

# A Campus in Distress

A Report on the Mental Health Crisis  
at the University of Melbourne

Edition 1, 2025



Written by

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UMSU Welfare Office Bearers (2025)

## **Acknowledgement of Country**

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

We acknowledge that the ongoing impacts of colonisation continue to affect the mental health and wellbeing of First Nations peoples. We pay our deepest respects to Indigenous Elders past, present and emerging, and recognise their strength, resilience and enduring connection to Country. We remain committed to advocating for improved mental wellbeing for all students, guided by principles of respect, equity and inclusion.

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## **Disclaimer**

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## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, we are grateful to all students who completed the Mental Wellbeing Survey. With 775 responses, this data provides a comprehensive overview of the issues relating to mental health faced by students across our university. We understand the subject matter can be distressing. We appreciate students' willingness to discuss their experience so that we can advocate for change in favour of all students and their mental wellbeing.

We are also thankful to our team of volunteers who make all UMSU Welfare programs possible.

While the survey has been supported by UMSU Welfare volunteers and UMSU, the following people deserve special praise and gratitude:

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Finally, we would like to thank the amazing UMSU staff members Lachie James, Juliette Elfick, Skye McFarlane and Jasmine Pierce for supporting us throughout the process and helping in the finalising and publication of the report.

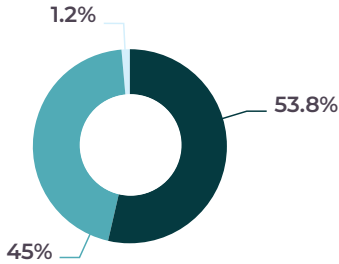
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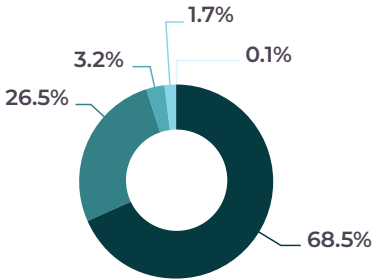
# Summary of Key Findings

## Demographics



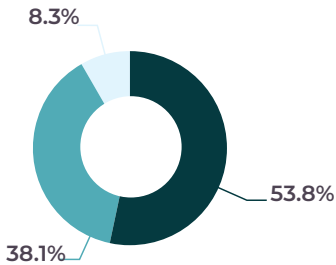
### Study level

- Undergraduate
- Graduate (Research Higher Degree and Coursework)
- Other



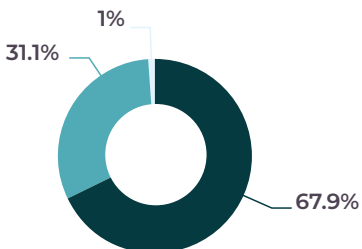
### Gender identity

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary
- Other
- Prefer not to say



