the numerous ways the University of Melbourne failed to deliver on the supports it offered me.

It could not be clearer that students who require accommodations are no more than an after-thought, and a disposable part of the University of Melbourne community.

There is no indication that the University of Melbourne is either better prepared, or more willing to accommodate students, and is instead taking clear steps to make education at this institution inaccessible and hostile.

The University of Melbourne consistently seeks to make students dependent on a broken system of support, and makes it the responsibility of students to fix fundamental issues in how this institution operates. The University of Melbourne forces students into a position where they must spend more time, energy and resources to challenge an institution that is built against them, leaving students at an even greater disadvantage to their peers.

At its core, the University of Melbourne frames students who require accommodations as threats to academic integrity, with any potential threat, no matter how remote or inconsequential, prioritized over actual students with needs. This attitude infects absolutely every single decision-making process that seeks to address any approach to learning that differs from “the norm”.

TESTIMONY 2

On 24 Feb 2023 (week 0), I had a Zoom meeting with SEDS to update my AAP in accordance with my psychiatrist’s letter clearly detailing my required accommodations for in-person study/exams. In this appointment, the SEDS person said SEDS cannot independently update my AAP with accommodations affecting JD exams (i.e. the [accommodations] as detailed in my psychiatrist’s letter). They said they would have to talk to the Law faculty and get back to me on whether I could have those accommodations. I was surprised to learn that my requested accommodations as supported by my psychiatrist were potentially up for debate. I repeatedly said to the SEDS person that I would simply not be able to complete the exams if I do not have the accommodations in place. The request was not a matter of choice or a ‘nice to have’ request but a matter of necessity for me to even complete the exams.

On 1 March 2023 (week 1), I sent a follow up email to the same SEDS person to ask if they had spoken to the Law Faculty.

On 14 March (week 3), the SEDS person replied saying they put in the new accommodations [...] I called the SEDS person (likely on the same day) to inquire about how the accommodations would be exactly implemented because the words inserted in the AAP lacked practical details. This is in contrast to the pre-existing accommodations in my AAP which have specific detail on what I need to do, and what MLS or the Uni would need do to enact each accommodation. On this call, I asked questions such as [how the accommodations would operate in practicality]. The SEDS person could not provide answers to my questions. They said that the Law Faculty had not figured out all the exam logistics yet and SEDS would need to keep working with the Law Faculty to sort out the details. This made me feel anxious because it didn’t seem like the accommodations were fully thought through, even those the accommodations were vaguely written at a high level in the AAP. I was also aware of the AAP/AEAs deadline in April and did not want to be in a situation where I did not have the accommodations fully and specifically confirmed by then. At this point, I did not have confidence that everyone involved had thought through how the accommodations would actually work. I was and

am still most worried about a situation where someone, having thought things through at a time close to the exams, backflips last minute on the application of my accommodations, or applies them in a technically compliant but impractical way. For example, the Law Faculty might require me to use [technology that is inappropriate for my needs]...In this hypothetical case, the requested accommodations would be technically implemented but practically ineffective [...].

On 6 April (just before the Easter break), the SEDS person emailed saying 'Apologies this has taken so long but I can confirm that you will have access to [your accommodations]. You will need to bring [equipment]. The exams team will organise [additional tech support].' This email basically confirmed my anxiety that the earlier insertion of the accommodations in the AAP on 14 March was not well thought through. It was only on 6 April that SEDS was able to confirm that I can access [my accommodation through additional equipment] (i.e. someone had thought through how [my accommodation] would be practically implemented). I am not sure why the SEDS person said in this email that the Exams Team will organise [further tech support] because I had asked for [tech support of a different nature] (which is unlikely to [be sufficient]). Again, I am still missing a lot of practical details and am not confident that someone has thought through how the totality of my accommodations will be implemented.

I sent back an email on the same day (6 April) saying: 'Just confirming that my exams will look like this and this will be updated in my AAP:

[accommodations]

I still do not have certainty regarding what my exams will look like, which makes me feel nervous. It is important to me to know exactly how things will work months before the exams because my executive functioning problems mean that I need to [practice] way in advance how I will execute even simple tasks that others can just do on the spot (e.g. finding a new room, task switching from writing the exam response on one device and navigating notes on another unconnected device, doing concentrated work with another person in close proximity without being too distracted).

Update from student 13/04/2023: *The person from SEDS [made] a judgment about how they couldn't see how the requirement for a second monitor was relevant for my condition despite the requirement being explicitly stated in my psychiatrist's letter. The person from SEDS also could not provide the simple guarantee that I would be in a room with adequate lighting and in a room with ample*

space, even those these would be reasonable conditions under non-AEA conditions.

TESTIMONY 3

I would really have loved to have a list of possible adjustments so that I could get some ideas around what could help me in my studies. SEDS were like, 'what adjustments do you need?' Which put the onus on me to know what could make my life easier - I had no idea what would help or what was even possible... a list of possible adjustments would have made this much more equitable and less stressful. And the mental load/onus being on me made me feel really unheard/unsupported... like I should automatically know everything about how my disability would work in the uni system....And just because something isn't working, we don't always know what might help alleviate that difficulty ...

TESTIMONY 4

If the final assessment is an essay I can obtain an extension of 10 working days from my course co-ordinator and then go through the Special Consideration process to get additional weeks (or even months). This allows me to work at a pace that is kind to my chronic illness and allows me to take some recovery time if I have a significant flare-up.

If the final assessment is a take home exam (that is an essay) and we're given, for example, 7 days to complete it, we cannot obtain an extension. If you can't complete it in the time allocated, you can submit a special consideration application and will be given a supplementary exam/essay with different questions that will have to be completed in the exact same timeframe of 7 days, just during the special exam period.

If you have a chronic illness that is exacerbated by stress or the physical requirements of spending hours on a computer each day e.g. you get migraines or have muscle/joint pain - the 7 day timeframe is unachievable without destroying yourself physically and mentally. It doesn't matter when the 7 day period is.

If a student has an AAP this should also apply to take home exams and extensions should be available.

Why are take home exams used for final assessment when they're basically a stress-test essay? They're obviously exclusionary.

For a core subject I don't have any choice, but for elective subjects the types of assessment play a large part in my decision as to whether I take the subject or not.

TESTIMONY 5

I sit comfortably in that space provided under the definition section of the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth), (a), “total or partial loss of the person’s bodily ... functions”.

I refer to a piece of legislation to justify the way that my body does, or doesn’t work, because the law is what the Law School understands best.

...

The Law School set a high bar for accessing accommodations in 2023; those of us who need to access remote learning were, per the email, only permitted to do so if (i) we were an overseas student with fewer than 50 points remaining in their degree; or (ii) we were unable to attend campus because we were immunocompromised.

I am a domestic student; and I am not immunocompromised. However, I have several pre-existing conditions, meaning that, when I caught COVID-19 in April of 2022, it took me five months to fully recover. I had to drop a subject past the census date, and reduce my workload in semester two significantly. I had to cut my hours at work. I had to go in for exploratory surgery before trialing two new medications to quell the exacerbation in symptoms I experienced in the months following my bout of COVID.

In-person exams

I prepared a new HPR form with my specialist in late 2022. I was, and am terrified of in-person exams. After reading [an email advising of in-person exams], I didn’t know what else to do, other than to make sure that I had a HPR form that listed every possible symptom I experience on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis.

