



*Achieving Excellence: the Graduate Student Experience at Melbourne – UMSU Response*

August 21, 2020

## Purpose

UMSU has reviewed the University's Draft strategy paper - *Graduate Student Experience* and this document sets out a range of issues, concerns and recommendations identified by Umsu for the University to consider as part of this Strategy.

## Introduction

As always, Umsu reiterates our support for any University initiatives which may materially improve student experience in a planned and coordinated way.

As with the University's Green Paper issued as part of the Melbourne Student Experience Enhancement Project (MSEEP), Umsu has identified a number of conceptual and substantive gaps with the way in which the strategy has been framed. We continue to believe that addressing these matters would have a direct impact on the outcomes of the strategy itself and, ultimately, the quality of student experience.

Concomitant with identifying gaps in the University's approach, Umsu has recommended a number of specific actions to improve student experience which the University should consider.

The *Graduate Student Experience* notes in its introduction that this paper comes "at a time of significant social and economic upheaval as we face the consequences of the global COVID-19 pandemic". In this context Umsu notes the University's decision to cut staff numbers, based on its own assessment that it needs to reduce expenditure, will be likely to impact student experience in profound ways which are wholly unacknowledged in this paper. Umsu is concerned that part of the impact of this cost cutting in the short term may be evidenced by the University's approach to providing financial and other support to students to address the impact of the pandemic.

## Financial Hardship and the COVID Context

The University is not the only one experiencing financial challenges in the current circumstances – however the University's concerns over expenditure appear to be at odds with students' increased need for financial support. Graduate students arguably have the greatest financial pressures among students even without the overlay of the pandemic this year, as they are more likely to be living independently, juggling work, study, and often their own young family.<sup>1</sup> However, in contrast with research on graduate student experience which puts financial support among the top two self-reported priorities for graduate students,<sup>2</sup> *Graduate Student Experience* is effectively silent on the importance of financial support to the student experience.

The Report of the Universities Australia commissioned 2017 *Student Finances Survey*,<sup>3</sup> undertaken by the Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education at this University notes in its foreword that

*One in seven domestic students say they regularly go without food or other necessities because they can't afford them. And three in five domestic students say their finances are a source of worry.*<sup>4</sup>

Paradoxically, the recent announcement of the second half year approach to the Emergency Support Fund (ESF) strongly implies that the University believes that things are improving for students financially,

<sup>1</sup> *Graduate Student Experience*, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Crane, L., Kinash, S., Bannatyne, A., Judd, M-M., Eckersley, B., Hamlin, G., Partridge, H., Richardson, S., Rolf, H., Udas, K., & Stark, A. (2016). *Engaging postgraduate students and supporting higher education to enhance the 21st century student experience*. Final report prepared for the Learning and Teaching Support Unit, Australian Department of Education and Training 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Sophie Arkoudis, Samantha Marangell, Chi Baik, Cameron Patrick, Emmaline Bexley and Richard James, *2017 Universities Australia Student Finances Survey*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 3.

which is directly at odds with students' experience of the financial impacts of the pandemic. Extending the cap of \$7500 across both Semester 1 and Semester 2 amounts to a dramatic reduction of financial support for semester 2. Notwithstanding the unspecified additional support available from Financial Aid it seems unlikely that a student who has already accessed significant funds in Semester 1 will be able to access sufficient support in Semester 2. This occurs at a time when it is well-documented that students' capacity to work is significantly reduced, both in Melbourne and internationally. We would also suggest that the impacts of financial hardship are cumulative and that there is likely to be greater distress for students in Semester 2 due to the ongoing impacts of the pandemic.

For these students, the ESF will be no more than a reminder of the financial support they could not access. Additionally, there are significant equity concerns given students commencing in Semester 2 will be able to access the same amount of financial support that other students have had to spread across the entire year using up to three separate financial support measures. We note that when the University introduced the ESF \$7500 was deemed an appropriate amount to support students in Semester 1 and the revised approach suggests that amount is now sufficient to address financial hardship across the entire year. This completely fails to engage with the reality of students' lives, and the way in which the University could make a material improvement to that experience.

### *The University's Approach to Questions of Student Experience*

Previously UMSU has noted the University's heavy reliance on survey instruments as its primary source of data and testimony from students themselves about their experience of study at the University.