### Person of Colour status

- Person of Colour
- Not a Person of Colour
- Prefer not to say

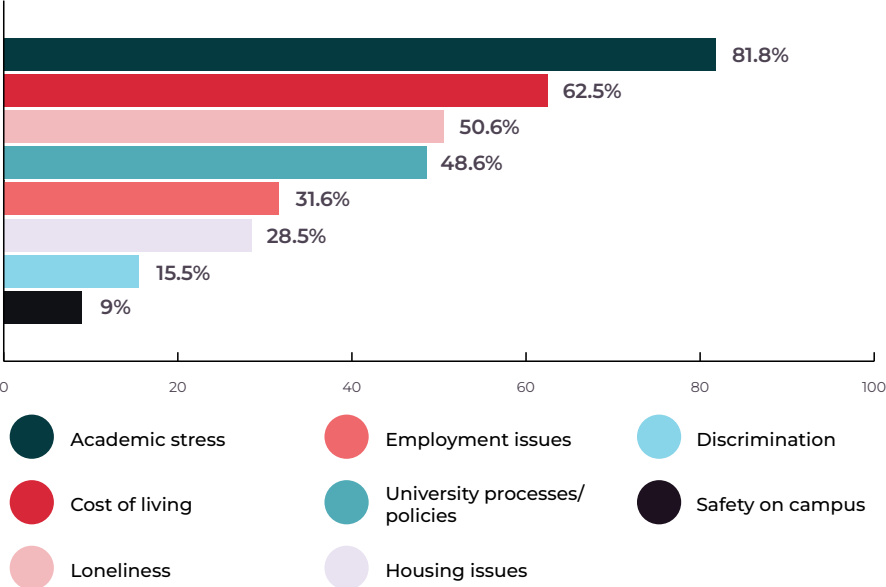


### Nationality

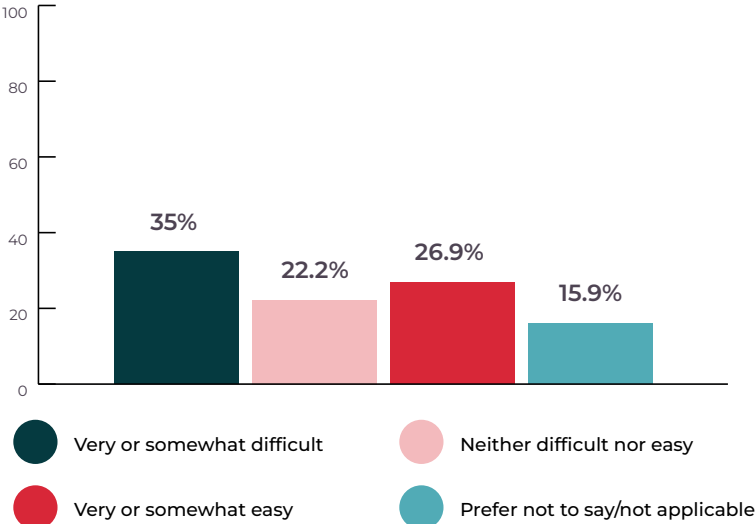
- International
- Domestic
- Prefer not to say

# University Life

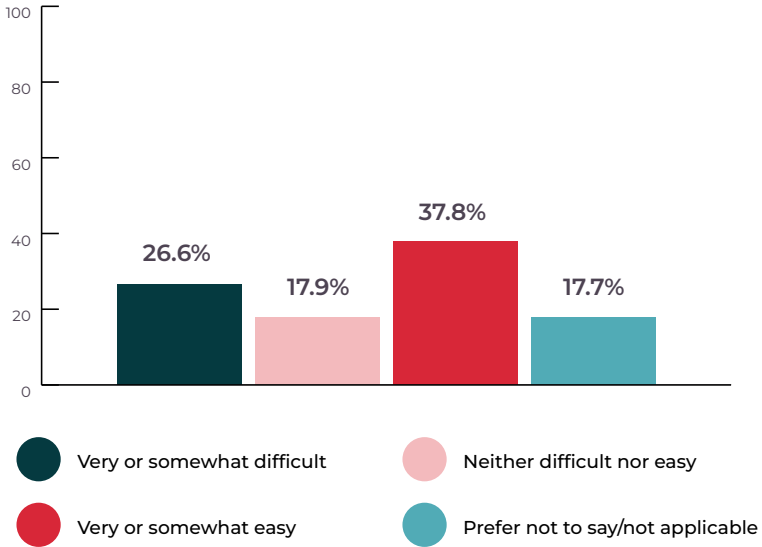
## Factors contributing to distress



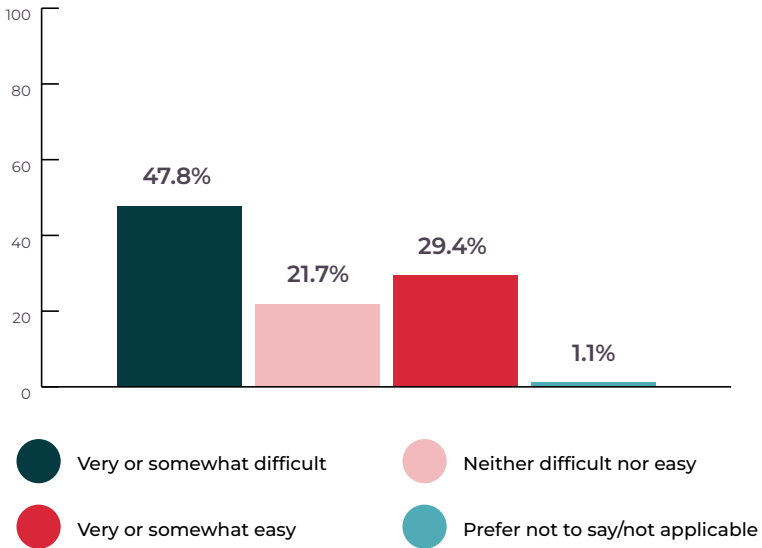
## How difficult respondents find living independently