It took me two and a half months to get an appointment with the Equity and Disability support team. Once I did, however, they were helpful, and extremely compassionate. This doesn’t take away from the fact that I had to list my symptoms to a complete stranger; and note that during in-person exams, I would likely need easy and quick access to a toilet. This was a non-negotiable request for me, and corresponding symptoms were listed on my HPR form.

The worker from the Equity and Disability support team noted my need for bathroom access during the exam period. However, the Law School rejected my request for bathroom access. In an email, Law School administration, as corresponding with a worker from the Equity and Disability team, stipulated that the request could not be fulfilled; and that there were no exam venues near a bathroom.

This has left me feeling deeply embarrassed. I've had to tell a complete stranger that I'll need access to a bathroom; who has had to pass that information on to the faculty at my Law School; and that same faculty has denied my request. I'm terrified of taking exams in a room that I don't know; full of people who may see me get sick; that I will likely be unable to leave quickly; nor access a bathroom in a timely manner.

There are other requests that I haven't even bothered to make, because to do so would be humiliating, and would involve a process of justification that I don't have the energy to engage in.

My disability and corresponding chronic illness means that it is hard for me to sit upright for long periods of time. I often have a chair that I can recline in. This is not something that I feel comfortable talking to the Law School administration about; nor do I feel comfortable asking them for help after being denied access to a toilet during exams.

Update from student 5/11/2023: *I'm terrified of taking the in-person exams. I have no idea what accommodations to request. I have no idea what accommodations I can request...We can't take coffee into exams, but I deal with chronic exhaustion, and I know it doesn't sound like a big deal for other people, but it is for me. I have to have my medication on the desk while I take my exams, for everyone to see...I feel so exposed, not having easy access to a bathroom and having my medication out for everyone to see. I'm terrified I'm going to get sick in public, which probably means I will.*

TESTIMONY 6

I am a Juris Doctor student with ADHD, depression and anxiety as well as CPTSD resulting from family violence. I am registered for ongoing consideration through the university and recently sought to have online exams implemented in my Academic Adjustment Plan for this semester in order to reasonably accommodate my disabilities and circumstances. I was denied access to online exams by SEDS on the grounds that the law faculty was not permitting SEDS to adjust the method of delivery of exams this semester. In essence, it felt like regardless of how worthy SEDS might have deemed me to be to take

an online exam to accommodate my disabilities, it was simply something they were unable to consider at all per the law faculty's instructions and policy on online exams.

While I was offered some in-person exam accommodations, these are inadequate in addressing the difficulties I face with in-person exams on account of my disability and outlined circumstances. I asked SEDS if there were any circumstances at all under which we could arrange for online exams to be made available to me, and I expressed that I am more than happy to provide extra documentation, be on a Zoom call with an invigilator during the exam and download the plagiarism software that students use in-person, or any other software necessary. In addition, I provided further information concerning my circumstances of being a victim-survivor of family violence, and having CPTSD.

In summary, I expressed to SEDS that I am quite concerned that not having the support mechanisms that I have in place at my home will impair my ability to complete exams, especially (but not exclusively) for subjects that assess the nature of the violence that I have experienced first-hand. I expressed that having to sit such exams in-person will disproportionately affect me, as a victim-survivor of family violence with CPTSD, as it is likely to be triggering and significantly impair my ability to complete the exam. I expressed that this would be lessened if I was able to do the exam online. I further explained that this situation places me at a considerable disadvantage to my peers even though we should be on a level playing-field. Being able to complete remote/online exams enables me to have autonomy and access to the support mechanisms that I need to manage this condition. Being able to take a supplementary exam does not solve this problem, as it is just as likely I could be triggered then too.

I reiterated to SEDS that remote exams are not simply a preference or a comfort for me, they're basically the only option that I feel truly provides me equity of opportunity. I expressed that I find it difficult to understand why online exams are not being made available to students with significant disabilities and circumstances. In-person exams and the pressures they place on me don't allow me the same opportunity as other students to work to the best of my ability.

Despite outlining all of the above, I was denied access to online exams again, as it was reiterated by SEDS that as 'the [law] faculty has determined that in-person exams cannot be provided in an online format we cannot implement this as an Alternative Exam Arrangement. If you are seeking further support and advice

regarding this decision we would recommend speaking with the Student Union Advocacy team.'

The law faculty has demonstrated an ability to conduct exams online during COVID, so I strongly urge faculty to reconsider its position on online exams. This is particularly so for students who have special circumstances and disabilities that make it inequitable to be required to sit exams in-person. I urge the university to consider the inequity created by a generic policy that wholesale prohibits SEDS from being able to provide online exams to students as an accommodation, without considering the individual circumstances and needs of students with disabilities in order to determine if it is a reasonable adjustment for them to take an online exam.

Update from student 21/04/2023: The student has since advised that on the 21st of April, SEDS contacted them to advise that in order to access electronic notes and a monitor with their exam, they would be placed in a PC lab with up to 15 other students. The student reports that this will not suit their well-documented needs to be placed in their own space and has contacted SEDS again to request to be in a pod, as per original plans, or a 1-on-1 room. A 1-on-1 room has been made available by SEDS, however the student advised that they will have to complete the exam on a University device unfamiliar to them, and use their own device for electronic notes.

Update from student 24/4/2023: The student has since been advised by SEDS that Law Wellbeing will be taking over responsibility in implementing their AEA's. Law Wellbeing has confirmed that their exam will take place in the Law Building, but no further detail has been given on what type of room the student will be in, or if they are currently scheduled to take their exam with other students.

TESTIMONY 7

I am a fourth year JD student and my primary disability is Autism Spectrum Disorder level 2 with the secondary disability of ADHD.

I contacted SEDS on 20 March with a request to take my exams remotely, even with the return to in-person exams. I provided compelling medical documentation to support this application.

SEDS advised that they are unable to change the mode of delivery for exams, which is decided by Faculty. SEDS has offered add-ons to in-person exams. I am still discussing with them about what options can be added to make in-person exams more accessible, but I note that nothing can be offered to make in-person exams as accessible as online exams.

As I explained to SEDS, no circumstances will effectively or appropriately mitigate the difficulties I face with in-person exams on account of my disabilities. The ultimate effect is that there really aren't any adjusted circumstances that will fully equate to the support that a remote exam provides.

I expressed that I was more than happy to work with SEDS to find a solution by getting more medical documentation or by being supervised differently but this did not make a difference.

I further explained that basically every aspect of in-person exams negatively impacts me in a way that can't be fully mitigated by anything other than remote exams. Commuting is an overwhelming experience that leaves me with much less capacity to effectively engage in content (either in class or in an exam). This places me at a disadvantage to my peers if even getting to the exam room has already depleted my energy and capacity. It takes an incredible amount of mental energy and effort for me to participate in-person, due to navigating the overwhelming sensory environment, which is a hurdle that other students don't have to face. No sensory friendly space has been provided as an accommodation for me to attempt to self-regulate after commuting and decompress prior to the exam. The campus is inherently not a sensory-friendly environment. The fluorescent lights are incredibly harsh and poorly maintained so they are often flickering. The building is poorly insulated and has an inconsistent temperature, and road noise, including construction and sirens, is loud and distracting in parts of the building. Teaching spaces - and presumably exam spaces - have large open windows, which further reflect the harsh overhead lighting.