The *four defining graduate experiences* set out in the paper are purportedly based on "extensive consultation". Again, as with the *MSEEP Green paper* which used 2018 statistical data and upon which much of the research for this paper still appears to be based, the paper uses survey data, including Subject Experience Surveys from 2016 to 2019.

Relevantly the surveys, as well as the National data drawn upon, all confirm that students are dissatisfied with measures relating to support services. However, the *Graduate Student Experience* does not engage with any of the ways in which the University could enhance student experience by increasing its support for student wellbeing. This is a significant blind spot for the University, which UMSU has raised time and again.

Additionally, the University's method of consulting its student body consistently leaves room for improvement. For example, the *Graduate Student Experience* notes that the total number of students consulted directly on graduate student experience was "a panel of **13 graduate students** nominated by divisions also attended to speak to their experiences and participate in the discussion".<sup>5</sup>

This small sample size is unrepresentative both due to the meagre number of individual students involved, but also because students nominated by divisions cannot speak on behalf of a constituency and therefore only represent themselves. On the other hand, had the University consulted a small number of students who hold representative positions and who can advance the views of large numbers of students in their constituencies, the credibility and representative character of any consultation would be a different matter.

In UMSU's 2019 response to the MSEEP Green Paper we identified the failure to consult democratically elected student representatives as a fundamental flaw in the approach of the University to questions of student need and satisfaction.

<sup>5</sup> *Graduate Student Experience*, p. 21.

As UMSU noted:

*“The University of Melbourne is a body politic and corporate. The University’s governing act of parliaments establishes that students are a defined constituency of the University. This, in turn, supports student representation in institutional governance. Students are members of the University, in the same way that staff and senior executives are, and they are equal participants in an academic and social community that depends on their engagement and participation.*

*UMSU submits that the notion of constituency is the thread that ties students together; constituents have rights and responsibilities associated with membership of the body politic and the legitimate expectation that their participation will be welcomed and encouraged. Importantly, this right to participate is unfettered – there is no role for other constituents of the University to limit or define the role of another unilaterally.*

*This notion of participation is significant as it requires students to be actively engaged in institutional discussions about student experience from the point of conception. Students have a legitimate expectation that when University management determines that it is necessary to act on improving student experience that the very first conversations are with students themselves. That as constituents of the body politic students must be included in discussions of what the term student experience means.”<sup>6</sup>*

As a constituency within the University, for students to be effectively represented in University processes of this type the students charged with this function need to have legitimacy as student representatives. This means, for example, they must be chosen by students and not by the University itself. It should be uncontroversial, given the University expressly recognises student organisations as having representative functions, that it is these organisations that should represent the views of students in processes of this type. Of course, other ancillary mechanisms should still be employed to gather feedback from students in relation to the University; however, the failure to engage with student representatives in formulating a strategy paper of this type undermines the legitimacy of the feedback provided by a small number of hand-picked students.

A commitment to engaging with student representation should be a central component of the University’s engagement with students and is contrasted with the University’s current approach to hearing “student voices.” Independent student representative organisations provide feedback that is moderated *by students themselves* and should be prioritised over student feedback that is moderated *by the University on behalf of students*.

It is alarming that the University continues to pursue this approach. It is also likely that this commitment to an anti-democratic approach to student representation is reflected in a lack of respect to the considered positions put to the University by UMSU. UMSU’s response to the MSEEP Green Paper identified a number of critical themes in relation to student experience that are expressed, again, in the *Graduate Student Experience* paper. The MSEEP White Paper did not address any of the issues identified by UMSU so it comes as no surprise to us that these issues continue to be identified by students and yet remain unaddressed and unresolved.

<sup>6</sup> UMSU, *Melbourne Student Experience Enhancement Project – Green Paper Response* <<https://umsu.unimelb.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Green-Paper-MSEEP-UMSU-Response-002.pdf>>, p.2.

Perhaps the most blatant and astonishing example of the University's anti-democratic approach to its dealings with students is the quote from the *Graduate Student Experience* where the following observation was deemed necessary to point out.