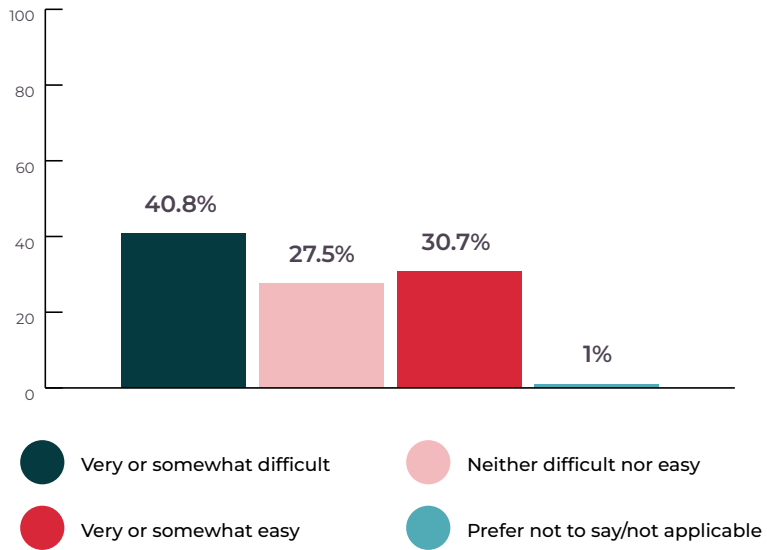
### How difficult respondents find homesickness



### Difficulty feeling sense of belonging



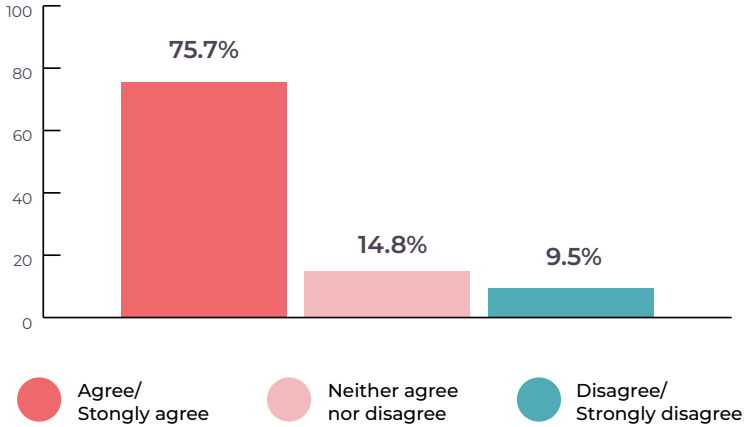
## Difficulty making friends



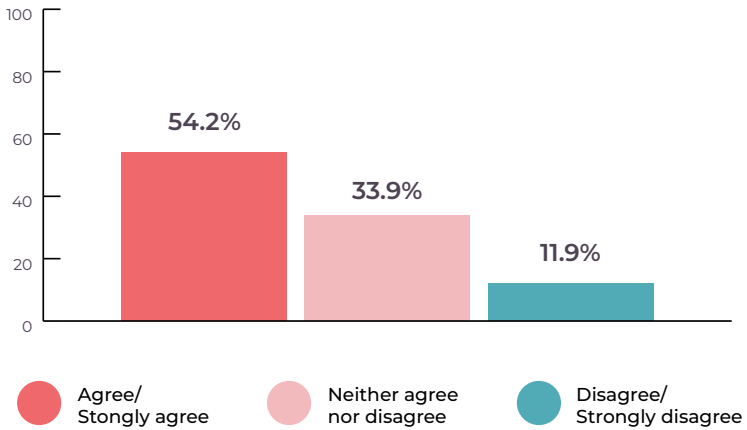
# Academic Stress

Please note: Percentages do not add to 100% as multiple options could be selected.