Further, even if I didn't face challenges commuting to university and even if the campus was appropriately sensory-friendly, even following remote exams I usually experience a melt down or a shut down because of the compressed cognitive processing (I do not have the ability to self-regulate in the same way that my non-autistic peers do), or because of the significant mental burden associated with masking that I have just experienced. Shut downs and melt downs are not controllable reactions for me. Needing to navigate getting home after an exam in these conditions is unpredictable and unsafe, whereas if I can complete remote exams, I have autonomy over my safety and security.

Remote exams are necessary to provide me with an equitable opportunity to meet my potential. However the University has not accepted these compelling circumstances as reasons to grant me

accessible exams. It's also notable that no reasoning has been provided to me, just that Faculty has refused.

This experience has negatively impacted me to a significant extent. I haven't been able to engage with my studies in the last few weeks because of the shutdown I have experienced due to the University's response. It has been a mental and emotional burden engaging with SEDS on the minutiae of in-person exams when I have everything I need if I could just be allowed to complete them remotely. It makes no sense to place so much burden on students when things could still go wrong with implementation, when we know what we need and can provide it ourselves. It is an ineffective use of the University's resources. The University is placing more risk and responsibility onto itself and its students, and I'm already feeling the effects.

Further, the implicit meaning behind the University's decision to disallow remote exams sends the message that the industry does not work for people like me. If I can't make this work, then I won't be accommodated or accepted in legal work. The reality is far from the truth. The environment created by the University for the purpose of in-person exams, and for classes generally is more disabling to me than any long term work relationships where I can have control over my sensory environment and develop a routine with supports that allow me to work to my full potential.

Update from the student 16/5/2023: *This student has since been advised by SEDS that Law Well-being will take over with coordinating their AEA's. It is notable that practical implementation of some were yet to be confirmed with SEDS before this hand-over. At least one other student has also been contacted with similar advice, despite SEDS not having updated their AAP to accommodate for new AEA's as requested. SEDS have been contacted regarding whether MLS now has increased discretion as to how exams are conducted, but no response has been provided. Both students were provided with the following email:*

"Dear [student name],

Thank you for your email.

MLS will coordinate your exams in house this semester.

Your exams will take place in the MLS building.

Please forward us a copy of your most recently approved AAP.

We will accommodate any AEAs listed as best we can and provide you with further information via email once finalised.

Kind Regards,”

This student has also advised that thus far, their AEA's have been implemented incorrectly, and that two of their exams are scheduled at times that are in conflict to their approved AEA's.

Update from student 24/5/2023: *This student has since been emailing back-and-forth with Law Wellbeing. As a result, Law Wellbeing have corrected the original scheduling error that was in conflict with the students' AAP. However despite multiple attempts to request necessary detail from Law Wellbeing regarding the environment and allowed adjustments for their exam, they are still without crucial information about how their exam will be conducted.*

The student has also advised that the experience of having to request detail multiple times regarding how their exams will run, and still not having had that detail provided, has also added significant stress and distress. The student has communicated that such responses from Law Well-being raise serious concerns that their accommodations aren't properly understood and potentially won't be met. This concern is only added to by the following text included in one of the emails:

...

"As hosting exams in MLS is not a common practice, and your case is a once off approval, we may not have all the required equipment to accommodate all your AEAs.

We will aim to accommodate your AEAs as much as possible."

...

TESTIMONY 8

I would like the university to have clearer communication about exams, especially with the return to in person exams. This transition was so sloppy and uncaring. I wish the university clearly communicated what was expected of students who needed to ALTER AEAs, not just apply for them for the first time. The university needs to communicate the available alternative exam spaces - can I get a private pod to take my exam in? Who knows! I would like the uni to record lectures and provide them to students more willingly. I promise people will come to class still. I would like the university to allow students to use electronic notes during exams because this isn't the 70s anymore. I don't care if the exams are in person with an invigilator, just let us have electronic notes. Everything is electronic these days. Everyone makes notes with tables of contents to easily

click through their exams and everyone needs to command + F when they get flustered and need to find something in their notes quickly. The fact that we have to pay to print out all our notes, buy binders, buy tabs, etc for one exam is such a waste of money and is extremely bad for the environment. The stress of having to slip through this huge binder of notes to find what I need is stressing me out more than my actual knowledge of the content in the exam. It shows that the uni is not actually committed to anything they say they care about, such as their students being poor, student wellbeing and disability, and the uni's environment impact. Finally, the electronic software for the exams needs to have autocorrect or spell check or the little red lines under incorrectly spelled words. I've heard this is not part of the online exam. As someone who is dyslexic, I rely so heavily on autocorrect and the red lines under my words to go back and fix them. I am so worried about how much time it is going to take me in my exam to go back and find all the spelling errors, or worried about getting marks off for spelling when I literally have a hard time spelling because I'm dyslexic. This is ableist software, and the change is easy and will not give anyone an added benefit.

TESTIMONY 9

I have access to digital notes and dictation software.

So I emailed SEDS about what dictation software will I be able to use since Respondus browser locks everything down.

SEDS [recommended to] talk to disability support. Disability Support said that I could use whatever I was already using, i.e Microsoft Word built in dictation or MacOS Voice Control.

[...] Since there is Respondus, I can't use MS Word. And for digital notes, my AEAs say that I need to access my notes with my own device and use the uni's device to complete my exam. And will MacOS Voice control even work with Respondus? Then I proposed using my own Macbook to complete the exam and the uni device to access my notes or to use my iPad to access my notes.

They then said it was Wellbeing's domain to sort that out because digital ones is a Laws specific AEA... BUT wellbeing said they don't do AEAs for end of semester exams. Asked me to fill in the form for exams team. Which was sent to SEDS.

[SEDS have advised that no software can be used with Respondus so have indicated that the student will not have to use it, but have advised that they also need to check with MLS Well-being.]

TESTIMONY 10

Students have reported that, in correspondence regarding AEAs, SEDS have advised that they are required to get pre-approval from faculties. However, in correspondence with faculty, Law students have been advised that examinations are not in their control, either.

The following excerpt from a faculty communication was provided:

“...Faculty is aware of student concerns on the lack of information about the upcoming in person examinations. However, End-of-semester examinations are run by the University Central Exam Team and Faculty has no control over this. Faculty has passed along student concerns. More information should be released by the exams team in the following weeks.

...Like us, Faculty has not been given much information on the details and logistics of the end-of-semester exams.

We have only been informed that exams will take place in the Royal Exhibition Building and/or Wilson Hall and that the buildings are being outfitted to facilitate in person typed exams. However, no information has been given to the exam location for students with AEAs.

We have only been informed that the exam will be a BYO device exam, but have not been advised on the specifications of the device needed or the software(s) to be used...”

However, students have reported that Melbourne Law School has refused certain requests or limited how adjustments are delivered.

TESTIMONY 11

A student reported that they now have to apply for special consideration due to the inability to autonomously manage their health concerns while undertaking an in-person exam. This was not something they previously had to consider with remote exams. As of 20/04/2023, they have not heard back from SEDS, despite applying for an AAP registration.

TESTIMONY 12

Several students have reported not knowing what in-person exam adjustments to ask for, and that the operation of their AEAs for faculty-managed exams, compared to centrally managed exams, is unclear or not guaranteed. These students are concerned that they will be left without necessary supports because they are unsure what is available to them, and what/how adjustments will apply. Administrative staff

and faculties have expressed that they lack information in order to provide meaningful recommendations about how exams will run.