*There was also recognition of the relative maturity of the graduate student cohort, and a concomitant focus on the ways in which students, as self-directed learners, might partner with the University in co-designing their experience, including by **engaging with students to understand how best to deliver to their needs.***<sup>7</sup> (emphasis added)

### **Focus of the Graduate Student Experience Strategy paper**

The *Graduate Student Experience* is almost exclusively centred on pedagogical matters and academic outcomes, again failing to acknowledge and adequately address many of the underlying matters that influence student experience and, therefore, academic outcomes.

In a relatively extensive study of Postgraduate Student Experience, the researchers in their Final Report prepared for the Learning and Teaching Support Unit, Australian Department of Education and Training, made a number of findings which indicate overall graduate students are less satisfied with their experience than their fellow undergraduate students.<sup>8</sup>

Specifically, the Report notes that the:

*“key research findings were that postgraduate students and the staff who support them are dissatisfied with the student experience and believe that universities should improve services and supports. Secondary analysis of national surveys showed that postgraduate students and graduates are less satisfied than are undergraduate students.”*<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, among Research Higher Degree (RHD) candidates the second most common presenting issue at the UMSU Advocacy Service is *supervision*. The student/supervisor relationship is an intense and lengthy engagement which can absolutely make or break the student experience. 31% of RHD students who contacted the Service sought assistance in relation to their progress, and 25% seek help with supervision problems.

The *Engaging postgraduate students and supporting higher education to enhance the 21st century student experience Final Report* notes:

*“For students in research-based programs, it is the quality of supervision, and for students in course-based programs, it is quality assessment. Financial support also emerged as a salient theme. When interviewed students were asked a similar question, the most frequently used word was – support.”*<sup>10</sup>

Yet *Graduate Student Experience* does not once mention the issue of RHD supervision, and the only use of the word *financial* is in the context of the University's own challenges and market pressures. Instead the paper retains the narrow focus of the *MSEEP Green Paper*, concentrating on academic and networking related “qualities”.

<sup>7</sup> *Graduate Student Experience*, p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> Crane, L. et al, above n. 2.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p.21.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 27.

As UMSU noted in its 2019 *MSEEP Green paper* response, the conception of student experience as synonymous with academic experience is inconsistent with how students think about their own experiences as a student. While it is true to say that all students experience study and curriculum, this does not mean that students' experiences of that curriculum, or the curricula themselves, are sufficiently uniform for this to be anything more than a truism.

As the *Graduate Student Experience* itself observes, student experience broadly relates to *all* aspects of a student's interaction with an institution – that it is inclusive of the student's academic, social, and physical experiences:

*“Like the Student Life Strategy released in 2019, to which this is in part a companion piece, this paper is focused on the aspects of the student experience that are outside of the curriculum structure of the University's degrees and to some extent, exclusive of discipline or pedagogical approaches. Unlike the Student Life Strategy, which focused for the most part on undergraduates, the diversity of the graduate student cohort and programs is such that no whole-of-University initiatives are proposed. Instead, the approach proposed is one in which shared priorities and defining qualities are agreed, recommendations made against each, and measures of success identified. Faculties should then explore which initiatives might best address these priorities and success measures in their context – with an opportunity to share exemplars so that efficiencies of scale might be realised.”<sup>11</sup>*

The University's ***Closing the loop on Student Feedback Semester 1, 2020*** – featuring insights from the University-wide survey of both undergraduate and graduate students notes:

*“Support for student wellbeing is critical as the University has adjusted to virtual teaching & learning and service delivery. Recent survey results from students have shown that this remains a priority area.”<sup>12</sup>*

Yet strategies to improve wellbeing support, communication and genuine collaboration with students are conspicuous by their absence in the body of the paper. UMSU notes that this is a major gap in the *Graduate Student Experience* and that the deficiencies of this approach are:

- A failure to respond to longstanding and consistent feedback from students.
- A delegation of responsibility to divisions for student wellbeing and support without reference to a whole of University approach.
- The inevitable divergence in student experience that will arise from different approaches employed across divisions, which will be driven by discretion around priorities and resources.

### ***The Centrality of Institutional Culture for Student Wellbeing***

There is a conceptual and practical significance to student wellbeing and its relationship as a central and fundamental component of enhancing student experience. The first, and most critical, step the University needs to take is to foster an organisational culture that engages with students in good faith. An approach to student wellbeing that is deliberately devolved does not address questions of institutional culture; rather it sends the clear message to students that student wellbeing is not central to the University's understanding of student experience.

