

# A Campus in Crisis

A Report on the Cost of Living Crisis  
at the University of Melbourne

Edition 1, 2024



Written by

**Joshua Stagg and Divyanshi Sati**

UMSU Welfare Office Bearers (2024)

In collaboration with

**Sara Guest**

PhD Candidate in Social Geography & Food Studies

# Acknowledgement of Country

This report was largely written on the land of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and Bunurong peoples. Sovereignty has never been ceded. It always was and always will be, Aboriginal land.

The entirety of Australia has been based upon the dispossession and genocide of First Nations people. We pay our respects to Indigenous Elders past, present and emerging. Data in this report has demonstrated that Indigenous Australians are suffering in the cost of living crisis to a greater extent than non-Indigenous respondents.

## UMSU Welfare

📍 Level 2, Building 168, The University of Melbourne,  
Parkville VIC 3052

✉ [welfare@union.unimelb.edu.au](mailto:welfare@union.unimelb.edu.au)

📘 [UMSU Welfare](#)

📷 [@umsu\\_welfare](#)

🌐 [umsu.unimelb.edu.au/welfare](https://umsu.unimelb.edu.au/welfare)

# Acknowledgements

First and foremost, we are grateful to all students who completed the Cost of Living Crisis Survey. With over 1,600 responses, this data has provided a comprehensive overview of the issues faced by students across our university. The high number of responses has ensured that this data is a broad and accurate representation of our diverse student body. We understand that some of the data in this report involves a great deal of distress and so we are incredibly grateful to students for being willing to discuss their experience so that we can advocate for change in favour of our community.

We are grateful to our team of volunteers who make all of UMSU's student welfare programs possible. As of 2024, there is not a single paid employee working within Union Mart. Without our volunteers, UMSU Welfare and Union Mart would simply not be possible. Whilst all our volunteers deserve praise, the following members of our team have gone above and beyond what could ever have been expected: Filia Cahyadi, Sonika Agarwal, Cynthia Wong, Jazmin Andres, Meet Vinod Varsani. Tran Hong Van Phan, Pulasthi Pathirana, Cornel Salim, Junaid Mohd Qamar, Shomdutta Roy and Ayda Zhao.

We would also like to acknowledge the work of the team at Foodbank Victoria for their continued service in combatting food insecurity.

Finally, we would like to thank Sara Guest, who has been instrumental in the development of this report.

# Foreword

The UMSU Welfare Department recognises that the increasing cost of living has placed unprecedented financial strain on students. The rapid increase in demand for UMSU Welfare services since the beginning of 2024 has highlighted the severity of the issue. In the first semester of 2024, UMSU Welfare served over 6,500 students through Union Mart. This includes students who came through our Parkville store during normal operating hours, those who accessed the Reserve Fund, those who attended our Southbank stall and those who came during public holidays and non-study periods.

Since the Howard Government's removal of Universal Student Unionism in 2006, student unions have found themselves in a precarious position. The effect of this was to deprive student unions of their independent streams of income and thus render student representatives dependent upon the higher education providers (HEPs) that collect the Student Service and Amenities Fee (SSAF) and distribute a portion of this revenue to student unions. This is a major problem, as HEPs have conflicting interests and may use the funds for competing services, while the disbursement of SSAF funds is contingent on student unions meeting conditions set by HEPs. This policy change introduced inherent encumbrances for proper student representation.

The impacts of these changes continue to be felt on campuses around the country. Student unions no longer have a seat at the table for larger discussions about campus development and as a result, we now have many campuses that prioritise commercial success over the wellbeing and health of students. This report details the extent to which this has harmed students at the University of Melbourne.

The findings from the Cost of Living Crisis Survey presented in this report unequivocally support the stories and experiences we hear from students every day. Not only are students worried about their futures, many are struggling to afford necessities right now. They're rent stressed, skipping meals and living below the poverty line. This is not business as usual. Urgent reform is needed: students are suffering, both physically and mentally.

It is the intention of UMSU Welfare to have this report provide the basis for reform on the part of UMSU and the University.

**Joshua Stagg and Divyanshi Sati**  
UMSU Welfare Office Bearers (2024)

**“This is not business as usual. Urgent reform is needed: students are suffering, both physically and mentally.”**

*– Joshua Stagg and Divyanshi Sati, UMSU Welfare Office Bearers (2024)*

**“It is clear that more student input is needed when it comes to future campus development related to food. Student unions are well-placed to advocate for campus development that has the best interests of student in mind and not what the University thinks students need.**

**Accessible and affordable food on campus should be a priority.”**

*– Sara Guest, PhD candidate in Social Geography & Food Studies*

**“As daily living costs continue to increase, University of Melbourne students are being forced to choose between buying food and paying rent, resulting in a horrific toll on both their studies and their health.”**

*– Bridgit Nugent, Master of Food Science, Juris Doctor, Welfare Committee member*

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# Overview



## Student financials

Over 88% of students responded that they earn an income equal to or below the poverty line.



## Food insecurity

Over 85% of students agree or strongly agree that they have removed items from their normal grocery shop due to rising prices.



## Health

Over 53% of students reported that they either always or usually avoid medical appointments or prescriptions due to concerns over cost.



## Housing

**Just under 80% of students are experiencing 'housing stress', given they spend above 30% of their income on rent.**



## Studies, workload and social life

**Almost 30% of students either agree or strongly agree that they have considered dropping out of university due to the cost of living crisis.**



## Support from UMSU and the University

Nearly 95% of students either agree or strongly agree that expanding Union Mart should be a priority for UMSU.



## Intersectionality

Over 51% of female identifying students strongly agree or agree that they struggle to afford period products due to rising prices.



“Rising prices have squeezed our spending capacity. Along with rising price[s] there is less [work available] causing [a reduction in our income].

As a full time masters student and a mom of a toddler, this rising price has caused mental and emotional pressure to me. I want to give adequate and balanced food to my child and family, but it is not possible most of [the time]. I have cut off entertainment and we have [reduced] our travel by almost 50%.

I travel only when I have to go [to] University and [I try] to do groceries and other shopping on that day so that there is no extra expenses on travel. This puts extra pressure on me and [I] cannot concentrate on my studies well.

This has caused pressure on my husband, he feels guilty [about] not being able to fulfil family needs.”

– Anonymous student at the University of Melbourne

# Key findings

## Student financials

1. Over 88% of students responded that they earn an income equal to or below the poverty line.
2. Over 46% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they have to rely on overdraft to make ends meet.
3. Over one quarter of students have less than or equal to \$100 in savings.
4. Nearly 10% of students state they prefer to be paid cash in hand as opposed to digitally. The most common reasons for this included avoiding reductions in welfare payments, avoiding delays in waiting for payments, avoiding visa working hour restrictions and avoiding card surcharges.
5. Nearly 65% of students agree or strongly agree that they feel anxious about their student debt and its repayment.
6. Nearly 73% of students agree or strongly agree that they struggle to afford transport to and from campus.

## Health

### Food insecurity

7. Over 85% of students agree or strongly agree that they have removed items from their normal grocery shop due to rising prices. When asked what items were being removed, the most common included fresh food and proteins.
8. Over 56% of students agree or strongly agree that they often have to skip meals due to rising prices.
9. Close to 47% of students disagree or strongly disagree that there are affordable food options on campus.

10. More than 48% of students either agreed or strongly agreed that they often have to deal with hunger in class because they cannot afford a meal on campus.
11. When asked if they agreed with the statement that their diet was less balanced due to rising food prices, over 77% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed.

### **Physical and mental health**

12. When asked if they agreed with the statement that they were scared about finding a job and the future after university, 54% of students strongly agreed and 25% of students agreed.
13. When asked if they agreed with the statement that the current cost of living crisis was having a negative impact on their mental health, 76% agreed or strongly agreed.
14. Over 66% of students agree or strongly agree that the cost of living crisis is having a negative impact on their physical health.
15. Over 53% of students reported that they either always or usually avoid medical appointments or prescriptions due to concerns over cost.

## **Housing**

16. Just under 80% of students are experiencing 'housing stress', given they spend above 30% of their income on rent. 23% of these students indicated that they spend more than 80% of their weekly income on rent.
17. Nearly 40% of students reported that they disliked their roommates but continued to live with them to save on expenses.
18. When asked if they felt their rental was good value for money, over 42% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed, with the most common response being 'neither agree nor disagree.'

## Studies, workload and social life

19. Just under 30% of students either agree or strongly agree that they have considered dropping out of university due to the cost of living crisis.
20. When asked if they agreed with the statement that their grades had been negatively affected by the cost of living crisis, over 44% of students either agreed or strongly agreed.
21. Over 52% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they had to increase their working hours due to the cost of living crisis.
22. When asked if they agreed with the statement that they had to miss class so that they could work more to afford necessities, just under 30% of students either agreed or strongly agreed.
23. Nearly 85% of students agree or strongly agree that they have had to change aspects of their social life due to the rising cost of living.

## Support from UMSU and the University

24. Nearly 95% of students either agree or strongly agree that expanding Union Mart should be a priority for UMSU.
25. When asked to rank what they thought was the most important student initiative, 62% of students indicated that free groceries/household products were the most important, 23% thought that free lunches were the most important, 10% of students selected free breakfasts, and 5% of students thought that free dinners were the most important.
26. When asked if students felt supported by the services offered by the University, 66% of students either agreed or strongly agreed. When the same question was asked about UMSU services, 67% of students either agreed or strongly agreed. This shows that even with less funding and resourcing, UMSU is matching and exceeding the support provided by the University of Melbourne.

## Intersectionality

27. Over 90% of female identifying students reported an income below the poverty line compared to just over 80% of male identifying students.
28. Over 51% of female identifying students agree or strongly agree that they struggle to afford period products due to rising prices.
29. Over 90% of students agree or strongly agree that UMSU should dedicate resources to ensuring that all students who menstruate have access to free period products through Union Mart.
30. Over 77% of survey respondents were international students.
31. Nearly 95% of students that have accessed Union Mart in 2024 were international students.
32. Nearly 90% of international students reported an income below the poverty line compared to the nearly 85% of domestic students.
33. Nearly 32% of international students report that they always avoid medical appointments and prescriptions due to the cost compared to the nearly 23% of domestic students.
34. Around 80% of the students that have accessed Union Mart in 2024 were graduate students.
35. 100% of students who identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders reported an income at or below the poverty line compared to the over 88% across all students.

“ [R]ising prices [are] impacting me a lot. I am already in a lot of [debt].

My course is too tough. I can't do part time job as I am not getting time to it. And in that this rising inflation making me stressed a lot.

I am not getting what to do [sic]. ”

*– Anonymous student at the University of Melbourne*



# Recommendations for University of Melbourne reform

## Student financials

1. Reduce parking fees on campus for students suffering financial hardship.
2. Advocate for graduate students to be eligible for public transport concessions.
3. Develop Financial Support Hubs that centralise University and UMSU-provided financial support services and resources for students. This includes providing resources to assist students with financial aid, scholarship and Centrelink applications, in addition to financial counsellors and support workers.
4. Require that on-campus retailers employ a minimum of 25% students.

## Health

### Food insecurity

5. Incorporate food security as a key consideration when assessing whether to renew food retailer leases on campus.
6. Move toward a model of campus food provision that sufficiently balances commercial interests with promoting food security among students and the wider university community.
7. Work with on campus retailers to ensure that there are affordable and nutritionally sustainable meal options available on all campuses.
8. Implement the Food Sustainability Ratio to ensure that at least 25% of retailers at every campus have a caloric and nutritionally sustainable meal available for less than \$5 indexed annually against CPI.



9. Provide funding and support to reopen an independent not-for-profit food co-operative on the Parkville campus. The food co-operative would be run by UMSU in collaboration with external providers and guarantee the availability of nutritious low-cost meals on campus. The co-operative must be centrally located and well marketed to students.
10. Have a minimum of five not-for-profit food providers on the Parkville campus, one on the Burnley campus and one on the Southbank campus. These organisations will be charged reduced rent in exchange for keeping all menu items below an amount agreed upon by Students' Council. Further to this agreement, volunteers and staffing are to be sourced largely from the student population in order to provide employment experience for the student body.
11. Advocate for further affordable meals to be provided around campus as opposed to centred at the Student Pavilion to ensure that students have access to meals in between classes.
12. Implement the University Nutrition Program.

#### **Physical and mental health**

13. Increase the resources dedicated to Clinical and Psychological Services (CAPS) with the aim of increasing the number of appointments available for students, reducing waiting times, and providing greater cultural diversity in practitioners.
14. Increase the resources dedicated to the University of Melbourne Health Service with the aim of increasing the quantity and diversity of practitioners and reducing wait times.
15. Provide students with support to afford prescription medications and medical expenses not covered by insurance.