TESTIMONY 13

A student's disability destabilised in 2022 and so they had to apply for a Special Exam. However, when they sat that exam, they had COVID. Due to the University's policy on Special Consideration, they were ineligible for another exam. Melbourne Law School refused to exercise discretion under the Assessment and Results Policy to award Reassessment, despite compelling arguments on DDA, Disability Standards of Education and basic equity, fairness, reasonableness and academic integrity grounds. This has had a significant impact on the student's graduate outcomes, as they have not been able to reap the same value from opportunities that other students have due to a delayed graduation date. This student has said that it feels like they're being punished for having an unstable disability and getting sick during a pandemic and note that the significant and unreasonable impact of this refusal to exercise discretion was never acknowledged by MLS.

TESTIMONY 14

A student reported that SEDS would not approve an application for a Special Exam using a letter dated a month prior, despite the letter itself concerning a medical procedure that had only just occurred. Although the contents of the letter were still relevant, SEDS placed an arbitrary value on the date of the letter and its recency with the application, although had the student submitted earlier there may have been concern from SEDS that the student had submitted *too* early to have enough impact by the time exams occurred.

Post-exams follow up

The above testimonies were received prior to the Semester 1, 2023 exam period. Since then, GSA's Disability & Equity Officer has followed up on the delivery of exams and support measures provided to students during the Semester 1, 2023 exam period. In doing so, GSA's Disability & Equity Officer has heard several accounts from students about key failures in how exams were delivered, including:

- Significant and disruptive issues with exam invigilation technology and, in some cases, incorrect invigilation
- Asymmetry of extensions applied in relation to technology issues
- Inadequate exam-taking facilities and support technologies provided

- Overlapping and disruptive exam timetabling
- A lack of notification of exam commencement
- Connectivity issues
- Mixed-medium completion (when exam invigilation technology failed, students were instructed to complete their exam with pen and paper, despite not being able to change anything that they had completed on their devices)
- Distracting announcements during reading time
- Inadequate seating time

Students with equity arrangements were found to experience significantly greater barriers to sitting their exams with the appropriate adjustments in place. Several key failures in exam delivery have been reported to GSA, including:

- Students being given the wrong paper and having to argue with invigilators
- Students being given the wrong reading time/rest break allocations
- Students initially being given no paper at all
- Students being allocated inadequate exam spaces, technology and software to support electronic notes
- Students not being allowed into the exam room until the exam was about to start
- Constant interruptions by invigilators
- Exam environments that undermined or breached AEAs
- The asymmetric application of rest breaks

When these problems occurred, the only solution that students were advised was available was to sit another exam. This is problematic as it leaves students to bear the burden of mistakes outside of their control. GSA affirms our belief that this responsibility should not be carried by students.

Graduate experiences with mandatory in-person learning

The following testimonies have been extracted from GSA's "Graduate student experiences of mandatory in-person learning" report.

TESTIMONY 15

I have been at this university for both my undergrad and postgrad degrees. During my time here I have seen how badly the University of Melbourne fails to support students with disabilities, chronic illnesses and other impairments.

This was no more obvious than in the open Zoom feedback sessions for the new Action Plan. Students shared deeply troubling stories of discrimination, ableism, exclusion and inaccessibility whilst at this university. Understandably, it was reported that Chancellery were shocked by these revelations.

However, the university has since chosen to only add to those experiences by removing dual-delivery and accessible learning options.

Support services such as the Disability Support team continue to be under-resourced and understaffed, so much so that despite the best-efforts of the team, myself and other students have gone weeks without accessible access to our class content. We literally don't have equal access to class materials. Not to mention that often, the rigors of these "support" services actually make things worse. They make us more disabled, more vulnerable and more marginalised. In trying to protect the uni from bad-faith actors, the uni hurts us and adds barriers that we have to jump over.

Faculties also restrict students' access to the full range of their Academic Adjustment Plans, despite valid registration and documentation. It shows that even though registration is confronting, expensive and intrusive, support is only theoretical. Medical advice and documentation that is supposed to be legitimised within the university's processes have little value.

It is also disappointing to see that the university doesn't have much interest in being at the cutting-edge of access and inclusion and working towards expanding what "reasonable" means.

TESTIMONY 16

I have an ongoing medical condition that was identified early in semester this year and meant I needed to register for ongoing support. My medical condition makes it difficult to always attend classes, both due to physical discomfort and doctor/hospital appointments. When I registered for class recordings, the ASO apparently didn't read the health report I provided as they only gave me access for one class on one day (when my doctor had indicated the issues were ongoing) - I had to follow them up and reapply to have access for other classes, which was very frustrating. It also took over a month to get an Academic Adjustment Plan in place.

Having more flexible options in relation to in-person or online classes would be very helpful as on days when my medical condition is causing particular discomfort, I would be able to still attend without

having to rely on recordings. Recordings are helpful, but they don't give you the full benefit of an online class as there's no opportunity to interact with the tutor or other students.

I'm also due to have surgery later this year which will require a minimum of 3 weeks recovery - an option for online classes would definitely be helpful then!

TESTIMONY 17

I'm doing my masters in science at the moment and every single contact hour I have is in-person, without an adequate online version. My lectures are recorded but often not high enough quality to follow without also having attended in person (e.g., because the blackboard is used).

I have social anxiety and find it very draining going to uni 3 days a week. I also have to spend 90 minutes commuting and for the past few weeks I have been getting nausea from the train journey. I have absolutely found myself missing dual delivery, because a lot of my classes are not really made better by being in-person. For example, I have an in-person computer lab, and I think these were just as good (or better) online. It's easy to work independently and then screen share when you need help.

I have been at the uni since 2018 so have experienced uni pre-pandemic, online only, dual delivery, and what we have now. I find it frustrating that the uni has taken a step backwards in terms of accessibility this semester. I don't think it benefits students to force us to go to in-person classes. I participated just as much with Zoom but I felt physically more comfortable.

TESTIMONY 18

[Mandatory in-person learning is] so inflexible and really incentivises people coming to uni when they are unwell, straining themselves and potentially making others ill at the same time. It's really not that hard to also provide recordings... I was rejected from recordings access because my med cert only had 3 days (what happens if someone is ill for 5 days but 2 are on the weekend - automatically the uni will say that's not good enough to warrant recordings!). I have had covid and I haven't even bothered trying to access recordings because I was only sick for part of last week and I doubt they would grant recordings. The recordings are there for a reason. Ridiculous they are making it so difficult for people.

TESTIMONY 19

I had a Zoom replacement class last week because my teacher had a cold. It was so good for me in terms of concentration and I actually participated way more than in-person. I think this is due to feeling like I'm 'closer' to the teacher and class (i.e., the teacher can see when I have the Zoom hand up more than in person and I can see all the other students and the teacher at the same time). The teacher even said this was the first time she could call us by name because Zoom shows everyone's name, where she has no idea in the in-person classes. I would personally choose remote classes for the rest of my degree if I could just because it personally works better for my accessibility needs. I am so physically exhausted from having to go to class 4 days a week. I think the law school should provide both options to cater for more diverse cohorts and to keep up with how the legal sector works in modern times.

TESTIMONY 20

Some of us have well-established careers and commitments pertaining to those. I'm still annoyed about the absolutely inefficiently used days of "mandatory" [JD] orientation that were demanded with one week's notice despite the faculty and speakers knowing about it for 2 months (really unfair and disrespectful for those with parenting and/or work commitments... how would you like your medical specialist cancelling your appointments because uni said they had to go do a scavenger hunt...).