<sup>11</sup> Graduate Student Experience, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Closing the loop on Student Feedback Semester 1 2020, p. 2.

Paradoxically, the devolved model of student wellbeing appears to speak to the University's misguided approach to cohort identity. Both the MSEEP Green Paper and the *Graduate Student Experience* document a determination to enhance students' cohort experience. While UMSU recognises the potential value of shared experience and connections within cohorts, the University's approach to cohort experience and divisional responsibility reflect fundamental misunderstandings of student experience.

By examining the notion of cohort experience through a prism of student wellbeing it would seem that the University's approach suggests that divisional approaches to student wellbeing are preferable because membership of a particular cohort will automatically give rise to the specific wellbeing needs of those students. There is no evidence presented by the University that suggests that the wellbeing needs of students can be differentiated by academic division. UMSU's experience is that the issues that impact on student wellbeing are not defined by faculty or graduate school, and that they are common for the entire student body. As such any strategy aimed at improving student experience should include centralised action and policy as a major component.

The research relied upon overlaps considerably with the 2018 research upon which the MSEEP green paper was based:

*“that a positive graduate experience is characterised by “not feeling like a ‘number’ and having a stronger connection to academics and in some instances their graduate school” (MSEEP report, p. 83). Less positive graduate experiences broadly relate to preparedness for study, cohort size and structure, how students perceive the program’s industry alignment and connections, the resources and study spaces available, and their sense of return on investment.”<sup>13</sup>*

There are a range of different issues enumerated in these statements, but without distinguishing the different characteristic of the matters to which they pertain. That is “not feeling like a number” may express a considerably more profound sense of depersonalisation in relation to the University than simply being about belonging to a graduate school.

UMSU has repeatedly made representations to the University aimed at addressing this aspect of student experience, to ensure students do not feel like they are merely a number. We do this by asking the University to define what kind of relationship it wants to have with its students. The answers to these questions should inform institutional approaches to student experience.

Adopting a position that students' sense of depersonalisation is best addressed at a divisional level is destined to leave critical matters of student experience unresolved. Students see themselves, first and foremost, as students of the University, and as members of an academic and social community. As part of this community they expect that they will be treated with respect and in good faith. That students express an experience of being perceived as a number is symptomatic of a relationship which is not based on mutual trust and confidence. Rather it speaks to students' experiences of being treated with hostility and mistrust by the University in such a way that suggests to many that this approach is a part of the University's organisation culture.

This cannot be addressed simply by shifting the emphasis of certain activities from one organisational unit to another as this shift remains within the parameters of the organisational culture that created this problem in the first place. To address the fundamental and critical issues relating to student experience the University cannot continue to shuffle its musical deck chairs; it needs to address its organisational culture which leaves students feeling devalued.

<sup>13</sup> Graduate Student Experience, p. 7.

### *UMSU's Representations on Student Experience*

UMSU's regular and often repeated representations regarding actions required to address various aspects of University service delivery which impact student experience include:

- The Advocacy Service's Quarterly Reports published since 2012.
- UMSU submissions, written and verbal, to University processes including:
  - The Phillips KPA Review of Student Services (2011).
  - The Student Lifecycle Review (2013).
  - The Business Improvement Project (2014).
- Participation in a variety of University working groups in relation to the content and application of University policy and procedure.
- UMSU's 2019 submission in relation to proposed changes to Special Consideration.
- UMSU's advocacy on behalf of students impacted by the pandemic in 2020.

### *University's culture as a barrier to effective support*

For nearly a decade, the Advocacy Service's Quarterly Reports document a persistent pre-occupation among University staff that the incidence of students practicing "strategic behaviours" to gain unfair advantages in their studies is significant or has escalated. This culture of distrust and moral panic forms a backdrop across the eight years of these reports, although there is neither research that provides evidence to support the University's approach, nor anecdotal evidence of a significant problem. This is another example of a disjunction between actual student experience and the University's approach, and one which we believe would be improved by active engagement with students as constituents.

Students express a strong sense that the University views them with mistrust and a profound lack of compassion. In this context, successive Quarterly Reports observe that frequently students (and their families) experience the implementation of the special consideration system, in particular, as punitive and lacking in empathy and concern for students' circumstances. It appears that one reason for this is a degree of compassion fatigue among University staff as a result of the under resourcing of areas dealing with students experiencing equity and disability related issues. Another problem lies within academic divisions who resist adjustments that may increase the workload of already overtaxed staff.