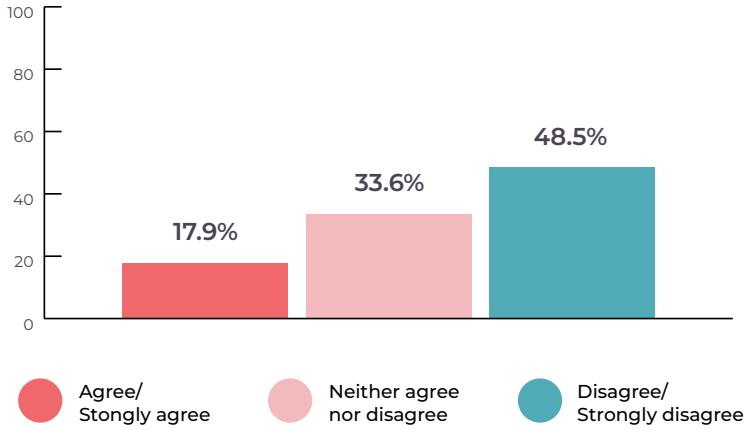
I feel stress due to high academic expectations.



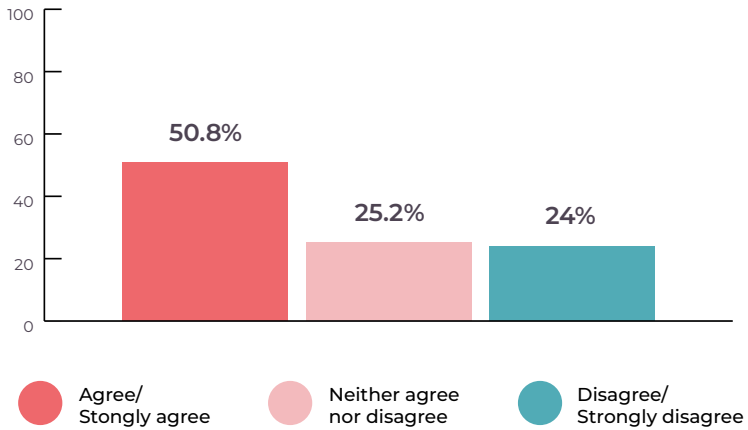
I feel supported by academic staff.



**My assessment load is easy to cope with.**



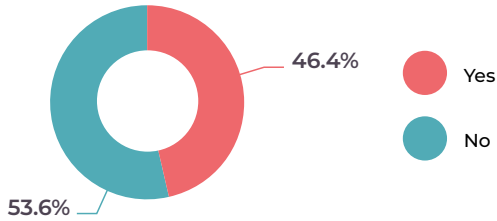
**The transition to study from previous activities has been difficult.**



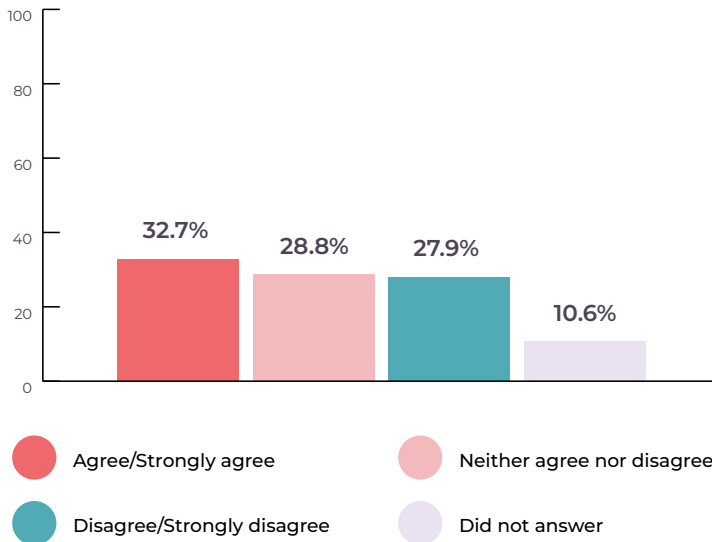
# Special Consideration

Please note: Percentages do not add to 100% as multiple options could be selected.