I asked for access to lecture recordings for two days in Feb because I was compelled to give testimony for work and was told "as per the policy we don't care about your work commitments." So, your options are either delay justice / breach subpoena, or give up \$1000 of education (if you break down the cost per day of LMR...)

I could add that whilst later on medical leave I did get access to recordings - they are incomplete, can't hear student Q&A, you can't see the whiteboard and the videos allegedly added to the recorded stream to supplement weren't provided to those in other streams (only one stream is recorded, which makes logistical sense).

TESTIMONY 21

I'm currently a first year JD student. While I'm certainly no way near as bad in the position as others, I too am struggling as I am a part-time student because I also work part time as a teacher. This worked well during my Bachelor's as I was completely online. Whereas this shift into complete and mandatory on-campus learning and exams has taken a toll on me and my mental health as I do need to pay bills. I feel as though I am barely getting by because I had to drop down

my hours of work due to the JD even though I already have a part-time load.

TESTIMONY 22

I find that less time is wasted when I have the opportunity to learn remotely because I don't need to be spending time travelling back-and forth to school when I can just pop open my laptop from home or anywhere else if I need to (it's more accessible and accommodating)

TESTIMONY 23

I work part-time, earn an income essential to pay for bills, food, transportation. Mandatory in-person classes, forces me to take time off from work-which I cannot do long-term. I have negotiated with my employer several times to compensate working hours for a university lecture that is mandatory. They have repeatedly refused, as work is not considered an option but considered necessary to fulfil my contractual obligations. Since I cannot change my work hours, it's forced me to take unpaid leave. This Stops me from earning an income, as mandatory classes force me compromise uni over work.

TESTIMONY 24

I think the lack of flexibility is quite detrimental, particularly in regard to illness and the presence of Covid still in our community. I do not think requiring students to go and get a medical form in order to access recordings when they are simultaneously discouraged from attending campus is a practical expectation, given the costs and time commitment involved in doing so. I think it in turn encourages students to come to campus who are feeling ill.

...

The law school maintained that our standard of education was not reduced due to online learning (in refusing a fee reduction) and so, it seems counterintuitive to now argue that some of those practices cannot be retained in order to ensure equitable access for students.

TESTIMONY 25

I am a JD student at the Melbourne Law School. I tested positive for Covid-19 earlier this year and have been suffering from severe fatigue ever since as a result of long covid. There has been a particularly negative impact on my cardiac health because of my pre-existing anxiety. I am prone to bouts of extreme fatigue and fainting, especially in situations that make me anxious. This has happened

several times during the course of the semester and because it takes me at least 2 days to recuperate, I am not able to attend classes during those days. I have reported this to Law Wellbeing several times and requested access to class recordings for the missed days, and each time, my request has been denied because it is not a recognized medical condition.

Finding a doctor and getting an appointment to get a medical certificate for the long covid has been a challenging process because I am an international student.

TESTIMONY 26

1) I'm a mature aged student - who has a few medical problems which have impacted my studies a fair bit (so having flexible remote study was handy to ensure breaks/exercise/meals plus Dr's visits)

...

2) my father has Dementia and Parkinson's disease. I live with my parents as I'm a student, but also to assist and care for my dad. He was diagnosed Day 1, of Sem 1 in 2022... Alas, I'm doing part time study now, but must leave my mother at home with him alone each Thursday when I'm required to be on campus.

...

For now, I hope and pray nothing goes awry whilst I'm away at uni, although I am aware that my dad is in his final years.

... Austudy minimum commitments meant I couldn't reduce study load until now. Now, b/c of health issues caused by excessive study load, and thus inability to concentrate/function I must now still repeat 2 subjects and had no choice but to become part time. However, I prefer part time study in 2023 as I now can learn and enjoy the content, and thus law school..

...

i) some flexibility to study online/on campus would be helpful (without having to spend time researching/completing endless forms for a slight variation if I must miss a class). Time is rarely in surplus as a law student.

ii) sticking to class breaks at 1 hr. intervals to use amenities (especially during 3 hr. classes) as having to sit holding it in, and then needing to run to the bathroom when a break finally comes is excruciating.

iii) class recordings - I'm OK at typing (at home) on an ergonomic keyboard. At school on a wee laptop keyboard, errors are frequent,

but the lesson is going 100 mph. I just can't type fast enough to take notes and listen/contribute at the same time. I'm at least thankful that English is my first language. God knows how international students manage to listen, write, discuss material when discussion is super-fast paced (the answer is they don't; and thus, international students are being somewhat silenced).

Maybe it's me, but Zoom classes had teachers pace conversations much better. Moreover, everyone got to contribute as we were equal on a single screen of tiled videos. In class, teachers don't see the periphery of students or their body language, or raised hands, and thus the extroverts in the teachers' line of sight seem the ones most focused on and called on when hands are raised.

TESTIMONY 27

I have a part-time job in my field of study, and I work 8.30-5.00 on 3/5 weekdays. Because of this, it is extremely difficult attend on-campus classes, especially when there are not multiple timeslots to choose from. Flexible class times are rare in my faculty, as there are usually only one or two possible time slots, so sometimes I am not able to choose a class that falls on a non-working day. The flexibility of online classes allows me to attend class remotely on a working day, during a break. My job is important for my future career, so if class arrangements are in-person only, I may not have the option to attend as I must prioritise working. Not to mention the cost of living right now. It is extremely stressful having to choose to go to class, or to sacrifice work and income. This is especially compounded when the classes are not recorded.

I have spoken to many of my peers who also work, and they share the same sentiments. I feel as though this challenge is extremely common amongst post-graduate students, as many of us have moved out of home and must work to support ourselves, and therefore find it difficult to attend on-campus classes.

TESTIMONY 28

I have experienced many colds/covid during 2023 in addition to my ongoing health issues in relation to IBS/anxiety. Mandatory in-person learning, and the Melbourne Law School's recording policy is inflexible. I have previously requested recordings due to medical absences and provided medical certificates but where the medical certificates have not covered 5 business days or more, MLS has rejected providing me with recordings. This makes requesting recordings or other accommodations seem pointless. People have a variety of reasons why they may not be able to come to class and

such policies exclude people with disabilities, health issues and more. It is incentivising students not only to attend class and potentially spread colds/flu/covid but also to attend class at the expense of their health. It definitely makes many students feel as though the university does not care for their health and wellbeing. I have, for the first time in my many years at uni, felt forced to request ongoing support and an academic adjustment plan that might (at the very least) only recommend to, not guarantee that, the Law School provides me recordings when I cannot attend.

...

Mandatory in-person classes are regressive and does not reflect the many needs of students, be they health or financial. Such policies also privilege wealthier students who do not need to work and demonstrate how out of touch the university is. They should be consulting other universities and bodies to determine what is best for student wellbeing and learning. Some students also better absorb information being able to access recordings after attending class and enables revision. The university is not permitting or accounting for the fact that students have different learning styles.