## Housing

16. Advocate for a cap on annual rent increases in university-owned and affiliated student accommodation. This cap is to be agreed upon between the UMSU President and a representative of the University. Whilst this is being established, impose an immediate rent freeze of university-owned and affiliated student accommodation to recognise the extreme levels of housing stress amongst our students.
17. Remove enrolment record penalties from contracts in university-owned student accommodation.
18. Advocate for the repeal of section 21 of the Residential Tenancies Act 1997 (Vic), so that students living in university-owned and affiliated student accommodation can receive the same legal protections as renters living elsewhere in Victoria.
19. Acknowledge that many students must live further away from campus to find affordable housing options and therefore must spend longer hours on campus. With this in mind, expand the opening hours of certain libraries and study areas on campus.

## Studies, workload and social life

20. Provide further paid internship opportunities to allow students approaching the end of their tertiary education improved prospects in finding future employment.
21. Provide further leniency in applications for extensions, special consideration etc. for circumstances caused by the cost of living crisis.
22. Provide further funding to facilitate social interactions between students to combat the increasing tendency of students to avoid social occasions due to concomitant expenses. The most cost-effective means of doing this appears to be support for student initiatives, such as UMSU and affiliated clubs and societies.

## Support from UMSU and the University

23. Commission a cost-benefit analysis of the various food relief services provided by UMSU and the University. Further, seek student input on what services are most in demand. The data indicates that free groceries are the primary request, but this must be consistently assessed to ensure that the services achieved through student funding are representative of student demands, alongside being the most effective and efficient use of said funds.
24. Provide additional funding to expand UMSU's food relief initiatives across all campuses.
25. Ensure UMSU is represented in all campus development discussions to ensure the needs of students are considered from a student-led perspective.

## Intersectionality

26. Take immediate action to financially support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
27. Dedicate funding to ensuring that all bathrooms on campus have a consistent supply of free period products. Further, provide funding to student initiatives that intend to further distribute period products and raise awareness of period poverty.
28. Provide funding to UMSU Welfare and the UMSU Women's departments to ensure a consistent supply of period products are available and can be distributed to students.
29. Provide funding to establish or expand services around campus specifically targeted at students with dependents. This can be in the form of securing student discounts for dependent related purchases, providing funding to UMSU Welfare to ensure Union Mart has baby food, diapers etc.
30. Provide further resources to the Queensberry Children's Centre, Swanston Street Children's Centre and the Early Learning Centre. Additionally, provide further subsidised rates for graduate and postgraduate international students with dependents.
31. Increase the PhD stipend to a rate that is agreed upon in consultation with student representatives, the University and a sample of PhD students.

**“ I am not able  
to eat properly. ”**

*– Anonymous student at the  
University of Melbourne*



# What is a cost of living crisis?

“Rising prices have meant I have to downsize on groceries, and only get the bare essentials. If it wasn’t for Union Mart, I would be skipping many more meals, as on my own, I just can’t afford everything needed to get by.”

– *Anonymous student at the University of Melbourne*

# What is a ‘cost of living crisis’?

A cost of living crisis occurs where the prices for goods and services continue to rise whilst wages remain largely stagnant. Inflation is a measure of how much more expensive things become over a given period of time.

The Reserve Bank of Australia utilises their monetary policy, essentially the changing of interest rates, to aim for a target of between 2% and 3% inflation each year (Reserve Bank of Australia, 2023). Inflation is considered a necessary function of an economy that prioritises economic growth as the opposite of inflation, deflation, incentivises consumers to delay their purchases until a future period where prices are lower. However, since the COVID-19 pandemic, inflation in Australia has far exceeded the RBA’s target, reaching a peak of 7.3% in late 2022 with the most recent ABS inflation rate at 3.6% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024).

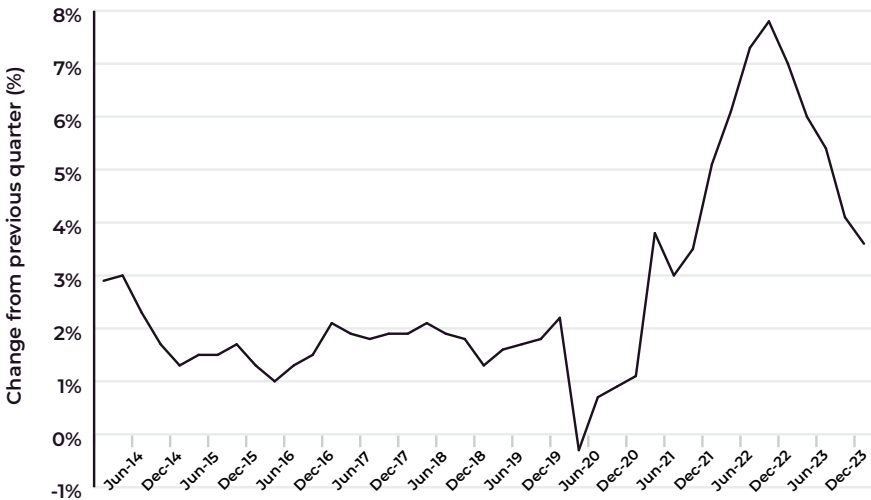
The change between 2022 and 2024 provides an example of disinflation, not to be confused with deflation. Disinflation is defined as a slowing of the inflation rate as opposed to deflation, which is a fall in prices: Australia’s prices are still rising at a drastic pace, albeit a slower rate than seen in the December 2022 quarter. However, there appears to be a significant degree of ‘price stickiness’ in the Australian market meaning that prices are not changing as expected in response to the RBA’s monetary policy (Hayes, 2021).

# What is the CPI?

The most common measure of inflation is the Consumer Price Index (CPI). CPI is calculated by comparing the price difference for a given 'basket' of goods in year X with the same goods in year Y. The % change in these prices between year X and year Y give the CPI. The items within the 'basket' are grouped within these eleven broad categories (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023):

- Food and non-alcoholic beverages
- Alcohol and tobacco
- Clothing and footwear
- Housing
- Furnishings, household equipment and services
- Health
- Transport
- Communication
- Recreation and culture
- Education
- Insurance and financial services

## Consumer Price Index (Reserve Bank of Australia, 2023)





The issue with relying exclusively on the CPI to gauge inflation is that the 'basket of goods' reflects an average household's spending pattern. As a result, it may fail to capture what is actually purchased by specific groups within the community, such as university students. In the U.S. for example, recent research has shown that the weighting given to certain types of goods did not accurately represent the spending patterns of university students and therefore the estimated inflation rate for students was 0.4% higher than the average rate (Michigan Journal of Economics, 2024).

# Demographic

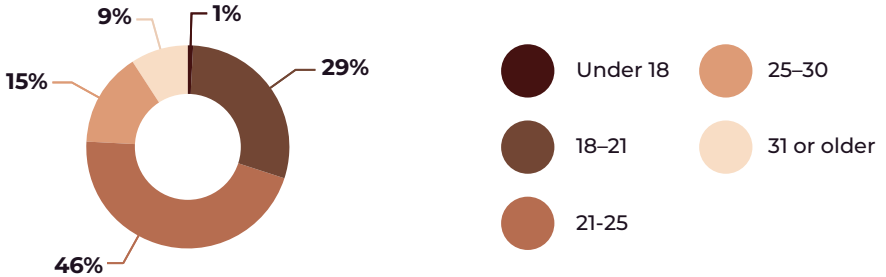
“It’s particularly difficult for grad students like myself who have long uni hours and attendance hurdles for classes. I would work more but I physically can’t due to my uni timetable.”

– *Anonymous student at the University of Melbourne*

# Age of respondents

Of survey respondents, 1% were under 18, 29% were 18-21, 46% were 21-25, 15% were 25-30 and 9% were 31 or older. This appears consistent with the vastly higher engagement of UMSU Welfare services by graduate students as compared to undergraduate.

## What is your age?



# Gender

Of the survey respondents, 76% of respondents identified as female, 21% identified as male, 2% as non-binary and 1% as other.

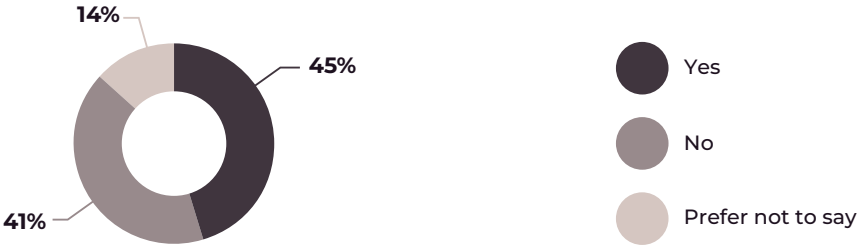
## What gender do you identify as?



# Person of colour

Of the survey respondents, 45% of students identified as people of colour, 41% did not, and 14% preferred not to say.

**Do you identify as a person of colour?**



# Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

Of the survey respondents, only 1% identified as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, 94% did not, and 5% preferred not to say.

**Do you identify as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?**



# Disability

Of the survey respondents, 7% identified as someone with a disability, 89% did not, and 4% preferred not to say.

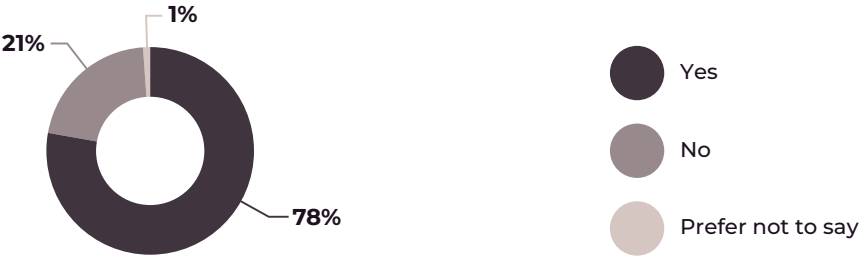
**Do you identify as someone with a disability?**



# International

Of the survey respondents, 78% were international, 21% were domestic and 1% preferred not to say.

**Are you an international student?**



# Student financials

“Even though there are so many options for food on the campus, I’ve never been able to try any of them. I can barely afford my own groceries and rent.”

– *Anonymous student at the University of Melbourne*

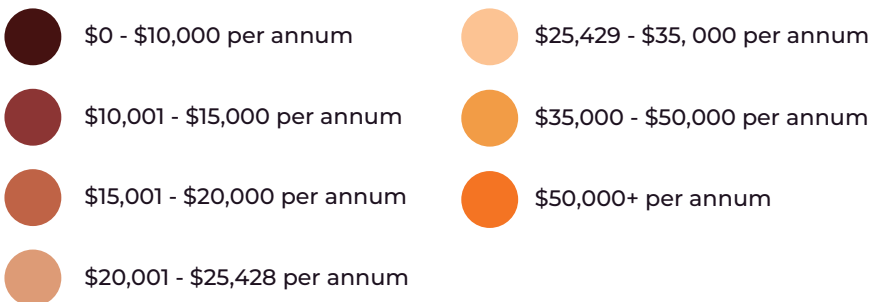
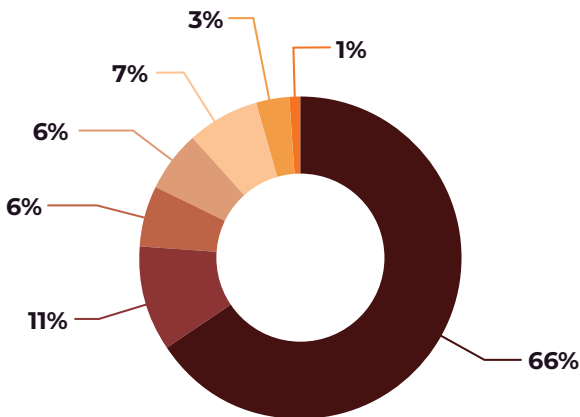
# Poverty line in Australia

The Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) has put the poverty line for a single adult at \$489 per week, equating to \$25,428 per annum. This data will be utilised in assessing how the income of students compares to that of other demographics across Australia.

## Income bracket

The vast majority (66%) of students indicated that they fell into the income bracket of less than or equal to \$10,000 per annum. Given that the poverty line in Australia is an annual income of at or below \$25,428, 88% of respondents reported annual incomes at or below the poverty line.

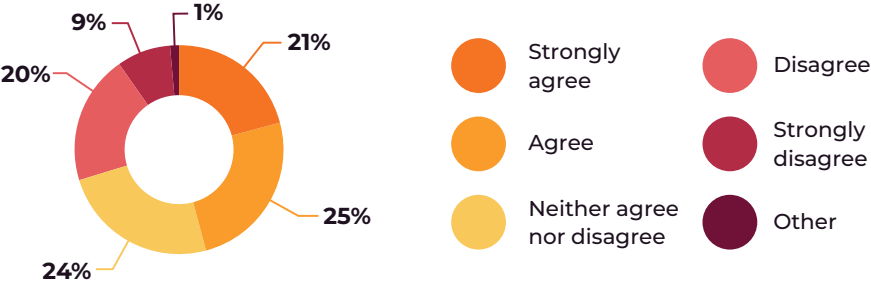
### What income bracket do you fall in?



# Overdraft

When asked if they had to rely on overdraft to make ends meet, 46% of students agreed or strongly agreed. This represents a significant issue for student welfare as relying on overdraft can produce a negative feedback loop. When a student is forced to go into overdraft to pay for essentials, they are then charged an overdraft fee, meaning they have less income in the next pay period and as a result are more likely to have to continue relying on overdraft to pay for essentials.