In October 2019 UMSU made an extensive submission to the Policy Network in respect of proposed changes to the special consideration provisions in the *Assessment and Results Policy*. The submission was framed around a survey conducted with students of the University which received 2108 responses in just under two weeks, 30% of whom were graduate students. The survey asked students, among other things, how their experience of the University would be impacted by the proposed changes which would have made it harder to manage circumstances affecting their studies.

*"Of all respondents, over half indicated the changes significantly affected their experience of the university, with 39% indicating it impacted somewhat on their experience and 7% were unaffected. Overall, there was negligible difference between graduate and undergraduates and domestic and international respondents. However, there were significantly more graduate international students indicating their experience would be significantly impacted (57%)."*<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> UMSU Submission Proposed amendments to the special consideration provisions in the *Assessment and Results Policy* <<https://umsu.unimelb.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/UMSU-Special-Consideration-Consultation-2019-.pdf>>, p. 18.

### *Reactive rather than pro-active approach to mental health issues*

In the middle of 2014, the Advocacy Service began highlighting the over representation of students suffering mental health problems. The Advocacy Service noted that it frequently sees students who have been struggling to keep up with their studies due to problems with their mental health and those students can be particularly vulnerable to the gap between the special consideration process and those mechanisms to support students with chronic disabilities or ongoing health problems. This is due to both the episodic nature of acute illness as well as this effect such illnesses can have on the organisation and motivation required to negotiate the current special consideration regime. In 2020 the Service continues to see the same or greater volume of these mental health related issues as it had five years previously.

Research Higher Degree students can be particularly vulnerable to the University's rigid and unsympathetic approach to the impacts of ill-health on candidatures. PhD students risk years of effort being wasted when the University refuses to exercise its discretion to allow leave beyond the duration under policy, despite there being discretion to do so. Anecdotally, cases involving students requiring periods of leave over and above the time generally available appear to be on the increase, while academic divisions concurrently increasingly exhibit a lack of flexibility around extending duration of students' candidatures.

### *University restructures and the impacts on student support*

After the first semester of the new Melbourne Operating Model the Service reported an increase in the presentation of students seeking advice and support on issues of discrimination, harassment or bullying. This had resulted from a change in the availability of support for students wishing to report or seek support on these matters after the disestablishment of the University Advisors Network.

We also noted an increase in students with disabilities approaching the Service for assistance liaising with academic staff subsequent to the downsizing and restructure of the Disability Liaison Unit, a deficit which remains today. There is limited or no active support available from the Student Equity and Disability Service where the student is in dispute over the implementation of adjustments with academic staff.

Other University restructures during 2015 created gaps in support and service delivery for students including the full devolution of administrative responsibility for graduate research to the faculties and graduate schools subsequent to the disestablishment of the Melbourne School of Graduate Research. This resulted in many matters arising with higher degree research students where their complaints have effectively 'fallen between the cracks.' That is – no one seemed to have or recognise responsibility for investigation and resolution of those grievances. This means some serious issues remained unaddressed for a lengthy period while responsibility for their resolution continued to be unsettled. The system remains fragmented and offers a patchwork and uneven experience across faculties.

### *Adequate resources for sound administrative decision making*

Graduate coursework students have also suffered poor experiences at the hands of administrative decision makers in both Student and Scholarly Services, and within academic divisions. In early July 2020 UMSU raised concerns with the quality of administrative decision making in respect of students applying for special consideration. The situation highlighted the poor experience of students when complex administrative decisions are made in perfunctory and inflexible ways. The casework presenting to the Advocacy Service suggested, for example, that administrative decision shortcuts were being taken to reduce the volume of matters being disputed by both deliberately mischaracterising administrative/procedural decisions on eligibility as a question of academic judgement and by failing to distinguish the administrative/procedural elements of a decision from aspects involving academic judgement – such as where the substantive adequacy of an academic adjustment is disputed.

It is hard to overstate how poorly students experience this sort of decision-shortcutting at the University. Faced with outcomes of decision-making which betray little or no engagement with their issues, students experience a profound sense of depersonalisation, and express their experience of the University as disrespectful and unfair.