TESTIMONY 29

I am a very anxious and easily overwhelmed / over stimulated person. The amount of people on campus has been very difficult for me to handle considering the transition was so abrupt. There are no longer any places to study on campus as everywhere is so crowded. There is no parking available nearby, as the spots are always taken. I needed to change my accommodations for in person testing, but the uni did not make it clear that the deadline to ALTER AEA's, not apply for new AEA's, was 14 April. Everything on the site said this deadline was for APPLYING for AEA's. There was no communication that this was the deadline for updating AEA's. This means that I missed the deadline by only 3 days, so now I can't get my AEA's updated for in person testing, which is a completely different experience to online testing. My only option is to defer my exams to the special exam period, but I do not want to delay my studies out that long. This just isn't good enough, and it is a breach of the uni's anti-discrimination requirements. Inflexible deadlines for disability are arbitrary when disability can be so unpredictable, especially when it is just updating something that already exists. Additionally, the fact that classes are no longer recorded is so ableist and classist. I have heard of people not getting access to class recordings due to work. Surprise! Some grad students are grown adults with rents and mortgages and kids and actually need to work to support themselves. The uni advertised this degree

as one that can be taken part-time to add flexibility. This is why we saw a much more diverse range of students start this degree during COVID because the accommodations during COVID made the degree more accessible. Now, these accommodations have been rolled back, and everyone is supposed to act like they never happened. Accommodations do not give people who need them an advantage. They do not make the degree less rigorous. They simply allow the person with caring responsibilities, work responsibilities, disabilities, etc be able to get on even ground with the other students who are fortunate enough to have much more time to sit with the content. Lastly, the fact that we cannot take exams the way we have been taking them since we started this degree is extremely unfair. I know the argument is that 'with online exams students were copying and pasting too much'. So why are all the students who didn't do that and did the right thing in these exams getting punished for the actions of those who cheated? You can punish the people who cheated, and that takes care of the problem. I should not have the benefit of online notes taken away from me just because someone else didn't want to study as hard as me. This is not my problem. I have always worked hard and performed fairly. I learned how to do well in online exams, and now I have to relearn everything I know.

TESTIMONY 30

I have a chronic illness called ulcerative colitis. I also take a TNF immune-suppressant medication weekly called Humira.

In person classes are difficult for me due to unpredictable and painful flares, concentration lapses, urgent bathroom visits and the constant risk of getting ill due to cramped classroom spaces, [taking] public transport to uni and the lack of masking requirements.

This has resulted in me missing significant class time and catching up with recordings which, while appreciated, are not made by my assigned Teacher, meaning the content of my recordings will be inconsistent with the content taught by my teacher who will be marking my exams.

TESTIMONY 31

I am a non-traditional student - a mother of a few children, including school age children. We live in the outer suburbs, so coming in is difficult, particularly when we need to come in on two separate days for just one subject. Living near Melbourne University would not only be totally impractical with a large family, but it would also be impossible financially, given I can't work as well as study and parent.

It takes me a four hour round trip to come in for a two-hour class - that runs TWICE a week for ONE subject. So, I spend eight hours (an entire workday) travelling for one subject's tuition. This to me seems to be a complete waste of time when I could be studying, especially when I am already so stretched with the significant demands on my time from parenting.

I also have medical conditions that make it not possible to work as well as study and parent. Thus, finances are very tight, and yet I need to pay approximately \$35 each time I come in for petrol and parking (public transport is not an option because I would never make it back in time for school, or I would need to pay extra for childcare anyway).

On-site learning also impacts me with on-site exams requiring printed notes - the cost of printing is prohibitive.

The law school has said we can apply for book fairy, but we are not eligible because of my husband's income. We are only a middle-income family, but we have had a lot of extra expenses for medical care, so an extra \$70 a week, plus printing costs, is definitely impacting us negatively with the rising cost of food and children to feed.

TESTIMONY 32

1.

My chronic health issues sometimes make it difficult for me to attend class. This year, the university have given me access to the class recordings to help me stay up to date with the lecture content.

My lack of faith in the university's recorded lecture process meant that I was not able to prioritise my health and welfare. I still went to class even though I had had surgery three days earlier. I went to class wearing a mask even though I had a horrible cold.

Chief examiners are human too. It is natural for mistakes to be made or for uploading schedules to be impacted by external issues, including when their class are being lectures by other academic staff members. I strongly believe the university should support their workforce and provide more technical support and financial incentive to their staff to ensure they are able to maintain the quality of the education they purport to be able to provide.

Last year, when my illness prevented me from attending class, I would be able to join the class using Zoom or be able to join a separate class tailored for virtual attendance. These options allowed

me to stay engaged in the subject and I strongly believe that integrating flexibility would greatly benefit the university.

2.

Almost all the university's lectures are during working hours. This means that working students and students with families are unable to attend classes without disrupting their work or family schedules. Students should feel valued and having an evening option for all the core subjects would be a reasonable adjustment to allow more people to have access to post-graduate education.

I have heard of multiple first year postgraduate students who have chosen to transfer to other universities due to the increased accessibility those institutes are able to provide. Reducing the diversity of the post-graduate community also does a disservice to current students. As it reduces their exposure to people with diverse backgrounds and different circumstances.

3.

The academic staff at the University of Melbourne are extremely talented and knowledgeable. In turn, the university should provide technical and financial support to allow them to provide education in a flexible model that promotes engagement and positive outcomes.

TESTIMONY 33

I completed the Bachelor of Commerce from university of Melbourne in 2020-2022 and the flexible learning opportunities were very beneficial for me given my circumstances. Moving to the JD which has been a dream of mine since high school I was hoping the flexibility in learning would remain the same.

My family lost my grandfather to covid in 2020. With my grandmother being alone in India, we had to migrate her over here last year as she was not able to manage all by herself. Both my parents work full time jobs just to keep the family and household afloat in these times where the cost of living is so high. Given my parents work commitments, I am the sole carer for my grandmother during daytime until my parents get home at night.

As you can imagine, someone as old as my grandmother, moving to a new country at such an age is a really hard adjustment. She often suffers from anxiety and gets really worried when she is left home alone for long periods of time as she does not even have the ability to be able to call me or my parents in case she is in an emergency.

For the past year, while Unimelb offered online learning as well as, recorded lectures I was able to commit to my studies better as I could do it from home while providing my grandmother with company and comfort. Having to commute to campus which is an hour and a half travel away from me means that I have to leave my grandmother at home by herself and this worries me. Even if there was an emergency, I would not be able to travel home quickly.

I requested the University of Melbourne to understand my situation and provide me with recordings of lectures, but they only provided me with a generic response about the benefits of on campus learning.

I am young and in my 20's, of course I want to be on campus more and make friends and enjoy the benefits of face-to-face learning. However, life is never this simple, and I will have to always put my family first.

It's week 4 now and I have missed out on so many classes because I haven't been able to leave my grandmother home alone. I just wish that I could get equal learning opportunities for the price I am paying for the degree.

Update from the student: This student was directed by GSA on how to register as a carer with the University, but still had not heard back about their application by Week 12.

TESTIMONY 34

Mandatory in-person classes are not accommodating when students face unforeseen circumstances like sickness or professional/medical commitments. It should be standard that lectures are recorded and are accessible for students in such cases and are good for revision purposes. The fact a student needs to request for permission to access recording to only one professor is time-consuming and discouraging.

I've personally gone to class while ill because I was so anxious about missing class information provided by the professor, who would ultimately be the one marking my examinations.

Additionally, some professors speak extremely quietly, making it difficult to hear in class. Students miss out on important information as a result but have no means to revisit such material in a tutorial class.

Aside from attending school while ill (subsequently putting others at risk...) because I fear I'd miss out on important lecture material

otherwise, the law school is extremely crowded and loud. As someone who has anxiety and panic disorder, the fact that I must come to campus everyday and face this environment is stressful and overwhelming. It makes me unproductive as I am distracted with overestimation.