**🗨️ I have to rely on overdraft to make ends meet (i.e. overdrawing funds when your account is zero to pay for things)**

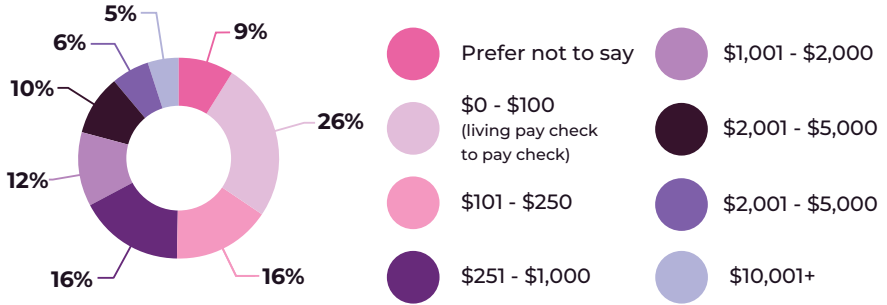


# Savings

When asked how much they had in savings, 26% of students indicated that they have less than or equal to \$100 to fall back on and 16% said they have more than \$100 but less than \$250. This means that over 40% of students surveyed had less than \$250 in savings. This data demonstrates that an overwhelming proportion of our student population are highly financially insecure. Given that students generally work on a casual basis, sickness, injury, death in the family, or any other life event impacting an individual's ability to work can be financially ruinous.



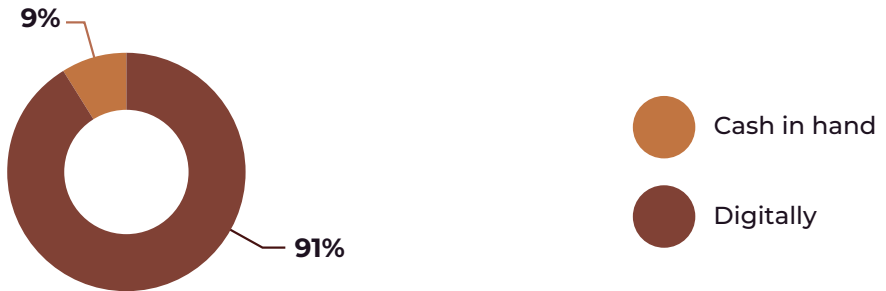
**How much money do you currently have in savings?**



## Method of payment

When asked if they preferred to be paid digitally or cash in hand, just under 10% of students preferred to be paid cash. Of those that chose to provide further explanation to preferring cash, the most common response was due to avoiding tax, avoiding welfare payments being reduced, avoiding card surcharges when paying, digital payments coming in less frequently and having to stretch funds, and avoiding visa working hour restrictions.

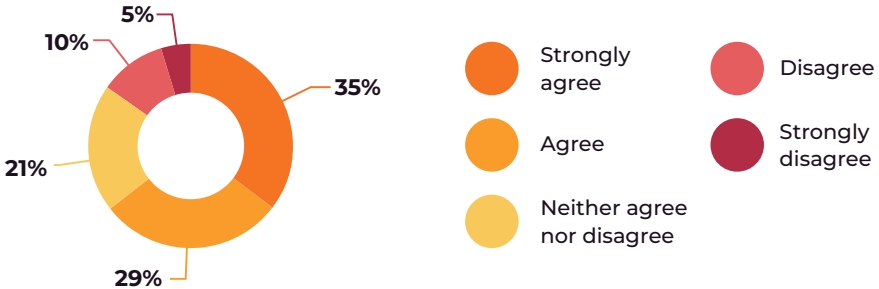
**Do you prefer to be paid for your work digitally or by 'cash in hand'?**



# Student debt

When asked if they were anxious about their student debt and its repayments nearly 65% either agreed or strongly agreed.

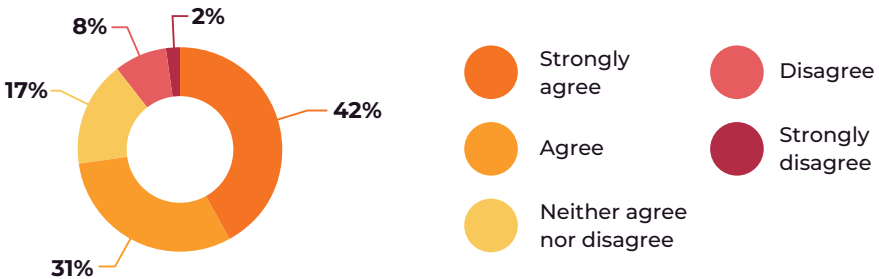
**🗨️ I feel anxious about my student debt and its repayments.**



# Struggle to afford transport

Nearly 73% of students agree or strongly agree that they struggle to afford transport to and from campus.

**🗨️ I struggle to afford transport to and from campus (e.g. public transport fares, parking fees etc.)**



**“ I never go anywhere  
except in free tram zone,  
to avoid more expenses. ”**

*– Anonymous student at the University of Melbourne*

# Health

“I have had to cut down on my meals,  
often just limiting myself to a meal a day.”

*– Anonymous student at the University of Melbourne*

# Food insecurity

Recent research suggests that food insecurity affects between 38% and 41% of university students in Australia (Murray et al., 2021). This includes students experiencing both severe food insecurity such as those going without food, skipping meals and eating less, to those feeling worried or anxious about running out of food. Food insecurity affects a diverse group of students, however, international students, LGBTQIA+ students and those living away from the family home are more likely to be affected than others (Murray et al., 2021).

“ It’s impossible to eat healthy with these vegetables prices. ”

– Anonymous student at the University of Melbourne



“ I’d skip meals often just to save up for basic necessities [sic]. ”

– Anonymous student at the University of Melbourne

## CASE STUDY

### The impact of food insecurity on students





by **Bridgit Nugent, Master of Food Science, Juris Doctor, member of the Welfare Committee**

As daily living costs continue to increase, University of Melbourne students are being forced to choose between buying food and paying rent, resulting in a horrific toll on both their studies and their health. A recent survey of more than 1,600 University of Melbourne students has found that 76% of respondents earned under \$15,000 with more than 85% agreeing they had found themselves removing items from their normal grocery shop due to rising living costs. Climate change will only continue to make these issues even more acute, as changes to food availability, accessibility, quality and stability continue to shock the world.



## Nutritional characteristics of food groups students have stopped or reduced consumption of\*

\*Table derived from the National Health and Medical Research Council of Australia.

 <b>Vegetables</b>	 <b>Fruits</b>	 <b>Milk/Dairy</b>	 <b>Meat</b>
<p><b>Main nutrients</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beta-carotene and other carotenoids</li> <li>• Folate</li> <li>• Dietary fibre</li> </ul> <p><b>Other nutrients</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Magnesium</li> <li>• Iron</li> <li>• Potassium</li> </ul>	<p><b>Main nutrients</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vitamin C</li> <li>• Dietary fibre</li> <li>• Antioxidants</li> </ul> <p><b>Other nutrients</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Folate</li> <li>• Beta-carotene</li> <li>• Potassium</li> </ul>	<p><b>Main nutrients</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Calcium</li> <li>• Protein</li> <li>• Riboflavin</li> <li>• Vitamin B12</li> </ul> <p><b>Other nutrients</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Magnesium</li> <li>• Zinc</li> <li>• Potassium</li> </ul>	<p><b>Main nutrients</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Protein</li> <li>• Iron</li> <li>• Zinc</li> <li>• Vitamin B12</li> <li>• Long chain omega 3 fatty acids</li> </ul> <p><b>Other nutrients</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Essential fatty acids</li> <li>• Niacin</li> </ul>

### Hard evidence

The UMSU Welfare Cost of Living Survey revealed that food insecurity at the University of Melbourne is not just anecdotal. The survey found that 55% of the more than 1,600 undergraduate and postgraduate students who responded would regularly skip meals due to rising prices. In addition to the 85% of respondents who found themselves removing items from their normal grocery shop, the common trend was a reduction in high quality nutrient dense foods rather than discretionary or ‘sometimes’ foods. Specifically, respondents indicated a reduction in core food group purchases including “vegetables and fruits,” “meats” and “dairy”. These groups are recognised to provide crucial macro and micro nutrients to maintain physical health.

The specific nutrients provided from each of these groups are shown in the table on the previous page. Notably, iron is a crucial micronutrient involved in academic performance (Scott et al., 2017) which is found in all of the food sources of which students are reducing consumption levels.

### **Widespread issue**

The struggle to find high quality nutritious food is not just a problem at the University of Melbourne. Food insecurity on campus is widespread in Australia and elsewhere. Specifically, a recent study revealed that the prevalence of food insecurity was almost 50% among university students in Tasmania with 17% of students being identified as very low food security (Kent et al., 2022). Alarming, this is nearly fourfold higher than food insecurity levels in the general Australian population being 13% (Bowden., 2020). The similar results mirrored elsewhere in the world including the US where a recent study reported 42% of US undergraduate students are unable to feed themselves with what they need to stay healthy (Hagedorn-Hatfield, Hood and Hege, 2022). Therefore, indicating student food insecurity is a prolific global problem which will only worsen into the future as the era of the climate crisis and global instability begins.

### **Next steps**

Whilst the problem is clear the solution is simple. Union Mart, a free grocery store for students is something that UMSU and University of Melbourne should make a priority. With increased funding, Union Mart can help close the gap in students' grocery bills and provide an alternative source to the key food groups of which students are having to reduce their consumption. More than 91% of the 1,600 respondents agreed that improving Union Mart is something that UMSU should make a priority. Therefore, Union Mart in addition to other food relief programs should be a key funding priority for both UMSU and the University of Melbourne.



**“ Free lunches and free dinner if possible so that we don’t need to worry about what to eat and when to eat. No need to be so good. Healthy and stomach full is ok. ”**

*– Anonymous student at the University of Melbourne*

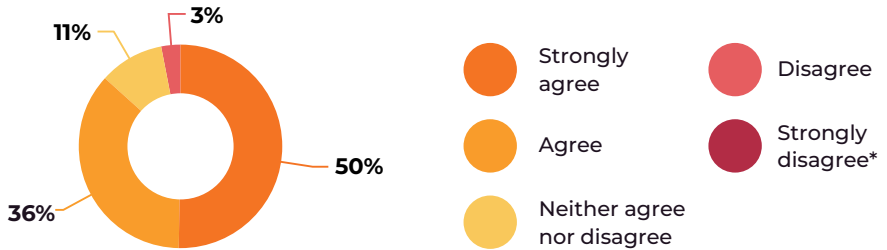
**“ I’d skip meals often  
just to save up for  
basic necessities [sic]. ”**

*– Anonymous student at the University of Melbourne*

## Removing items from regular groceries

Over 85% of students agree or strongly agree that they have removed items from their normal grocery shop due to rising prices. When asked what items were being removed, the most common answer included fresh food and proteins.

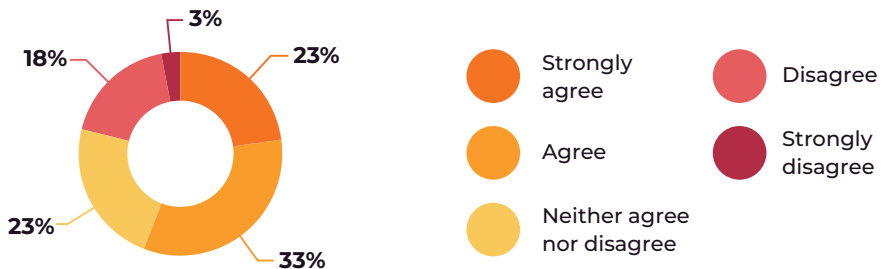
**🗨️ I have found myself having to remove items from my normal grocery shop due to rising costs.**



## Meal skipping

Students have resorted to skipping meals, with over 55% of students stating they either agree or strongly agree with the statement 'I often skip meals due to rising prices'. One study of Korean students found significant correlation between meal skipping and depressive moods, suicidal ideation and stress (Lee, Han and Kim, 2017).

**🗨️ I often have to skip meals due to rising prices.**

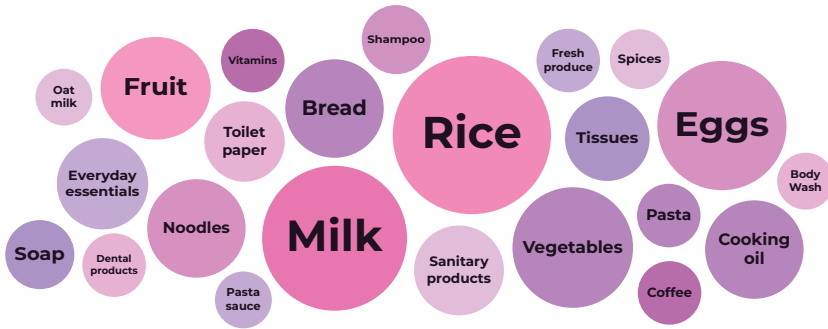


\*Note: segments representing less than 1% are too small to be visible on the chart.