### *Increased support for vulnerable students with complex needs*

Since 2015 UMSU has been raising serious problems with the lack of case management available to students with complex needs. We have noted consistently that the sort of decision making in this area must be both nuanced and responsive to the student's reality, balancing regard for academic integrity with compassion to make logical determinations based on all of the circumstances. We noted in 2015 that the Student Lifecycle Review of 2013 identified Special Consideration as a significant "pain point" for students and recommended that the University take action to address in both the operation of the process and the way in which it has been conceived. Since 2013 Special Consideration policy and procedure has been subject to almost constant review and change; however, for many students the issues that gave rise to the 2013 recommendations remain or have become worse. At one point we referred to the Kafkaesque quality of the experience for many students, their families and their health care practitioners; and by this we meant the process remains both opaque and characterised by an extreme asymmetry of information and power.

Quarterly Reports have made recommendations regarding case management of students with complex needs dozens of times since then. Repeatedly noting that the University needs to ensure there are sufficient resources to enable sensitive and appropriate decision making with respect to special consideration specifically, and student support more broadly. Additionally, we have consistently recommended a review of the assumptions underpinning the approach to these students, and particularly, aside from proper case management, that, in the absence of evidence that students are actively attempting to abuse the process to obtain an unfair advantage, the process should be based on a good faith relationship with students. There seems to be a double standard, when it comes to accepting documentary evidence from students compared to the process for staff sick leave, where presumably health practitioner statements are accepted in good faith. This unequal approach might also be addressed by regarding students as constituents of the University.

Ultimately, despite some promising early discussions and plans discussed by the Special Consideration Working Group in 2012-2013, seven years later, we are no closer to a properly resourced, case-managed process for very sick and vulnerable students. On the contrary, as documented in UMSU's submission to the Policy Working Group late last year, the University has gone backwards in its approach to special consideration – targeting the most vulnerable students with its proposed changes.

The engagement of two staff in Student Equity and Disability Services in 2018 who were originally slated to perform case management work, morphed into a slow moving projects to research case management at the University, and as the two staff were employed on fixed contracts, we note the positions were not renewed earlier in the year, presumably due to the COVID-19 impacts on the University's financial situation. There is a grim irony that such potentially effective and long-awaited initiatives are the first to go during a time that students may most benefit, and this is a stark indicator of the University's disordered priorities with respect to student experience.

Additionally, students with complex needs have negligible support in a range of important areas which are generally outside of the Advocacy Service's charter. This extends from simple administrative queries, requests for help filling out special consideration applications or enrolment and course related forms; and extends to very complex matters involving advocacy-related issues interwoven with more general support needs.

While many tertiary advocacy services include a welfare component which offers well-being services and support to students in addition to advocacy functions, the UMSU Advocacy Service has structured its service model having regard to the supports for students purportedly offered by the University. We have consciously sought to avoid duplication of existing services for students and focussed our charter on providing independent, expert advocacy on academic and administrative matters. Accordingly, the Service does not offer counselling or general emotional/psychological support. The Service is also unable to access student records, the SAS or other university administrative tools, and does not provide any form of course advising.

Students report that they approach the Advocacy Service with matters outside our ambit for a range of reasons, including a greater awareness and profile of the Advocacy Service's support compared to University support options, the relative ease with which students can make direct contact with the Service via phone or drop in without lengthy waits; the change from the smaller local student centres, and shift from the comprehensive disability support at the erstwhile Disability Liaison Unit to the stripped down support offered under the centralised Stop 1 service model.

It is simply not enough to provide a single access point with too few staff to manage the volume of transactions. The result has been to reduce complex discretionary decision making to formulaic, rigid rule-based approaches which have no regard to evidence or specific circumstances, let alone the University's duty of care. Over the last decade or more, this has effectively shifted the burden to the Advocacy Service, and in turn, put greater than necessary pressure on the central complaints process and ultimately the Academic Board Appeal process. It is a matter of human rights that students with disabilities are provided with reasonable adjustments and accommodation of their circumstances.

UMSU does not advocate for a return to localised student centres; however, there is a clear need to ensure that the University provides a comprehensive range of properly resourced support services to students that supports their enrolments.

