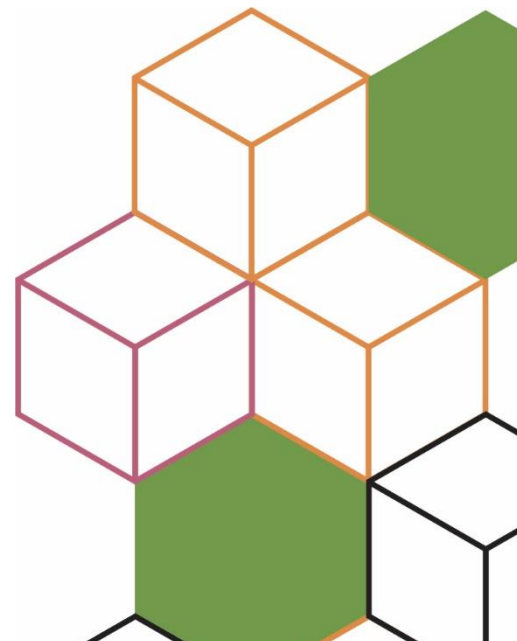


January
2023

Graduate Student
Association

**Submission to the
Senate inquiry into
the extent and
nature of poverty in
Australia**



The University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association (GSA) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate inquiry into the extent and nature of poverty in Australia.

Introduction

The Graduate Student Association 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 36,000 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 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.

Cost of living at the University of Melbourne

Melbourne is consistently ranked as one of the most expensive cities to live in in the world, ranking at the most expensive in 2022.¹ This environment disproportionately affects those unable to work fulltime, including students. The combination of an inability to work fulltime and the high cost of living in Melbourne drives students into poverty and deters students who have the aptitude from completing their studies. This process robs individuals and society from benefiting from more education prior to entering the workforce. Relatedly, 20% of postgraduate coursework students who considered leaving their studies early cited financial difficulties as their reason for doing so.²

An adequate income through fulltime work can protect individuals from experiencing poverty. However, the Melbourne Model often requires University of Melbourne students to undertake postgraduate degrees to acquire a work-ready qualification. Comparatively, students at other Victorian universities can acquire these qualifications through one undergraduate degree. This model precludes Melbourne University students from working full-time for longer, further depleting their savings.

¹ The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), Worldwide Cost of living Index 2022, EIU.

<https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/worldwide-cost-of-living-2022>

² Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT), *Student Experience Survey*, QILT.

[https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/student-experience-survey-\(ses\)](https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/student-experience-survey-(ses))

Introduced by the University of Melbourne in 2008, the Melbourne Model is an academic degree structure where students undertake a generalist undergraduate degree followed by a specialist postgraduate degree.

When the model was introduced, nearly 100 undergraduate degrees were replaced by six generalist degrees, which has since expanded to 31. Comparatively, there are 384 postgraduate programs at the University of Melbourne.

The University of Melbourne's ratio of postgraduate programs to undergraduate programs is approximately 12:1.

This is a far higher ratio compared to other major universities in Victoria:

- Monash University: 1:1.5 ratio (140 postgraduate versus 220 undergraduate)
- RMIT University: 1:1.23 (160 postgraduate versus 198 undergraduate)

If an undergraduate student at the University of Melbourne decides to become a qualified teacher, they must undertake one of the 30 programs within the Graduate School of Education following the completion of their undergraduate degree. At other universities in Victoria, such as RMIT University, a student can receive a work-ready qualification through their undergraduate degree.

In this way, the combination of the Melbourne model and the high cost of living in Melbourne, graduate students at the University of Melbourne are driven into poverty.

GSA's experience as a service provider

At the University of Melbourne, student poverty is particularly evident in students' experiences of food insecurity. Alarming levels of persistent food insecurity have been reported among the University of Melbourne's student body, primarily caused by a lack of income.³

GSA is positioned as a service provider and community building organisation. In the past, we have hosted social events, like the Graduate Ball, and provided academic support through programs like our Thesis Bootcamp. However, recently GSA has experienced demand for more material aid to alleviate student poverty. Last year we launched our Healthy Breakfasts program and provided daily free breakfasts for graduate students.

The service had an average attendance of 85 students per day, with attendance on some days being as high as 140 students. Around 25 students attended the breakfasts regularly (around three days per week), with some students attending every day. This

³ Melbourne Social Equity Institute, *Talking Hunger: Understanding and addressing food insecurity at the University of Melbourne*, Project Summary Report, University of Melbourne. https://socialequity.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/3831086/Talking-Hunger-Summary-Report-2021.pdf

demonstrates the prevalence of food insecurity, and the need for material aid, among this cohort. Given that most students do not need to be on campus so often, it also points to students trading valuable study/work/leisure time to travel to campus early in the morning for free food instead. Previous research at the University of Melbourne found that students seek out events where free food is served. Some students organise their timetables around these events, and the long wait times can impair their studies.⁴

Poverty and food insecurity can negatively affect students' health, educational outcomes, and mental well-being. It can lead to students feeling anxious or depressed and unable to focus during lectures and tutorials.⁵ The importance of programs like Healthy Breakfasts is shown in the comments we received from students. Graduate students regularly approached event staff to thank them. Several students stated that food in Melbourne was expensive and that knowing they had a regular, reliable source of food at breakfast meant one less meal to worry about. A student parent told us that the program meant she could focus on feeding her two children instead, as the cost of food meant she struggled to feed everyone in her family.

The high demand for the program meant that GSA spent \$12,300 on food procurement. In addition to this, more than 50% of the event team's capacity was spent on delivering this program while it was running. Healthy Breakfasts has become a much sought after GSA service and will run again in 2023. Looking ahead, we expect the demand for this program to continue, especially with recent low rental vacancy rates and decreased rental affordability for student sharehouses.^{6 7}

The recent increase in service demands associated with student poverty and food insecurity is concerning. Structurally, GSA is not geared towards providing poverty alleviation and material aid. Our primary focus has been student life and social/academic support events. Allocating resources to material aid provision limits our ability to deliver other events and services that enhance student life. However, demand for food aid and the severity of the anecdotes we are encountering precludes us from discontinuing our poverty alleviation initiatives. These come at the cost of GSA being unable to provide graduate students more career-oriented programs and

⁴ Melbourne Social Equity Institute, *Talking Hunger: Understanding and addressing food insecurity at the University of Melbourne*, Project Summary Report, University of Melbourne. https://socialequity.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/3831086/Talking-Hunger-Summary-Report-2021.pdf

⁵ Jeffrey, C, Dyson, J & Scrinis, G (2022), *Hunger for change: Student food insecurity in Australia*, Geoforum (136), pp.186-193.

⁶ SQM Research, *Residential Vacancy Rates*, SQM Research.

https://sgmresearch.com.au/graph_vacancy.php?region=vic%3A%3AMelbourne&type=c&t=1

⁷ SGS Economics and Planning, *Rental Affordability Index \ Key Findings*, SGS Economics and Planning Pty Ltd.

https://www.sgsep.com.au/assets/main/Rental-Affordability-Index_Nov_2022_low-resolution.pdf

services, like our Transition to Employment workshops and LEAD leadership program. GSA urges the Australian government to ensure aid organisations are adequately resourced to manage rising student poverty rates and to explore additional support for postgraduate students, including income support.