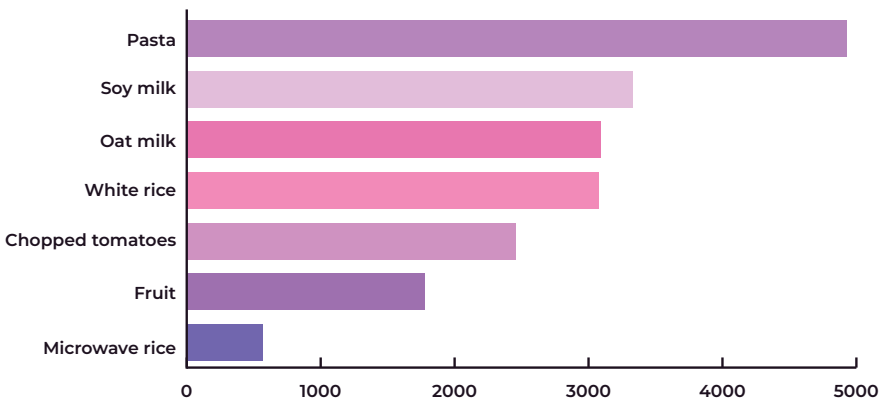
## Genuine need or because it's free?

One of the common queries made about the high use of Union Mart was whether students were in genuine need, or just utilising these resources given they were free. With this in mind, Union Mart has collected data on the items dispensed at Union Mart and the items requested. If the customers of Union Mart were in less than urgent need, the products taken and requested would be items other than basic food items. However, this is not the case, as can be seen in the above responses detailing what items students are removing from their shop, and the two below images showing the items most popular at Union Mart for both checkout and request.

### Product requests from Week 7 of Union Mart attendance form



### Union Mart points spent Weeks 1-7

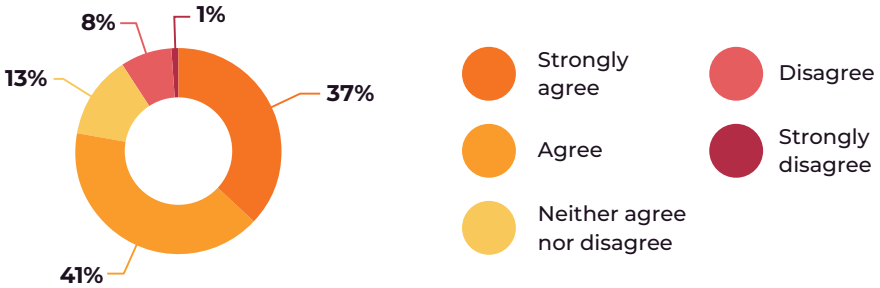




## Less balanced diet

When asked if they agreed with the statement that their diet was less balanced due to rising food prices, over 77% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed.

**🗨️ My diet is less balanced due to rising food prices.**

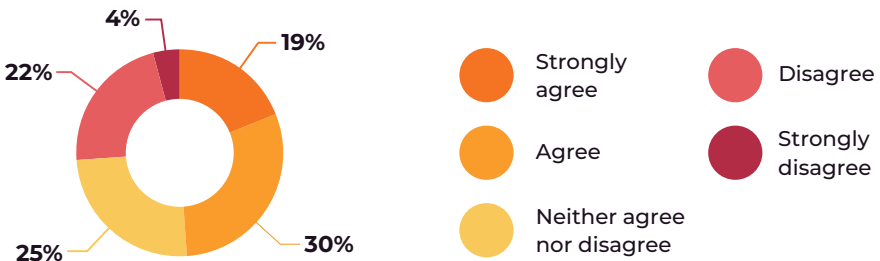


## Hunger in class

When asked if they agreed with the statement about whether they had to deal with hunger in class due to not being able to afford a meal on campus, nearly 50% of students agreed or strongly agreed.

Hunger has the potential to negatively impact a student's ability to learn with one study finding that providing meals to students improved cognitive performance by 13% to 16% (Afridi, Barooah and Somanathan, 2019).

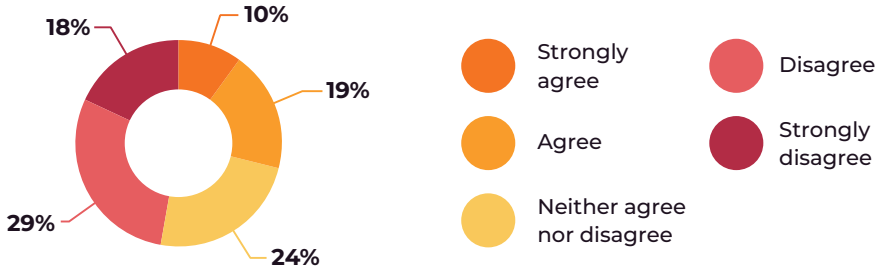
**🗨️ I have to deal with hunger in class because I cannot afford a meal on campus.**



## Food on campus: unaffordable

When asked whether they agreed with the statement 'I think there are affordable options for food on campus', 47% of students disagreed or strongly disagreed, with an additional 24% stating they neither agreed nor disagreed. Students are increasingly relying on UMSU services such as Welfare Brunches for food.

**🗨️ I think that there are affordable options for food on campus.**



“

**I limit my consumption  
of healthy food and  
switched to a more  
affordable one. ”**

*– Anonymous student at the University of Melbourne*



## CASE STUDY

### Campus food affordability

by Sara Guest, PhD candidate in Social Geography & Food Studies

There is currently a distinct lack of affordable food options across all University of Melbourne campuses.

When it comes to the provision of food on campus, the University has prioritised rental income and profit above the wellbeing and needs of students and the wider University community including staff. Most students are unable to afford a meal on campus. Although free food and meals are available at events, they are piecemeal and do not address the underlying problem at hand: that the food on campus is unaffordable.

Unlike in other parts of the world such as Europe and Asia, subsidised food is uncommon on Australian university campuses, although this has not always been the case. Up until the closure of old Union House, the University of Melbourne had its own cafeteria. Since the 1980's however, campuses across Australia and not just the University of Melbourne have increasingly turned to the private vendors at the cost of providing for all students, regardless of their economic position.

It is clear that more student input is needed when it comes to future campus development related to food. Student unions are well-placed to advocate for campus development that has the best interests of students in mind and not what the University thinks students need. Accessible and affordable food on campus should be a priority.

## **Recommendation 1: the Food Sustainability Ratio (FSR)**

There is significant concern amongst students that the availability of affordable food options on campus has failed to remain a relevant consideration in the development of the University. There must be a proportional number of affordable options relative to more expensive retailers on campus. Further, there must be tenancies made available to not-for-profits.

With the above in mind, UMSU Welfare is recommending the implementation of a ratio that requires 1 in 4 of food providers on campus to offer a meal that is equal to or less than \$5 (indexed annually) per serving. This meal must be equivalent to at least  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the estimated daily caloric intake of an average adult and must be nutritious. The best way for this to be implemented appears to be establishing not-for-profit eateries on campus.

The FSR provides a sustainable means of scaling up and positively developing our campuses whilst still ensuring that there are affordable options for all students.

## **Recommendation 2: University Nutrition Program (UNP)**

In addition to the FSR, there must be a means to support students in the most marginal economic circumstances for whom even a \$5 meal might be inaccessible. As such, the University should consider implementing a means-tested University Nutrition Program. This program would target students in the most need and provide them with free and/or highly subsidised meals on campus. Domestic students on low-income concession cards and those students receiving needs-based financial bursaries and scholarships should be automatically considered. In addition, individual Schools should be able to allocate places at their discretion. This is important given that postgraduate students appear to be the cohort of students most in need.

## CASE STUDY

### **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program model**

In the USA, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a federal nutritional assistance program accessible by low-income families and individuals, including university students. It provides households and individuals with a debit card which can be used to purchase eligible foods from retailers (Benefits, 2019). There have been calls for US tertiary education providers to provide SNAP applicable retailers on campus to ensure that low-income students can access nutritionally sustainable meals whilst studying (Lowthert, 2022).

The UNP could draw on elements of the SNAP program by providing eligible students with semesterly debit cards that can be used at participating retailers on campus to purchase selected nutritious and healthy meals. This could be a tiered system depending on level of financial need, with some students provided with highly subsidised, rather than free meals.



Fresh Australian Produce

**“ It’s impossible to eat  
healthy with these  
vegetables prices. ”**

*– Anonymous student at the University of Melbourne*

## **Recommendation 3: the need for a food cooperative on campus**

S 14.1 of the UMSU Constitution provides that UMSU recognises that the Melbourne University Food Cooperative (MUFC) (UMSU, 2022):

- (a) Provides a valuable and unique service for students at the university;
- (b) Supports sustainable commercial and agricultural practices;
- (c) Operates as a not for profit student service which is not in direct competition with other on campus retailers;
- (d) Is owned and controlled by a student base, thereby providing for its members experience in all aspects of running a small business; and
- (e) Creates an atmosphere that promotes social awareness and possibilities for social change, and encourages student participation in activities relating to a broad range of social and environmental issues.

It is the view of UMSU Welfare that the food co-operative be reopened at a central location on campus. As detailed in s 14.1(c), the co-op is not intended to be in competition with other retailers. As has been detailed elsewhere in this report, there is a distinct lack of affordable food retailers on campus to the extent that students are skipping meals due to being unable to afford to eat on campus. Further, students have demonstrated a high level of anxiety about finding employment and the future past university. Therefore, the restarting of the food co-op can aid in combatting food insecurity and provide valuable work experience per s 14(d) for the benefit of all students.

In order to restart the food co-op, UMSU would require additional assistance to pilot a new model.

## CASE STUDY

### The need for a food co-operative on campus

by Lavinia Kailis

The University of Melbourne co-op had sustained a source of community on campus for four decades years before Covid-19 instigated its most unfortunate end. A co-op, short for co-operative, seeks to unite individuals who share values and ambitions within an organised collective. Both member-owned and member-run, a co-op creates space for knowledge sharing, co-creating, discussion, and community building. The university food co-op sought to address issues of food instability among students while encouraging participation with the organisation. In an investigation of the former university co-op, history graduate Claire Hannon identifies the following policies as those upon which the university co-op was founded:

- The Melbourne University Food Co-op will sell only nutritional and minimally processed foods.
- It will sell goods with a minimum of packaging and will encourage the recycling of containers.
- It will be a non-profit organisation, aiming to cover costs only.
- It will perform an educational role through the type of food it sells, its style of operation, and specific educational programs.

A revitalised co-op would retain these policies, and introduce another:

- Non-exclusionary and voluntary participation.

Since the advent of Covid-19, student participation on campus has unquestionably dwindled. In accordance with the findings from the Cost of Living Report, a space that encourages community-based direct involvement with sustainable food systems provides students with the tools to aid them in diversifying their diets.

I propose that a co-op ought to be reestablished on the basis that it will encourage food literacy, conversations of culture, and tactile engagement for students on campus.

“ [M]y family is  
struggling a lot. ”

*– Anonymous student at the University of Melbourne*

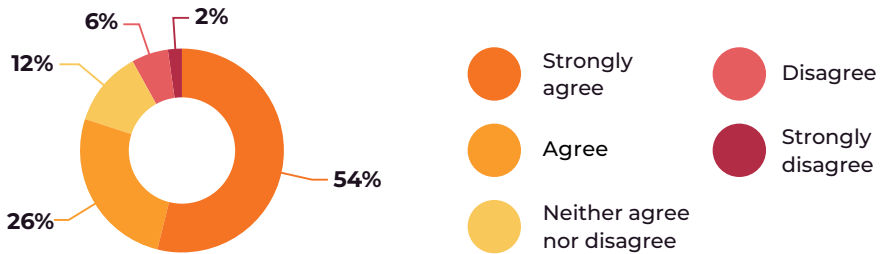


# Physical and mental health

## Anxiety about the future

When asked if they agreed with the statement that they were scared about finding a job and the future after university, 54% of students strongly agreed and 26% of students agreed.

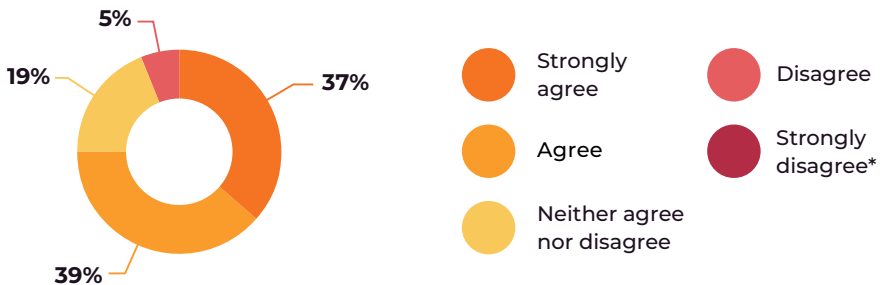
**🗣️ I am scared about finding a job and the future after university.**



## Impact on mental health

When asked if they agreed with the statement that the current cost of living crisis was having a negative impact on their mental health, 37% strongly agreed and 39% agreed. Therefore, over 75% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the cost of living crisis has had a negative impact on their mental health.