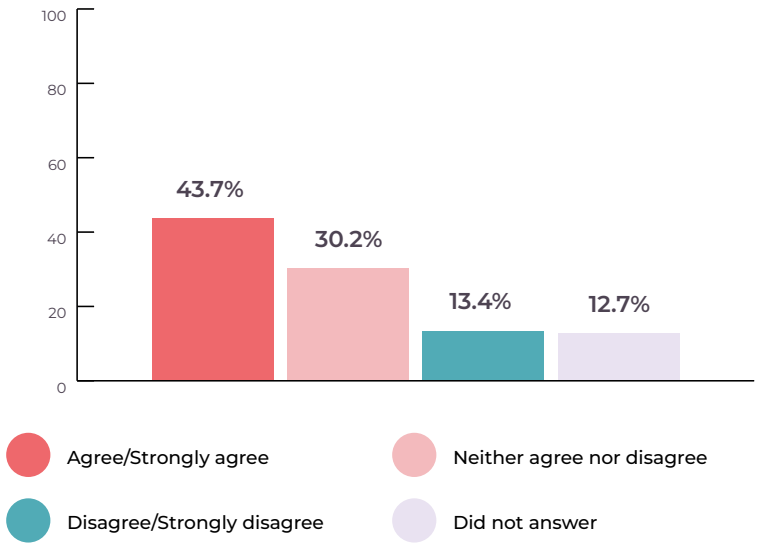
Are you aware of the changes to the Special Consideration policy?



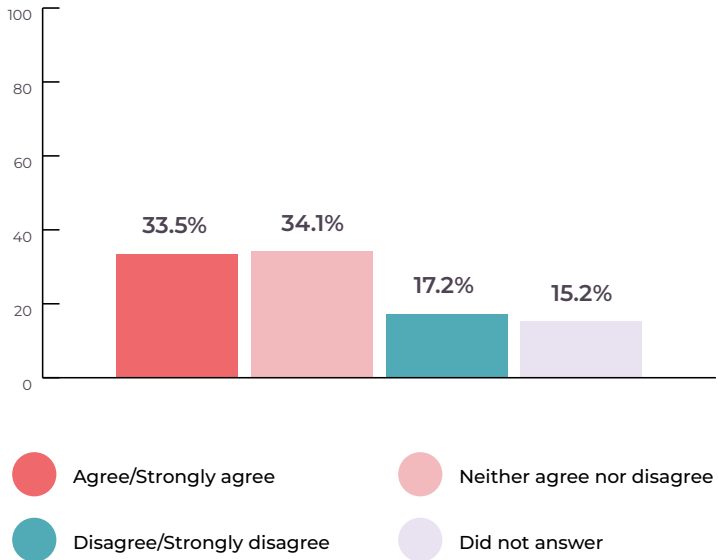
Special Consideration policies are easy to understand.



### The Special Consideration policy has negatively impacted my grades.



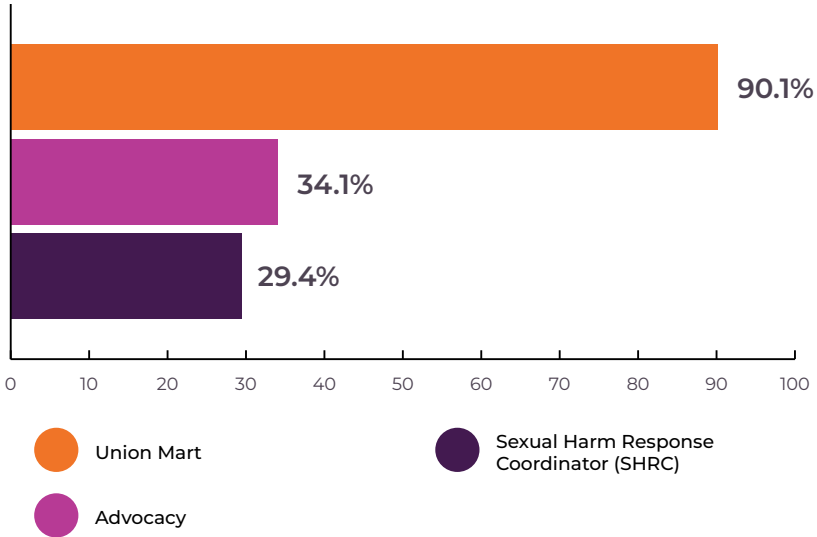
### The Special Consideration policy has negatively impacted my mental health.