I had two instances this semester where my professors had to hold zoom sessions because they were sick/exposed to COVID. Those were the BEST lectures/tutorials I've had this semester. The class was actively participating and engaged. I have partial hearing issues but finally. I could hear the professor clearly and did not struggle to decipher words. It was a very productive class, a stark contrast to the many in person sessions of that class during the semester.

TESTIMONY 35

Over the course of my studies, I have developed a serious injury that has required multiple surgeries and left me with permanent mobility issues. I also live in a regional area, and the combination of these factors often make it extremely difficult for me to travel to campus, and also walk around the campus once I get there. Additionally, I have chronic health condition which puts me at increased risk if I contract COVID-19. Prior to the 2020 lockdowns, I had made multiple requests for research group meetings and post-grad training courses to be conducted in a hybrid setting. Occasionally, staff would agree to this, but there was never any follow through as it was said to be too hard. Since 2020, this has become more of the norm, though there seems to be a lot of pushback from staff who prefer in-person learning. This creates a lot of stress for me as a student to continually try to advocate for myself and feel like I have to prove my disability to staff who show little or no understanding of issues faced by disabled people.

TESTIMONY 36

I enjoy being able to attend on-campus lectures and I enjoy the unique face-to-face opportunities that it provides. However I do not have the capacity to regularly attend campus multiple times per week because of my disability (autism spectrum disorder level 2 and ADHD). This is at least in large part because the campus is not an accommodating place. The fluorescent lights are incredibly harsh and are poorly maintained so are often flickering. The teaching spaces use large open windows which reflect the harsh overhead lights. There are insufficient sensory friendly study rooms and chill-out pods available and the general study spaces are not ergonomic. A university of this caliber should be using properly ergonomic study

chairs and have monitor docking stations available at all study locations.

In the absence of making the campus more accessible and in the absence of flexible engagement options, I miss up to 75% of my classes.

I end up teaching myself the course content and while my grades do not appear to be negatively impacted, I miss much of the educational, social and networking engagement available to my peers. I would like to be an active and vibrant member of the MLS community, however the campus environment profoundly disables me and the administrative support structures around flexible learning act to exclude me.

TESTIMONY 37

I am a carer on Centrelink Carers Payment. Centrelink has special requirements for those on this payment. One of which is that I can only work, volunteer or pursue education (in-person) up to a maximum of 25 hours a week including travel.

It takes me one and a half hours just to get to campus. I have been fortunate to have my classes scheduled on only two days of the week. However, this means that I use six hours (out of 25) on travel alone. If I had been scheduled as many of my peers who attend four days a week, I would be using 12 hours for travel. This would not allow me to pursue an education and be a carer as I would go over the time allowance in seminar time, breaks and travel.

During my undergrad at another University, I was able to do some study from home and care at the same time (this was not counted by Centrelink). It opened up opportunities for me to also volunteer because I was under 25 hours a week.

I am safe from having to give up caring for now only because I fought to be on campus only two days a week. This might not be possible in future semesters.

It is hard to consider the possibility that I may be forced to decide between being a carer and furthering my education in my dream degree. Mandatory in person learning does not make it easy for students to also be carers. This strays from the University of Melbourne initiatives.

Allowing for multiple delivery modes addresses would, in my opinion, allow equal access to opportunities and increase inclusivity.

Update from student: *I believe that in-person learning is beneficial. However, sometimes when unable to attend campus I would prefer the option to join a zoom class. Accessing recorded content does not allow for opportunities to converse and expand on content, nor clarify information. In particular a zoom classroom creates a more organic learning environment than that of recorded content.*

TESTIMONY 38

I sit comfortably in that space provided under the definition section of the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth), (a), “total or partial loss of the person’s bodily ... functions”.

I refer to a piece of legislation to justify the way that my body does, or doesn’t work, because the law is what the Law School understands best.

...

The Law School set a high bar for accessing accommodations in 2023; those of us who need to access remote learning were, per the email, only permitted to do so if (i) we were an overseas student with fewer than 50 points remaining in their degree; or (ii) we were unable to attend campus because we were immunocompromised.

I am a domestic student; and I am not immunocompromised. However, I have several pre-existing conditions, meaning that, when I caught COVID-19 in April of 2022, it took me five months to fully recover. I had to drop a subject past the census date and reduce my workload in semester two significantly. I had to cut my hours at work. I had to go in for exploratory surgery before trialling two new medications to quell the exacerbation in symptoms I experienced in the months following my bout of COVID.

...

In-person learning

This week, both of my tutors for an elective subject contracted COVID. For them, it meant that the subject had to be moved online. When it was their turn to speak, one student prefaced their answer with a note to the effect of, “I hate online learning, I’ll try to stay engaged”. But for me, it meant that this week, even though my chronic illness was flaring, I could attend class. I stayed for the whole class, and I learnt everything I needed to know. I was engaged, and it was wonderful.

I did not have the luxury of choosing in-person learning over online learning when the dual-delivery mode was introduced. This is because in-person learning can be exhausting for me. Some days I'm well; and some days I'm not. I cannot understand why the option for dual delivery has been removed. The option for dual delivery meant that:

- people who were sick and contagious, e.g., had covid, could stay home and continue to learn, meaning that there was less pressure to come into the Law School while sick. Because there is pressure to continue to learn while sick, and to deny that there isn't is ludacris; &*
- people, like myself, who are disabled and/or chronically ill can always have access to learning, even when not mobile.*

I have attended one out of seven classes for one of my electives this semester. I want to attend all of my classes. My not being able to attend classes makes me feel as though I need to justify to the Law School administration why I am here; why I stay here; and that I'm not too sick to do this.

I am hesitant to repeatedly email my tutors in order to ask them for more, or updated information. I do not want to be bothersome. I do not want to share specific details pertaining to why I have not been in class; as to why they don't know my name.

I do not want my only option at school to be to be a sick student. The dual-delivery option meant that I could choose to attend in-person classes; or choose to attend online classes when needed, without explanation. I did not need to let the administration, or other students know that I am a sick person. I just want to be in class, in whatever way I can be.

Update from student: *Since mandatory in-person learning has returned, I have attended one of my core classes. That's one out of the two that run a week, every week, since week one. It's now week ten. I have attended three of my elective classes. Five out of the other elective. Stress exacerbates my chronic illness, meaning that I'm sick more often than I'm used to.... This week, I wasn't able to make it to another one of my elective classes. I emailed my tutor, and she responded straight away by sending through a zoom link for that day. She told me that if I felt up to joining then to join. I was so grateful, and I didn't miss out because of debilitating physical symptoms. I just don't think it's that difficult to be compassionate - my tutor was compassionate and made sure that I was able to attend class.*

TESTIMONY 39

Due to in person learning and the structure of administrative law, I was unable to attend a class for 7 weeks. As the law school refuses to recognise work as a legitimate reason to miss class, I am also unable to access recordings to assist in my learning. (I will not my work supports not just myself as I live off country, but my family also, making not working an impossibility)

Further to this, in person requirements have impacted my own caring responsibilities, due to the requirements to sit in person exams. It means I am unable to be on country to care for elderly relatives or attend sorry business.

As I am in the process of receiving a formal diagnosis, I am also suffering from in person learning as I have had to choose between class attendance or a specialist appointment. Staff have offered but never delivered in providing recordings in these instances.

I am thankful for and supported by the Indigenous Law and Justice Hub for the cultural strength and understanding offered.