**🗣️ The current cost of living crisis has had a negative impact on my mental health.**

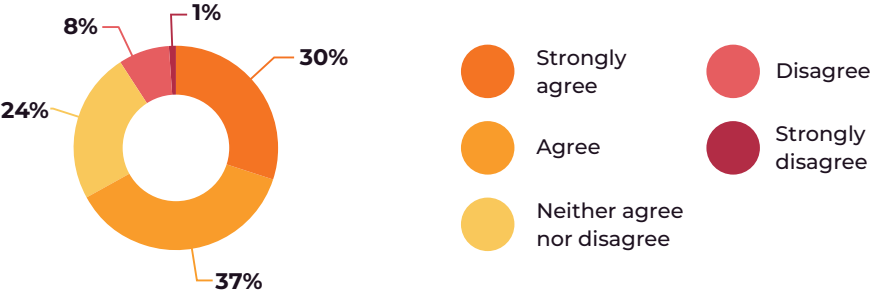


\*Note: segments representing less than 1% are too small to be visible on the chart.

# Impact on physical health

When asked if they agreed with the statement that the cost of living crisis was having a negative impact on their physical health, 30% of students strongly agreed and 37% agreed. Meaning that over two thirds of students either agree or strongly agree that the cost of living crisis is having a negative impact on their physical health.

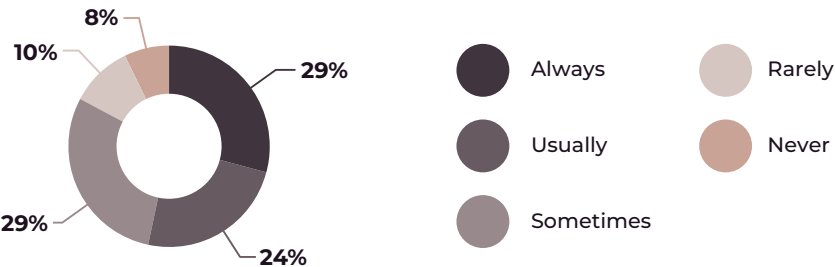
**🗨️ The current cost of living crisis has had a negative impact on my physical health.**



# Avoiding medical appointments and prescriptions

29% of students stated that they always avoid medical appointments or picking up prescriptions due to concerns over the cost. 24% stated that they usually do so, and an additional 29% stated that they sometimes do so.

**🗨️ I avoid medical appointments or picking up prescriptions due to concerns over their cost.**



“ So much insecurity,  
having to stretch meals,  
not getting the right  
nutrition which has  
led to health problems. ”

*– Anonymous student at the University of Melbourne*

# Housing

“[S]tudent accommodation look like a good option for students from abroad but its not worth it it’s extremely expensive but students want an accommodation before moving here have to go for the expensive options which holds them for year or semester long lease [sic].”

– *Anonymous student at the University of Melbourne*

# Decline of student unions

Student unions suffered a near fatal blow with the cut to mandatory union fees in 2006 by the Howard Government. This represented an attack on students, but unions more broadly. A Coalition Government is not renowned for its love of unions, but to escalate this enmity to the level of students was reprehensible.

One of the largest casualties of the 2006 reforms was the decline in available housing owned by student unions with the result being for profit entities charging extortionate amounts to an essentially captive market: an on-campus student is required to live relatively close to the campus, and so student housing with high rents has festered to surround all sides of the campus.

## Housing within Melbourne<sup>1</sup>

The inner-city location of the University of Melbourne poses increased challenges for the affordability of surrounding goods and services. All students are facing difficulties in finding a private rental given the excess demand in the market. However, it is made worse for international students that are not in Australia as they are less likely to be aware of the other options available as they will be required to research within a foreign housing market, and whilst a domestic student can move to commence their studies without the need to have found a secure rental, this is a requirement for international students to commence their studies. The University of Melbourne has targeted this need with offers of student housing alongside their enrolment offers. These housing options are significantly overpriced for services on offer.

In addition, student housing owned and leased by, or formally affiliated with the University can claim an exemption from rental laws in Victoria. This means that students who live in University-owned or affiliated housing are not afforded the protections of rental laws, and do not have the access to the renting division to resolve disputes at the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal.

Further, the University also includes contractual terms requiring students to agree to link their obligations under their housing contracts to their enrolment record. This means that non-payment of rent or other disputes could lead to the University withholding results, or the student's right to enrol or graduate.

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<sup>1</sup> Further information on the housing issue provided by the UMSU Advocacy and Legal Service can be found at: [umsu.unimelb.edu.au/support/legal/policies](https://umsu.unimelb.edu.au/support/legal/policies)

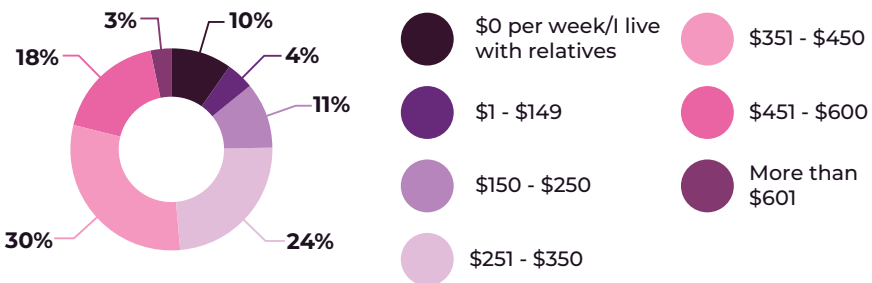
These penalties are wholly inappropriate, and in effect mean that students are restricted from pursuing any disputes. The potential impact is particularly severe on international students, whose visas may be impacted by these penalties.

Student housing stands as one of the most under addressed issues facing students today. The direct exploitation of students through the cost of student housing is a product of the rapid decline in power and influence of student unions: student representatives are no longer at the table for the discussions that establish what type of housing is to be placed in and around the campus. It is also linked to the expanding commercialisation of the student experience, the lack of intervention from local government, the lack of enforcement from external bodies such as Consumer Affairs Victoria, and the educational exemption from the Residential Tenancies Act that leaves residents of university housing and university affiliated housing without the rental protections offered in the private market.

The University is adamant in their opposition to 24/7 libraries, with one of the issues most consistently being raised is students sleeping on campus. To remove these students from the building is to deal with the symptom, not the issue. The University of Melbourne has entirely failed to address the underlying issues that drive students to sleep within campus. Students have been forced into poor quality rentals, share houses in which they do not feel safe or comfortable, and locations involving substantial commutes.

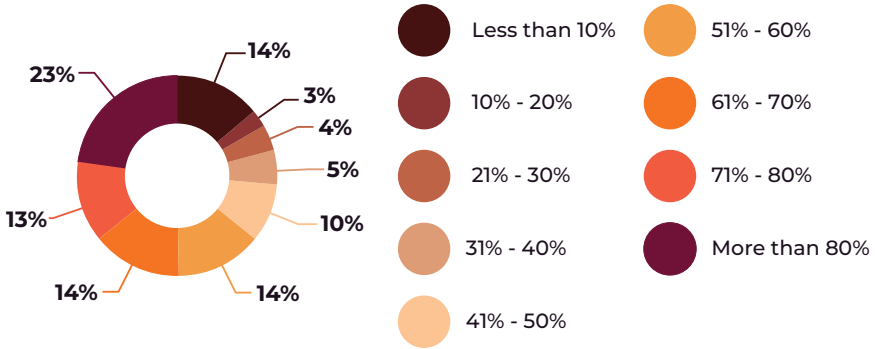
Housing stress is defined as where a person spends more than 30% of their gross income on housing. The following graph shows the devastating reality of students at the University of Melbourne.

**🗨️ How much do you pay in rent (per week)?**



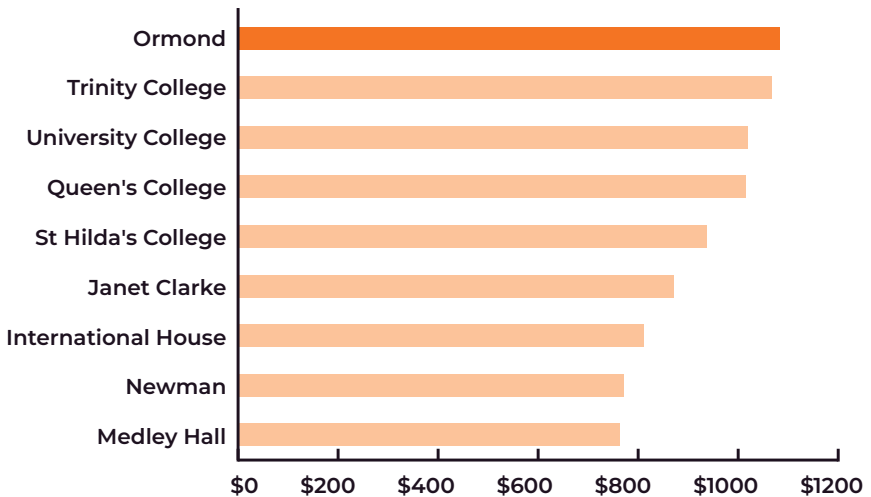
When asked how much of their weekly income was spend on rent, the most common response at 23% was more than 80% of weekly income.

**How much of your weekly income do you spend on rent?**

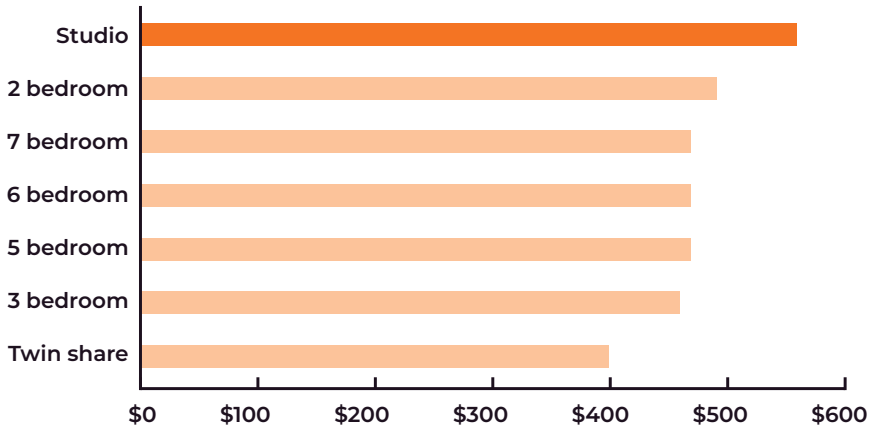


## The cost of student housing

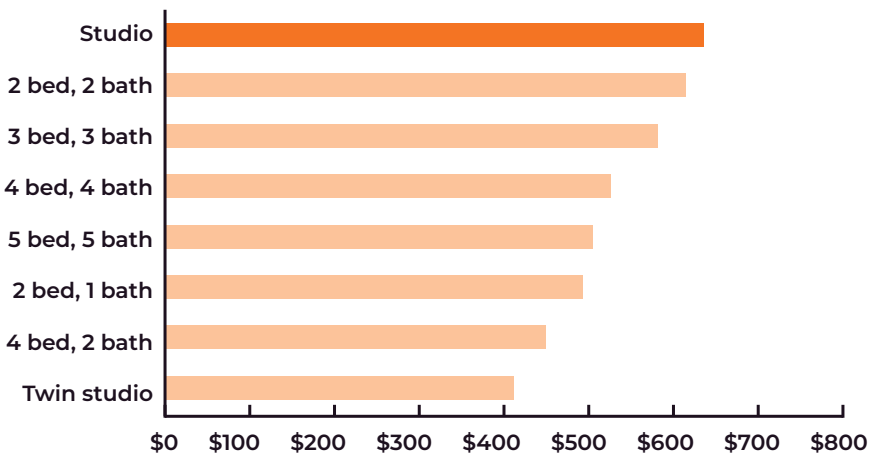
### Residential colleges weekly cost (per person)



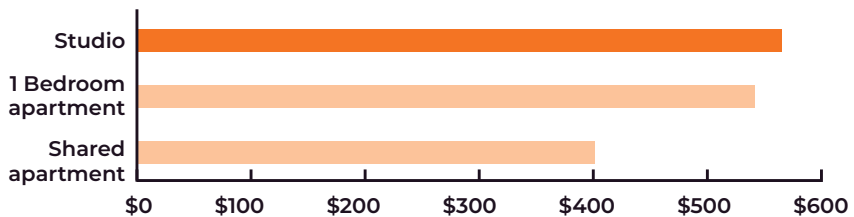
### UniLodge weekly cost (per person)