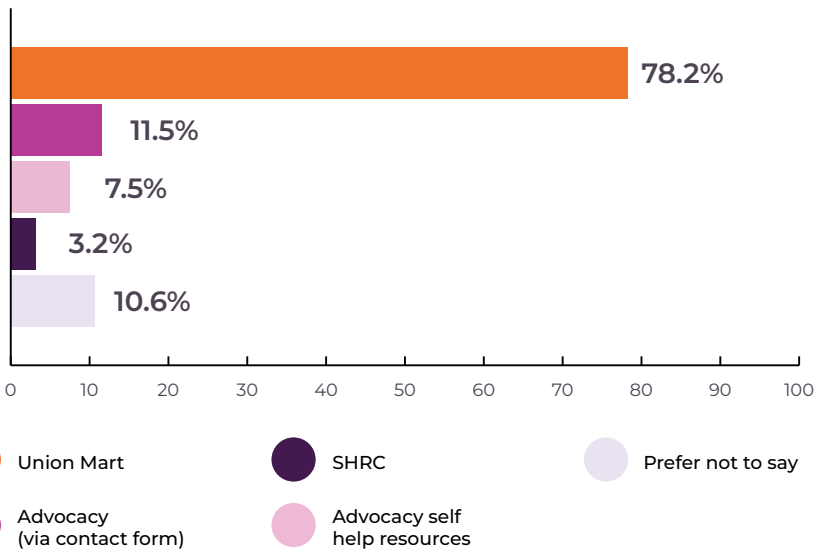
# UMSU Services

Please note: these responses do not sum to 100% as respondents could select more than one answer.

## Awareness of UMSU Services



## Have used UMSU Services



# Key Recommendations for Reform

## Academic Reforms

1. Reverse the 2025 Special Consideration policy change and restore visibility of original grades prior to special-exam decisions
2. Extend Special Consideration timeframes to a minimum of 10 business days, with crisis flexibility and provisional lodgement
3. Modernise and streamline the Special Consideration portal, to include a cloud-based platform with a mobile-friendly user interface, plain-language guidance, visual checklists, automatic status updates, and integrated appeal tracking
4. Ensure extensions are context-sensitive to take into account workload, assessment type, and difficulty obtaining documentation
5. Clarify Special Consideration eligibility criteria and documentation requirements through clear language and visual guides, ensuring that all students, especially those experiencing mental distress, can navigate the process with ease
6. Publish the exact content titles of teaching material for each subject in the publicly visible University of Melbourne Handbook, as this information is what students use to decide which subjects to study for their degrees
7. Establish a scheduling calendar that ensures deadlines imposed upon students across all subjects avoid unintended high-pressure assessment-heavy points in semester
8. Mandate the provision of adequate practice materials, including past exams and mock assessments, to all students prior to exam-based assessments
9. Mandatory training for academic and administrative staff to ensure that all teaching and feedback is trauma-informed and culturally safe. Further, in instances where this is not followed, reporting and escalation procedures for students must be clear and accessible
10. Share results of previous end-of-semester subject surveys transparently with students.

## Support Services Reform

11. Expand the services available through University of Melbourne Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS) to ensure that students can easily access appointments online
12. Increase the number of counsellors available through CAPS, open more daily appointment slots, and extend the number of sessions available per student each year
13. Conduct a focus-group based, student-led review of how students interact with CAPS to ensure that the infrastructure is accessible
14. Building upon the recognition that students prefer in person support for mental health related matters<sup>1</sup>, the University should provide resources to UMSU to establish an in-person UMSU Advocacy Booth to provide timely advice
15. Relaunch the Digital Wellbeing resource with clear, informative and evidence-based pathways through which students can seek support, rather than simply listing information
16. Structured mentoring and language support to build English-language academic writing skills with improved visibility of DELA (Diagnostic English Language Assessment).<sup>2</sup>

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1 See Academic Board 7(25) re 2024 Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS) Annual Report.