### *Increasing assessment disputes*

As we noted in UMSU's response to the 2018 MSEEP Green Paper, the volume and frequency of assessment dispute related presentations to the Advocacy Service has also grown steadily over the last decade. Concurrently students have reported a number of factors affecting their experience of assessment at the University, and in particular the transparency of assessment practices, and support in relation to their assessment.

Students consistently report problems accessing academic staff in relation to guidance on assessment prior to submission, and feedback on assessment post grading. Additionally, some students with particular learning disabilities and other support needs report that the level of support provided for them at the Academic Skills Unit is insufficient, and in some cases significantly inferior to offerings at other Universities where they have previously studied.

With the changes to assessment during the transition to online teaching and learning, these matters have exploded in volume.

### *Opportunity to have a significant impact on student experience of service delivery and the application of policy and procedure*

As UMSU noted in its response to the MSEEP Green Paper, there are a number of significant improvements the University could make to its approach to service delivery and student support that would have a positive impact on student experience. Accordingly, the University should consider:

- Situating service delivery to students within the broader context of an institutional approach to student experience and the role of the student within the University as a body politic.
- investing significant resources in this area and commit to a proper case managed approach to vulnerable complex needs students.
- Addressing the University's role in contributing to circumstances where some students find it easier to obtain or submit fraudulent documents than seek assistance within the institution.
- Strengthening administrative decision-making processes to ensure the proper exercise of discretion and to ensure the application of principles of procedural fairness.
- Providing greater clarity and transparency to students in relation to assessment.

### *A Cohort Experience?*

While we have addressed issues associated with the University's proposal to devolve strategic activity in relation to divisions, it is also important to consider whether the emphasis placed on cohort experience is desirable or proportionate. While UMSU recognises the potential benefits to students that arise from a positive cohort experience we do not believe that this a panacea for deficiencies in student experience.

In particular, we note the University's concern around a lack of discipline identity, the role of discipline-based clubs and societies, and the impact on student experience.

It is important to note that students do already choose to participate in and join discipline-based clubs and societies and that there are currently 57 of these clubs affiliated to UMSU. For a club to be affiliated to UMSU it must demonstrate sufficient support from students and must continue to do so to maintain its affiliation.

Cumulatively these clubs and societies clearly account for a significant aspect of student engagement activity fostering the kind of social connections that support student success.

It is important to interrogate why emphasis is placed on the value of a discipline experience, particularly in the context of the Melbourne Model and the impact that this has on student experience. The impact of breadth on undergraduate enrolment has the effect of diluting the notion of a discipline-based cohort. In this respect, a lack of discipline identity for students should be seen as an endorsement for the Melbourne Model rather than a deficit to be addressed.

Similarly, an approach that suggests replacing a broader view of student experience as interchangeable with cohort experience delegitimises the 'cohorts' that students themselves identify as important to them, and that are not bound by course, degree or division. For example, students from LGBTIQ+ communities often coalesce to form a community around shared experience that is not bound by academic delineation, and which is the source of support and connection that is not inherently better delivered by a faculty or graduate school.

Likewise, an undue emphasis on cohort experience at the expense of a broader conception of student experience will have the effect of highlighting differences between cohorts which are analogous to the

kind of inward focusing divisions that are anathema to the kinds of 'global citizenship' the University aspires to for its students.

It is also significant to note that the current strength of discipline-based student grouping is only one part of a broader and thriving range of student engagement activities that occur without the formal involvement of the University and which are driven entirely by demand from students. The total number of clubs and societies affiliated to UMSU is 220 and is already the single largest area of student participation and engagement outside the classroom. That UMSU received almost 40 applications for the affiliation of new clubs and societies in 2019 indicates that students are engaged with each other and the processes which support this peer engagement.

When coupled with the range of student-led volunteer programs and student participation in UMSU's creative and performing arts programs it is clear that students already participate and engage on a large scale in activities which are of interest to students. The value of this participation and engagement was not given appropriate weight by the MSEEP Green Paper, and neither is it acknowledged in the *Graduate Student Experience* paper.

Ultimately the lack of acknowledgement of student-led engagement brings us full circle in this response to the *Graduate Student Experience* in that it is consistent with the limited and flawed approach to the idea of student experience used by the University in relation to graduate and undergraduate students alike.