### Little Hall weekly cost (per person)

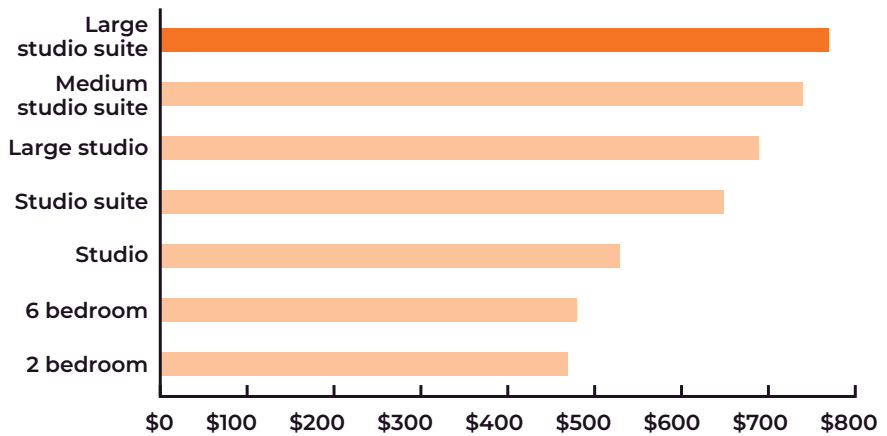


### The Village weekly cost (per person)





## Scape weekly cost (per person)

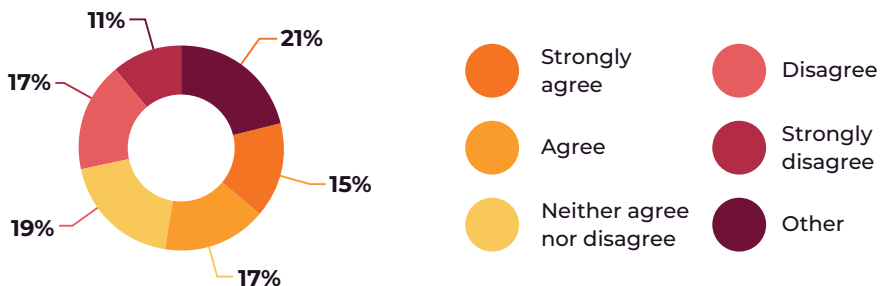


## Shared accommodation

Shared accommodation, whilst proving a fruitful experience for some, can be a degrading and socially isolating experience for many students. If a student does not get along with their roommates, they are forced to stay due to being unable to afford a single property. Further, there is a distinct lack of legal framework for dispute resolution within co-renting situations making changes difficult for students already on a lease<sup>2</sup>.

When asked if they disliked their roommates but continued to live with them to save money, 32% of those with roommates agreed or strongly agreed.

**🗣️ I dislike my roommates but have to live with them to save money.**



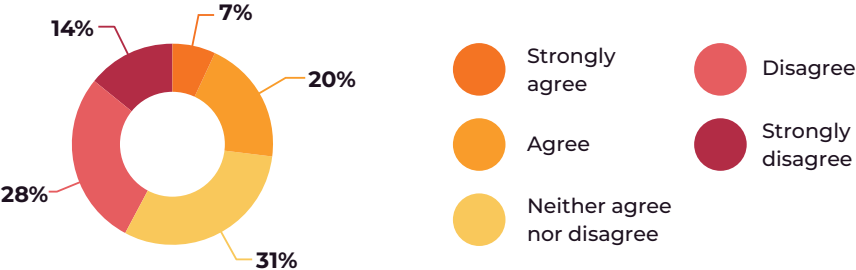
<sup>2</sup> The UMSU Legal team has developed a variety of research specifically related to this issue which can be found here: [umsu.unimelb.edu.au/support/legal/policies/](https://umsu.unimelb.edu.au/support/legal/policies/)

# Quality of rentals

When asked if they felt their rental was good value for money, 14% of respondents strongly disagreed and 28% disagreed, with the most common response being neither agree nor disagree.

Student accommodation is markedly of lesser quality than the average rental on the market. This is not a new phenomenon. However, the continuing increases in the cost of living have caused the cost of these low quality living spaces to increase dramatically with the results witnessed throughout this report.

## **Do you feel that your rental is good value for money?**



**“ As the cost goes higher,  
I have to work harder  
while doing my study. ”**

*– Anonymous student at the University of Melbourne*

# Studies, workload and social life

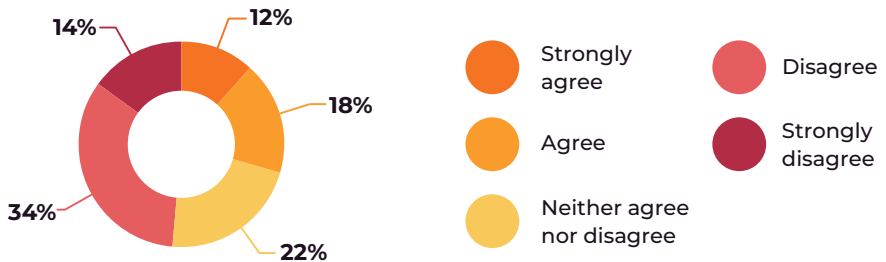
“[C]an’t go anywhere beside school and home,  
no budget for leisure or recreation.”

– *Anonymous student at the University of Melbourne*

# Students considering dropping out

When asked if they agreed with the statement that they have considered dropping out of university due to the increasing cost of living, 12% of students strongly agreed, 18% agreed, 22% neither agree nor disagree and 14% strongly disagreed. This data indicates that nearly one third of students either agree or strongly agree that they have considered dropping out due to the increasing cost of living crisis. This indicates that the situation is worse than that of the United Kingdom, which found that 20% of students were considering dropping out of universities due to the cost of living crisis (Bryant, 2023).

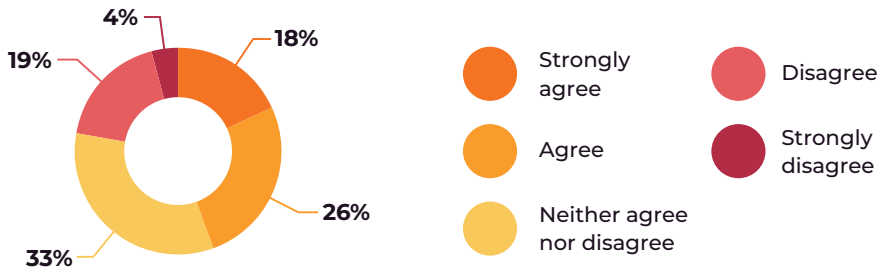
**🗨️ I have considered dropping out of university due to the increasing cost of living.**



## Academic impact

When asked if they agreed with the statement that their grades had been negatively affected by the cost of living crisis, 44% of students either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.

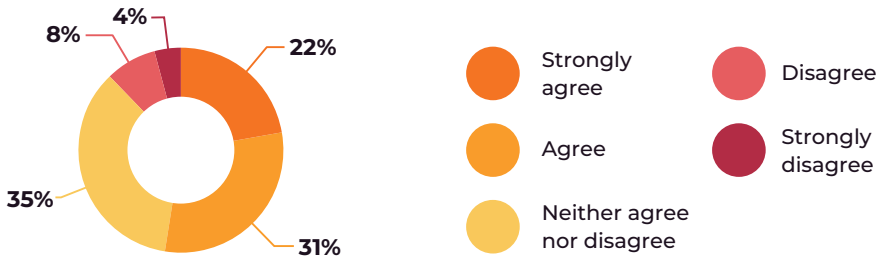
**🗨️ My grades have been negatively affected by the cost of living crisis (i.e. due to having to increase work hours etc).**



# Working hours

When asked if they agreed with the statement that they have had to increase their working hours due to the cost of living crisis, 53% of students agreed or strongly agreed.

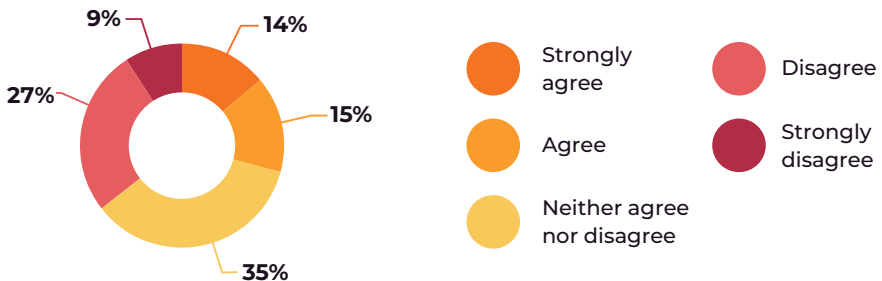
**🗨️ I have had to increase my working hours in response to the cost of living crisis.**



# Missing class due to financial need

When asked if they agreed with the statement that they had had to miss class so that they can work more to be able to buy necessities, just under 30% of students either agreed or strongly agreed.

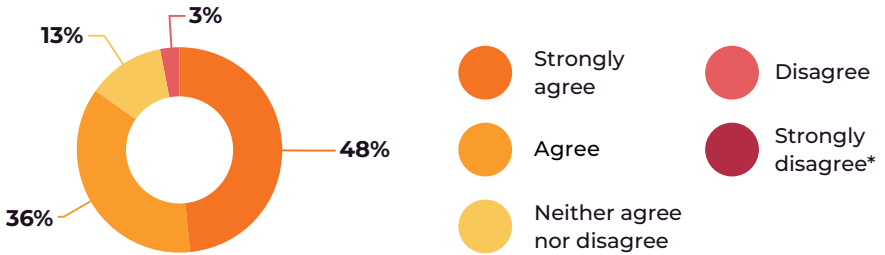
**🗨️ I find myself having to miss class so that I can work more and be able to buy necessities.**



# Changing social habits

When asked if they agreed with the statement that they have had to change aspects of their social life due to the rising cost of living, nearly 85% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed.

**Have you changed aspects of your social life due to the rising cost of living? (e.g. not going to an event due to not having enough money)**



\*Note: segments representing less than 1% are too small to be visible on the chart.

# Support from UMSU and the University

“Allowing more people to take free food.  
We students are very poor.”

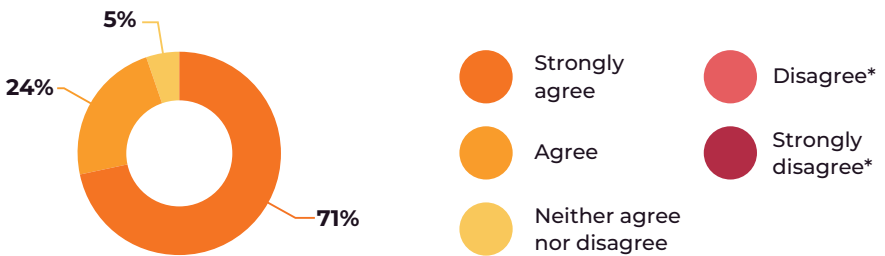
– *Anonymous student at the University of Melbourne*



# Demand for further resources to Union Mart

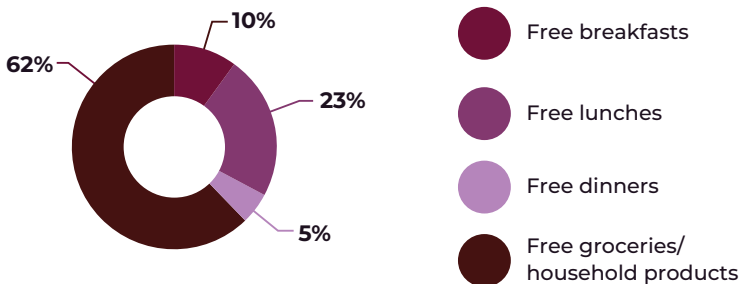
95% of students agree or strongly agree that expanding Union Mart is something that UMSU should make a priority.

**💬 I think that improving Union Mart (a free grocery store for students) is something that UMSU should make a priority.**



## What do students want?

When asked to rank what they thought was the most important student initiative, 62% of students thought that free groceries/household products were the most important, 23% thought that free lunches were the most important, 10% of students thought that free breakfasts were the most important and 5% of students thought that free dinners were the most important.

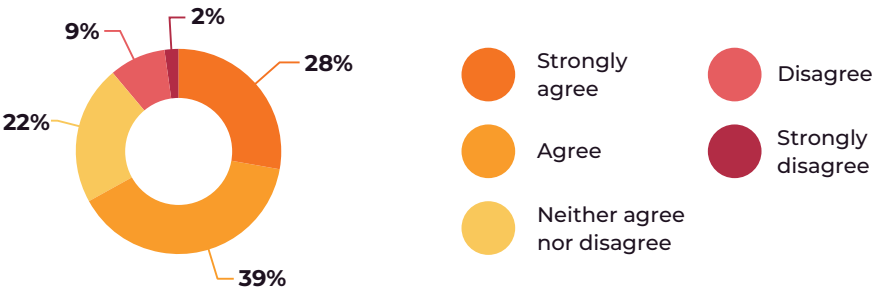


\*Note: segments representing less than 1% are too small to be visible on the chart.