2 "Diagnostic English Language Assessment (DELA)." Students, 6 Oct. 2025, [students.unimelb.edu.au/academic-skills/english-language-development/english-language-development-DELA](https://students.unimelb.edu.au/academic-skills/english-language-development/english-language-development-DELA). Accessed 14 Nov. 2025.

## Collaboration with UMSU

17. Work with UMSU to develop a student representative program, constituting a minimum of two student representatives per subject as part of Student-Staff Liaison Committee, to communicate issues raised by students to academic staff
18. Work with UMSU to ensure the University's welfare, counselling, and community-building initiatives meet the diverse and intersecting needs of students and address intersectional stressors including but not limited to racism, period poverty, the ongoing trauma of colonialism, postgraduate poverty, and ableism
19. Work with UMSU to establish more autonomous spaces across the University of Melbourne
20. Increase UMSU funding and resources in order to:
  - a. Increase social support for students through Collectives, Clubs and events, including across other campuses
  - b. Expand Union Mart to alleviate student financial stress
  - c. Expand Advocacy's capacity and accessibility
  - d. Establish an in-person drop-in Advocacy booth to support students through simple matters
21. Establish a Student Wellbeing Reform Working Group comprising membership from UMSU, UMSUi and GSA to develop, implement and review the recommendations from this report.

# Introduction

The findings of the 2025 UMSU Welfare Mental Wellbeing Survey reveal the heavy mental and emotional strain experienced by University of Melbourne students, and that current support services largely fail to address it. Across 775 responses, students shared a consistent narrative of unmanageable academic pressure, limited access to support, and a disconnect between University policies and student needs, compounded by the soaring cost of living.

Our results align with those of the 2024 Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) survey, which found that 42% of students reported high or very high psychological distress, while only 61% felt their university provided adequate wellbeing support. The failings of the University of Melbourne to support student wellbeing may also account in part for their poor overall student experience ratings on the QILT survey.

While the University promotes various wellbeing initiatives, the data shows that the existing structures, policies and programs are insufficient to address the volume of need. The Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS) program remains the most recognised support service, yet only 24.7% of students reported having been able to access it, despite 81.8% citing academic stress as a significant factor affecting their mental health.

Critical failures in capacity and accessibility render the service unable to meet current demand. Similarly, the Student Health and Wellbeing Digital Hub, despite being designed as a central platform for wellbeing support, remains largely underutilised and ineffective. Cost-of-living relief is effectively overlooked, with lunch reheating stations and the Student Canteen hardly sufficient to fill the gap.

These issues have been exacerbated by the recent changes to the Special Consideration policy, which have been widely criticised by students as confusing, distressing, and inequitable. The new policy, which prevents students from viewing their original grades before deciding whether to accept a replacement exam, has created unnecessary anxiety and uncertainty. For many, the policy represents yet another barrier in a system already perceived as unempathetic, inaccessible and inequitable to the realities of student life.

These findings point to an urgent need for structural change. The University must take immediate action to expand CAPS capacity, and redesign academic structures and policies to recognise that wellbeing is necessary for performance. Students are not asking for less rigour, but for a system that recognises their humanity. The University must work with UMSU and student voices to build a healthy, equitable, and sustainable learning environment where students don't just survive, but thrive.

## Demographics

Our sample demographics differ from our membership demographics in a few notable ways. Female respondents and international respondents especially reflected a greater proportion of our sample than they do in our membership.

It is worth considering whether this difference could be due to higher levels of mental distress amongst those demographics, or whether they are simply more comfortable sharing their experiences. Future surveys should examine whether particular demographic groups experience greater levels of distress, or are more likely to underreport.

## General University Life

**“My main issue with the university is the pacing of the break. This semester’s mid-sem break being after week 9 is making keeping up incredibly challenging, and the increased workload over this ‘break’ is entirely counterproductive to calling it a ‘break’.”**

Our results indicate that student wellbeing at university is affected by stressors at multiple levels: societal, institutional and interpersonal. The most reported issue was academic stress (81.8%), followed by cost-of-living pressures (62.5%) and loneliness (50.6%).