TESTIMONY 40

I am a first year Juris Doctor student at Melbourne Law School, currently in my second year of study in 2023.

I have several chronic illnesses/conditions which impact me while I study, for which I have an AAP and ongoing support in place, including flexible delivery and alternative exam arrangements.

I have been diagnosed with the following:

- Major Depressive Disorder/Generalised Anxiety Disorder/Complex Trauma – for which I receive on going psychiatric and other treatment*
- Autism Spectrum Disorder – my ASD profile intersects with my mental illness conditions, and as such informs my treatment plan*

My chronic illness and ASD create disability impacts on my study capacity, both in classroom and exam situations.

Clinical areas of impairment:

- 1. Sensory processing*
 - auditory, light, and tactile (proximity of other people)*
- 2. Executive function*

- attention, focus, working memory, comprehension, concept formation, word idea generation, set shifting, organisation and planning

3. Nervous system and emotional regulation

- Anxiety, panic, depression

...

My experience at MLS:

- *Since return to campus learning I have experienced extreme difficulty being in crowded, noisy spaces – such as seminar and lecture rooms, or in thoroughfare spaces to access seminars and lectures (this applies to even moderately sized groups of people).*
- *Periods where there has been a lot of movement, frenetic energy, and noise from people talking at once - such as prior to commencement of class, during class discussion - have triggered sensory overload. This causes severe physical and psychological discomfort, which requires intense sustained mental effort to manage in order to stay in the space.*
- *The mental effort required to just be in the physical space severely diminishes my ability to learn and make the most of the learning experience as MLS*
 - *Significantly diminished interaction with students and teachers as compared with online learning*
 - *Reduced capacity to understand and respond to instruction/course content (written /oral)*
 - *Unable to hear what is being said - therefore unable to participate effectively or contribute to seminar discussions*
 - *Unable to process information presented in class – therefore unable to take effective notes*
 - *Diminished ability to complete assessments to the standard of which I am capable – as a result of compromised learning*

TESTIMONY 41

A Master of Psychology student had contracted COVID and was isolating at home. It was unlikely that they would be well enough to safely attend their Child Psychopathology (PSYC90023) classes. They reached out to their lecturer to ask whether a recording of the lecture would be made available online for those who could not safely attend in-person.

The student received the following response:

"I'm sorry to hear that you have Covid and hope that you're better soon. The Child Psychopathology lectures will not be recorded due to the School's decision to return to pre Covid policies and to not record live lectures, to maximise live class attendance."

TESTIMONY 42

A student enrolled in Property (LAWS50030) described how they were not able to change classes despite the teaching style of their original class negatively interacting with their disability. This was despite having a “priority timetabling” provision in their Academic Adjustment Plan and medical reports.

The student registered their issue with at least four different University authorities and was passed back-and-forth multiple times between them. The student was told that, due to capacity issues, their only options were to drop out completely (delaying their degree by a year) or submit a complaint and persist.

TESTIMONY 43

A student undertaking Law and Human Nature (LAWS90245) reported not being offered remote-learning arrangements despite having given birth recently and having to manage caring responsibilities for their elderly grandfather. This was in addition to being denied access to lecture recordings.

Mandatory in-class attendance has forced the student to stop breastfeeding their baby before they were completely comfortable. It has also led to the student’s husband undertaking caring duties while being on leave. The student’s husband is returning to work in May, and they are considering bringing both their baby and elderly father with them to campus for their safety.

The reason for refusing lecture recordings given by the University was that the class did not lend itself to being recorded due to class discussions taking place.

Update from student: The student has since sought access to the MLS Parents’ Room so that they can bring their baby and father to classes with them but was denied access.

Semester 2, 2023 Learning Feedback

GSA is committed to monitoring students' ongoing experiences with learning and teaching. As such, GSA's Disability & Equity Officer has received more recent student reports outlining experiences with learning support and adjustments in Semester 2, 2023. These

accounts show that students are continuing to experience barriers to accessing their education and a lack of appropriate support.

For one, students have reported that Faculties are scheduling interim assessments for students with AEA's that direct them to sit apart from their cohort on different days. These measures are implemented without consulting the student and requests to reschedule (due to work commitments or caring commitments) are denied. Instead, Faculties are reported to have advised students to forgo paid work, which could endanger both job stability and livelihood, or sit their assessment without their medically-approved and required adjustments. GSA maintains that this should never be an 'option' presented by the University.

Furthermore, each semester, and each time an AAP is updated, *and* each time a student has a mid-semester assignment for which they need AEA's/AAPs, students are required to manually send their AAP to Law Wellbeing. GSA notes that students should not bear the sole responsibility of ensuring a document produced by one University body is upheld by another. Nor should a student have to act as an intermediary in order to receive the support they need. At other institutions, students are asked for their permission to share their adjustments with key staff to ensure that supports are applied consistently.

TESTIMONY 44

Students with AEA's at Melbourne Law School have reached out about issues with receiving equitable treatment and support during their interim assessments. For one subject, Corporations Law, students with AEA's sat their interim at a different time to their peers (non-AEA students sat their interim during their first scheduled class of the week), which was set without consultation with relevant students, who had to quickly re-arrange work and caring commitments. These students have had to specifically make time for this interim which other students did not have the additional burden of navigating. Certain students also reported that the different interim assessment time reduced their ability to engage in their classes, where their interim and class took place on the same day. This was again only an experience faced by specific students with AEA's.

For another subject, Equity and Trusts. Students with AEA's were advised that Melbourne Law School "does not function as an examination venue and as such cannot accommodate every specification outlined in your AAP (Approved Accommodation Plan), particularly requests for individual rooms or pods due to classes

being taught, as well as any additional equipment such as lamps, adjustable desks, ergonomic chairs.” In another email, the list of adjustments that could not be made also included “ dimmable lights, LED lamps, adjustable desks, purifiers, bean bags, and monitors in the room. Students were also asked not to bring any of this support equipment to their interim assessment “as they may disrupt the exam environment and disturb fellow students”.

Recommendations

Graduate students have outlined where SEDS and the University of Melbourne need to take greater responsibility in ensuring an equitable and accessible tertiary experience. Current measures prevent students from accessing meaningful, impactful and necessary support. In order to better serve students, GSA recommends that SEDS and relevant University leadership:

1. Review the evidence threshold students are required to meet to access support, and how often this evidence needs to be reviewed.
2. Legitimise flexible learning options and remote exams for students through AAPs and AEAs as an additional available support.
3. Give more weight to AAPs and SEDS processes within Faculties and develop communication methods to ensure their implementation.
4. Expand training on equity principles and adjustments to change how students are viewed and treated within the SEDS process.
5. Include COVID/'long COVID' as valid grounds for formalised support.
6. Expand basic medical training so SEDS staff are better equipped to accurately review applications in line with policy.
7. Provide more resources and funding to change SEDS back to a case-worker/care model, as well as an advocate for the students it serves.
8. Develop a consultative "walk-through" process to ensure that AEAs are applied harmoniously and without conflict.
9. Audit how Faculties implement AEAs so that they are in-line with the expectations of SEDS, medical practitioners and legal obligations regarding access and inclusion.
10. Establish effective channels of recourse for students who feel that SEDS or their Faculties are not meeting their needs and/or AEAs.
11. Create and provide students with a comprehensive list of previously available supports, and how they might support learning, rather than placing that burden on students who may otherwise miss out on appropriate and adapted support.