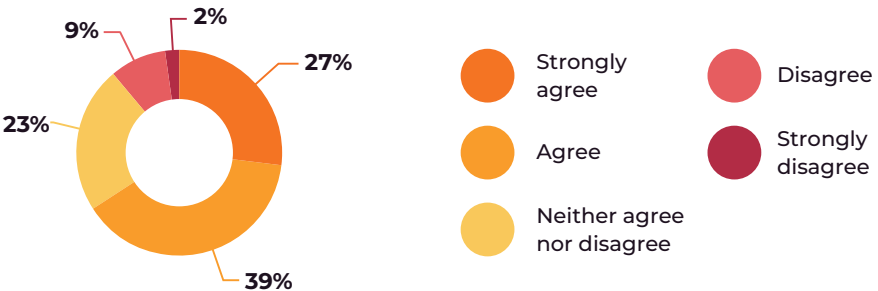
# Feeling supported

When asked if students felt supported by the services offered by UMSU, 67% of students either agreed or strongly agreed. However, when the same question was asked about University services, 66% of students either agreed or strongly agreed. Given the vastly disproportionate level of resources provided to the University's services as opposed to those available to the student union, it is testament to the power of student powered, student led initiatives, that more students feel supported by UMSU than the University.

**Do you feel supported by services offered by the Student Union, UMSU?**  
(e.g. Union Mart, Welfare Brunches etc.)



**Do you feel supported by services offered by the University?**  
(e.g. Food Relief etc.)



**“ Please think about students on campuses other than parkville. Many of the services offered by UMSU can’t be used by students based at other campuses. ”**

*– Anonymous student at the University of Melbourne*

# Ineffective funding

The issue of food insecurity at the University of Melbourne is the product of a variety of factors unique to the circumstances faced by students.

The student union, comprised of elected student representatives, is best placed, both in regard to understanding the issues faced by students on a personal level, but also having the experience and expertise to address these specific challenges. This fundamental disconnect means that the role of helping students during times of food insecurity is most appropriately shouldered by student unions, not universities.

UMSU Welfare's Union Mart program is volunteer run: the people serving are the people in need. Food insecurity programs run by the University are simply insufficient: it provides something that the University can point to when questioned about the extent to which their students are suffering. Piecemeal solutions are unable to correct a systemic trend of prioritising campus retail tenancies over student welfare. Sara Goldrick-Rab<sup>3</sup>, the founder of Hope Center, commented in relation to US institutions that, "it has become a thing [for colleges] to say, 'we addressed food insecurity,' and all they do is open a food pantry (Lowthert, 2022). Given the existence of a genuinely student run and effective program that aims to combat this issue in a student-centric manner, the solution is to aid these student initiatives directly, not compete with them.



<sup>3</sup> [journalistsresource.org/environment/college-homelessness-food-insecurity](https://journalistsresource.org/environment/college-homelessness-food-insecurity)



*Queues to Union Mart compared to other programs*

## **Failure to support students outside Parkville**

Despite paying essentially the same fees, students outside of Parkville have distinctly less support than those at Parkville. This has meant that many students accessing the Reserve Fund are making the trip up from these other campuses.

# Intersectionality

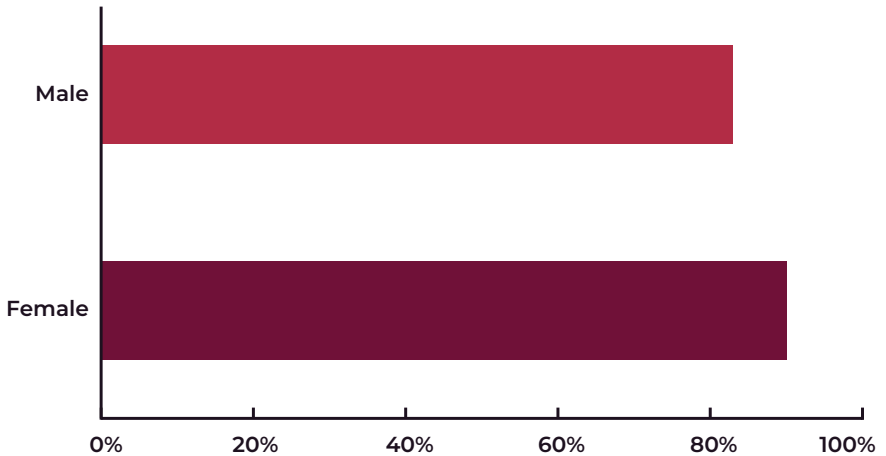
“[P]lease consider supporting student mothers with children by providing affordable childcare.”

– *Anonymous student at the University of Melbourne*

# Female identifying students<sup>4</sup>

When the data for reported income brackets is separated by the gender the respondent identifies as, it was found that over 90% of female identifying student respondents reported an income below the poverty line compared to the around 85% of male identifying students.

**Percentage of students reporting an income below the poverty line**



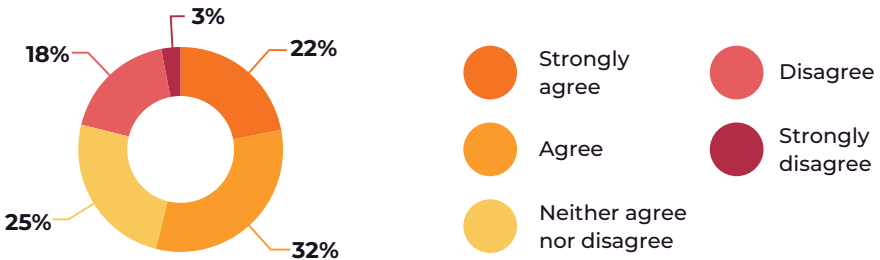
<sup>4</sup> Note that other gender identifying options were not included in the above graph due to insufficient responses

## Period poverty

When asked if they agreed with the statement that they often struggled to afford period products due to rising prices, over 51% of students either agreed or strongly agreed. Period products remain one of the most popular items in Union Mart as the Welfare Department recognises these are just as essential as the other items stocked in Union Mart. Further, UMSU Welfare has committed to never putting a point value on period products, as a student that menstruates should never have to choose between period products and other essentials.

Inadequate access to menstrual products owing to financial stress is a significant issue for persons who menstruate. This issue, broadly termed Period Poverty, strongly intersects with stigma and the lack of education surrounding menstrual health and management.

**🗨️ I often struggle to afford period products due to rising prices.**



## Demand for more period products

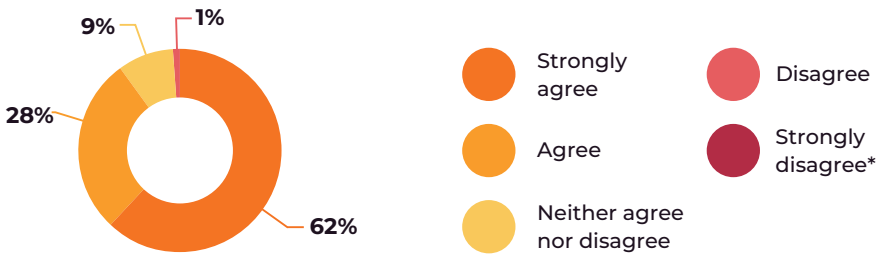
Over 90% of students agree or strongly agree that UMSU should dedicate resources to ensure that all students that menstruate have access to free period products through Union Mart.

Further to hygiene and health implications, basic human dignity is at stake when persons who menstruate simply cannot afford these necessary products. In addition, the provision of free period products would aid in mitigating stigma, as other hygienic products such as soap, toilet paper and hand paper towels are freely provided.



In addition, providing free menstruation products would help alleviate the stress and anxiety associated with Period Poverty, further exacerbated by the present cost of living crisis. Hence, directly addressing menstruation-related barriers within the education sector, namely participation with university studies and student wellbeing.

**💬 The student union (UMSU) should dedicate resources to ensure that all students that menstruate have access to free period products through Union Mart.**



\*Note: segments representing less than 1% are too small to be visible on the chart.

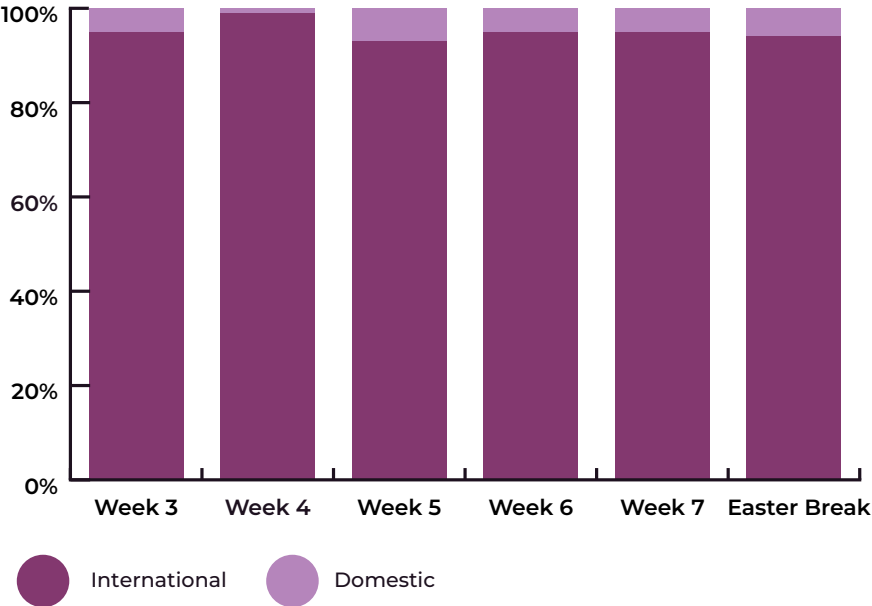
# International students

Current media depictions of international students fail to recognise the diverse socio-economic background that make up the international student community. Many students arrive in Australia with limited resources, leaving their well-established network of friends and family. They do so in search for a better quality of education and resources that they lack in their home country.

We need to recognise the needs of an international student when they come to university by creating a supportive environment that caters for all students, regardless of where they come from.

High attendance rates at UMSU Welfare initiatives suggests that it is international students who are suffering the most during this cost of living crisis. This is reflected in the international student community's engagement with the survey, Union Mart, and other UMSU Welfare initiatives.

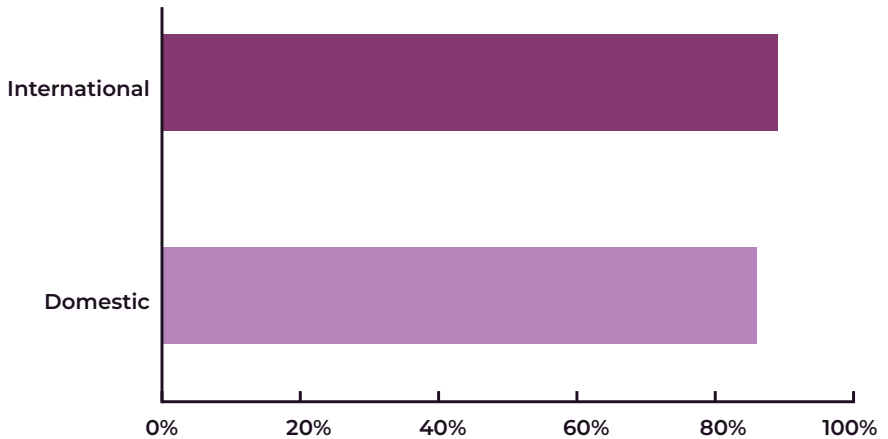
## Union Mart student type



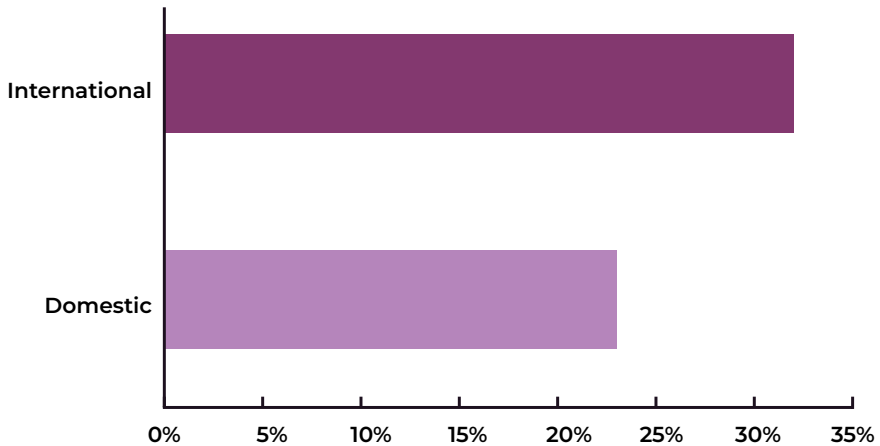
The staggering contrast in attendance to Union Mart between international as opposed to domestic students reflects the failure to address the impact of cost of living pressure upon international students. Further, the University is actively increasing the pressure upon these members of our community by raising tuition fees and raising the prices of University-affiliated accommodation. If the cost of living pressure grows too great, international students face the bleak options of either leaving university and therefore being forced to leave Australia, or continuing to cut costs, with the result being that international students are the demographic most in need at our university.

Over 77% of survey respondents were international students. On average, nearly 95% of students accessing Union Mart are international students.

### **Percentage of students that report an income below the Australian poverty line**



## Percentage of students that report that they always avoid medical appointments and prescriptions due to the cost



International students are suffering during this cost of living crisis. This fact is supported by the data in our report where we found that over 80% of international students have an income below the Australian poverty line. This highlights the significance of international students' welfare in the University, or lack thereof.

More than 30% of international students are avoiding buying prescription medication due to financial constraints, this is very concerning data. It underscores the lack of affordable pharmacy options to non-domestic students. It is especially hard for international students to access healthcare services in Australia due to their ineligibility for Medicare cover. This further makes it necessary to develop an accessible healthcare system for students, especially the ones who do not have a safety net to rely on.

## Exchange rates and purchasing power

Whilst domestic students whose only sources of income are generated in AUD are suffering from rising prices, the issue can be exacerbated for international students with the additional factor of exchange rates and purchasing power.

Australia has been ranked as the third most expensive country in which to pursue overseas education, ranked only behind the USA and NZ (Brodzka, 2023). For Australia, it was estimated that around 2% of annual education costs, \$516, were lost due to unfavourable exchange rates (Brodzka, 2023).

## Visa restrictions

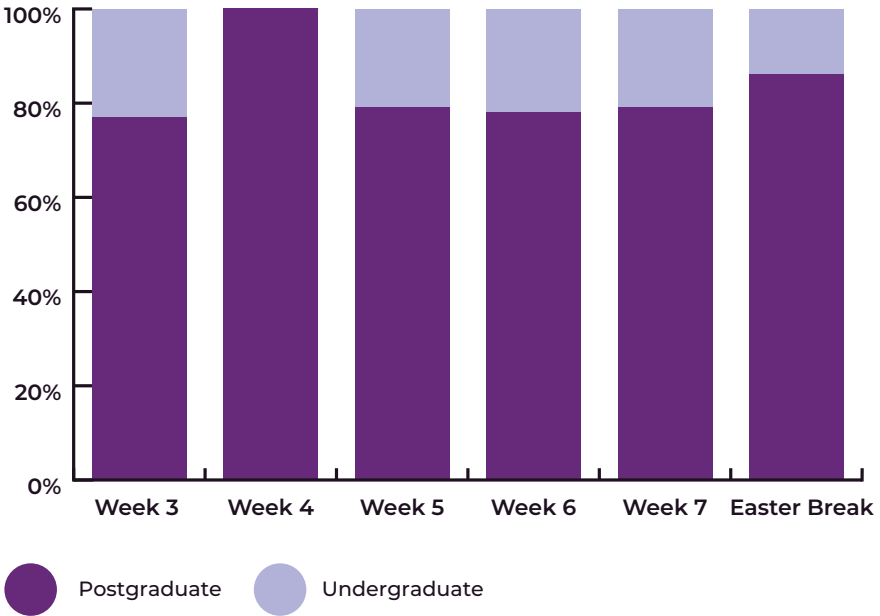
International students are limited to working a maximum of 48 hours per fortnight (Study Melbourne, 2023). Further, international students are required to maintain full time enrolment status whilst on their student visa (University of Adelaide, 2024). This creates two crucial issues for the purpose of this report. Firstly, it places a firm cap on the income a student can seek from their employment as, if their expenses rise above those that can be earned through 48 hours of work per fortnight, then the only options available are to find higher paid employment. Secondly, it prevents international students from engaging in student representation, hence why UMSU was previously dominated by domestic students. Whilst a domestic student running for an office bearing position can simply reduce their study load, an international student is not afforded this luxury.

# Graduate students

The below graph shows that despite representing 48% of the student population, postgraduate students (PhD & Masters) represent over 63% of the survey respondents. This is consistent with attendance data from Union Mart which shows that the majority of students accessing Union Mart are postgraduate students. UMSU Welfare believes that there are several reasons for this:

- A lack of targeted food insecurity measures
- Many domestic postgraduate students being past the age of Youth Allowance
- PhD students being ineligible for Youth Allowance/Austudy

## Union Mart study type



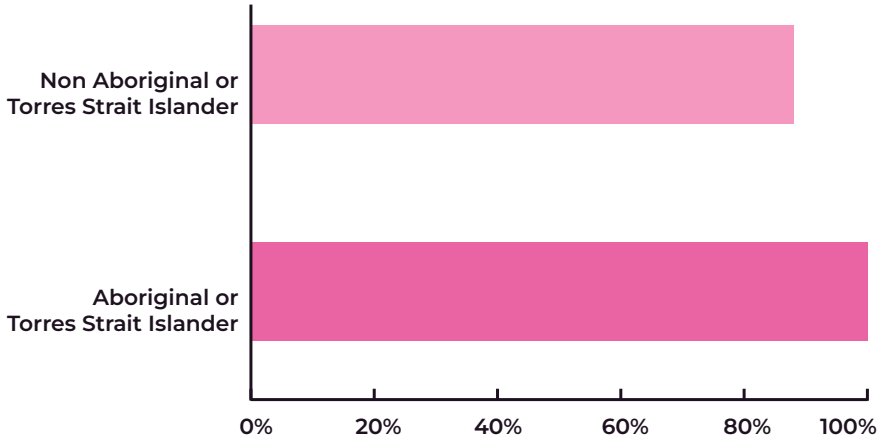
**“ As a postgrad student,  
I can't get support from  
sources like Centrelink  
because my degree  
is not listed as one  
which would receive  
a youth allowance. ”**

*– Anonymous student at the University of Melbourne*

# Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders

100% of the respondents that identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders reported an income below the Australian poverty line. Urgent reform is needed to support our Indigenous community.

Percentage of students reporting an income below the poverty line







# UMSU Welfare

“I am a PhD student at Unimelb living with wife and baby. Our source of income is the RTP stipend, which is barely enough for one person let alone a family of three.

Sometimes me and my wife compromise and what we need so that we don't have to compromise for our baby. Union mart reserve fund has been filling this gap in our needs and we appreciate them from the bottom of our hearts. Thank you for looking after us when the University isn't.”

*– Anonymous student at the University of Melbourne*

# Growth of Union Mart

Union Mart in 2023 relied upon a system requiring students to book in advance. One key issue with having this setup was that the excess demand for the service was in no way captured. The move to in person queuing for Union Mart has ensured that the devastating reality of food insecurity is clearly visible and present. The fact that students are willing to queue for over an hour to gain some basic household necessities is a testament to just how badly students are suffering from inflation.

The first day of Union Mart we opened at 10 am and served 125 students by 12:40 pm. However, as of Week 5, the queue had reached the capacity of 125 students at 10:05 am, a mere five minutes after opening.

Following the unbelievably high demand for Union Mart, the UMSU Welfare Committee alongside the Office Bearers, Joshua and Divyanshi, re-assessed priorities of the Department and cut other less essential programs to increase the daily capacity to 150 students from Week 10 onwards.

In direct response to demand from Southbank students, Union Mart now runs a smaller scale pop-up Union Mart each Tuesday on the Southbank campus.



*Union Mart – Week 5 Semester 1 2024*

# Union Mart reforms in 2024

The UMSU Welfare Department has received significant student response regarding the changes made in 2024 to the structure of Union Mart, most of which was positive, but some negative.

In their 2018 paper, Payne-Sturges et. al, concluded that universities that actively monitored the presence of food insecurity on campus would be better able to advocate for the needs of their students (Payne-Sturges et al., 2018). A similar approach was taken by UMSU Welfare. The issue with a purely online ticketing system in advance is that it forces students to suffer in silence. There was no visual or any other, indicator of how much demand there was beyond measuring how fast it sold out. However, seeing that all tickets had sold out on a digital display and seeing hundreds of students queuing each and every day produced vastly different results within the student body and the university more broadly. The snaking queues across campus are a de facto protest against the present state of affairs at the University of Melbourne. To remove the queues is to fail to understand the root cause of these queues in the first place.



We, as the UMSU Welfare Department, do not have the ability to help every student on campus. Aside from Office Bearers, no person within the hundreds of UMSU Welfare volunteers are paid. It is purely driven upon the sheer tenacity and altruism witnessed within the student body.

 **UNION  
MART**  
is  
**OPEN**

 WELFARE

[umsu.unimelb.edu.au/union-mart](http://umsu.unimelb.edu.au/union-mart)

**UMSU**  
UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE  
STUDENT UNION





Umsu Welfare | Union Mart | Student Market

# UNION MART

POP-UP STALL

**FRI 5 APRIL**  
**2-4PM**  
1888 COURTYARD

FREE household items  
and appliances!

@umsu.welfare@unimelb.edu.au/union-mart

# Reserve Fund

The Reserve Fund was developed in response to complaints from students in serious need who had previously been turned away. This fund provides students with a higher allocation of points, allowing them to collect extra items from UnionMart and/or access additional sessions. The fund is used at the discretion of the manager on shift. To access the fund, a student simply needs to provide a statement attesting to their need. We do not, and never will, ask why you need these funds; we operate purely on an honesty system. The response to the Reserve Fund has been highly supportive, with needs ranging from students supporting their families and feeding children to dealing with homelessness and more.

# Union Mart budget

\$70,000 was the budget allocated to UMSU Welfare for 2024. Of this, \$40,000 was allocated to Union Mart with the rest for Welfare Brunches, Stress Less Week, Harm Reduction and more. This \$40,000 was divided into the weeks that Union Mart would be operating; 24 weeks with 12 each semester<sup>5</sup>. This gives \$1,667 per week. The Welfare Department then divided this by the number of students we would let in each week, giving \$3.33 per student, per week. This number is rounded down to \$3.00 with the excess being placed in the Reserve Fund. This \$3.00 is multiplied by 10 to give the point budget per student, hence why each student has 30 points. The fact that UMSU Welfare is only able to spend \$3.00 on each student per week demonstrates why the need for further funding is so urgent.

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<sup>5</sup> Due to popular demand, Union Mart remained open during the public holidays and non-teaching period surrounding Easter 2024. This week was not included in the original budget

# Your elected representatives

## Welfare Office Bearers

Joshua Stagg and Divyanshi Sati



## Welfare Committee

Udit Jain, Bridgit Nugent, Jayde East, Ally Tayler, Filia Cahyadi, Riya Gupta and Alessandra Ward



U NSWU WELFARE SUPPORT





# Methodology

## Question preparation

UMSU Welfare Office Bearers met with the Umsu Advocacy team to discuss the kind of data we were seeking. The Advocacy team aided in the development of a series of questions that was then refined. The Umsu Communication, Marketing & Events team then assessed the questions and made comments if issues were likely to arise (e.g. bias). The questions were then finalised.

## Location

All responses to this survey were conducted through a survey tool. QR codes to the survey were shown at Union Mart, Welfare Brunches, on posters around campus, at other Umsu events, in the Umsu newsletter, and on Umsu's social media.

## Duration

The survey was opened in week four and closed in week eight of semester one 2024.

## Responses

In total we had 1,679 responses to the survey. Through a fault of our own, some questions were able to be skipped. However, the minimum for each question appears to be about 1,400.

## Data analysis

The majority of the data presented was simply the output of our survey tool. However, in the intersectionality section we conducted some analysis to compare response types for different demographics. This involved sorting all data into two types, those that identified as being of X demographic and those that did not. Then, for a given assessment of Y value, we would take the number of students that met Y value divided by the total number of students in that demographic or not in that demographic to give the Y value as a percentage of that population.

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# Resources


## UMSU Legal

The Umsu Legal Service is a nationally accredited community legal centre that provides free and confidential legal help and financial counselling to current University of Melbourne students.

 [umsu.unimelb.edu.au/legal](https://umsu.unimelb.edu.au/legal)


## UMSU Advocacy

Graduate, undergraduate domestic and international students are welcome to use our free and confidential advocacy service.

 [umsu.unimelb.edu.au/advocacy](https://umsu.unimelb.edu.au/advocacy)


## Beyond Blue

Offers 24/7 telephone support. Specialises in issues such as depression, anxiety and suicide.

 [beyondblue.org.au](https://beyondblue.org.au)


## Lifeline

Mental health and wellbeing. Lifeline offers free counseling via phone call on 13 11 14, or via text and online chat.

 [lifeline.org.au](https://lifeline.org.au)


## UniMelb Counselling and Psychological Services

The University of Melbourne Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS) provides free, confidential, short-term psychological counselling to currently enrolled students and staff, as well as a range of workshops, mental health training, and helpful resources.

 [services.unimelb.edu.au/counsel](https://services.unimelb.edu.au/counsel)


## Headspace

Headspace is a dedicated mental health support resource for young people aged 18–25. You can chat with a counselor for free on 1800 650 890 or connect with them via online chat or email.

 [headspace.org.au](https://headspace.org.au)

## Community Food Guide

The City of Melbourne provides an annual guide of free food providers within Melbourne. This guide includes all contact information to help people in need find food and support in their community.

 [melbourne.vic.gov.au/sitecollection/documents/community-food-guide.pdf](https://melbourne.vic.gov.au/sitecollection/documents/community-food-guide.pdf)

# UMSU Welfare

📍 Level 2, Building 168, The University of Melbourne,  
Parkville VIC 3052

✉ [welfare@union.unimelb.edu.au](mailto:welfare@union.unimelb.edu.au)

📘 [UMSU Welfare](#)

📷 [@umsu\\_welfare](#)

🌐 [umsu.unimelb.edu.au/welfare](https://umsu.unimelb.edu.au/welfare)



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UMSU reserves the right to alter this information should the need arise.

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