Other contributing factors included employment problems (48.6%), university processes (30.6%), discrimination (15%) and safety concerns (9%). This aligns with findings from the 2024 Student Experience Survey (SES)<sup>3</sup> by QILT (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching), which show that 38% of undergraduate students considered withdrawing from their studies, citing health, stress, and financial pressures as leading reasons.

The QILT survey also found that 42% of students reported high or very high psychological distress, while only 61% felt their university provided adequate wellbeing support. As these stressors are multi-level, broad-based and intersecting, we and the University must take a holistic and collaborative approach to supporting students’ mental wellbeing.

<sup>3</sup> “Diagnostic English Language Assessment (DELA).” Students, 6 Oct. 2025, [students.unimelb.edu.au/academic-skills/english-language-development/english-language-development-DELA](https://students.unimelb.edu.au/academic-skills/english-language-development/english-language-development-DELA). Accessed 14 Nov. 2025.

## Academic Stress

“All of my assignments always end up being due on the same week and I never feel like I have enough time to do my best and it’s so stressful.”

According to the International Student Survey Report 2024<sup>4</sup> by UMSU International, a vast majority of students faced academic stress. There, students reported struggling the most with keeping up with course content and understanding assessment policies. With regard to postgraduate coursework students, the 2024 QILT survey ranked the University of Melbourne at 39 out of 42 universities for overall educational experience, indicating persistent challenges in delivering a quality learning experience, even for students who have studied previously. Our results echo these findings, showing that inconsistent support, high expectations and heavy workloads affect students’ mental health.

## Academic Expectations

“I have a strong expectation to perform exceptionally well in university. The workload has been tough, balancing between drastically different subjects. I also have the pressure to do well extracurricularly so I can stand out when I plan to get a job here (going back home to Indonesia isn’t a good option), which is extremely stressful considering I don’t really know what to do and university in itself is already tough.”

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4 “International Student Survey Report 2024.” UMSU International.

Some 76% of our respondents reported experiencing stress stemming from high academic expectations, both external and self-imposed. Many postgraduate research students expressed fear of disappointing their supervisors, particularly when struggling to define research aims or maintain consistent academic progress. Similarly, many respondents for whom English was not their first language described feelings of inadequacy when comparing themselves to peers who are fluent English-speaking peers or have stronger academic foundations.

For international students and scholarship recipients in particular, academic success is tied to financial stability, residency or visa obligations, and future employment opportunities, amplifying the emotional burden. Balancing these expectations with multiple subjects, extracurricular involvement, and career aspirations was described as exhausting.

“*Somehow I have to compete with people who have been speaking English ever since they were born.*”

## Support from Lecturers and Tutors



***“Tutors do not have regard for the fact that other subjects exist.”***

When asked whether they felt well supported by their lecturers and tutors, 54.3% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed. While it is encouraging that over half reported receiving adequate support from teaching staff, there remains a clear need to enhance the consistency and quality of academic support. Some 11.9% of our respondents felt unsupported by academic staff, which many expanded on in their qualitative responses.

Our respondents described support from lecturers and tutors as inconsistent and often unempathetic, with disregard for students' workloads across different subjects. Some even shared experiences of discrimination.



***“There’s a real need for mental health training for staff. They’re approaching mental health conditions like they would a broken leg, something that happens once, gets treated, and then you’re fine forever. But mental health doesn’t work that way. These conditions can flare up repeatedly and unpredictably. Students should NOT be penalised for having ongoing episodes.”***

Uncertainty over whether academic staff will be supportive can lead to students being reluctant to reach out for help, which in turn exacerbates academic issues and increases anxiety. Many students, especially those with anxiety or other conditions that require Academic Adjustment Plans (AAPs), feel especially uncomfortable seeking assistance. Additionally, several faculties are viewed as less receptive in granting extensions or special consideration, particularly when heavily weighted assessments occur early in the semester without sufficient preparation. These patterns indicate a need for more responsive, helpful, and inclusive teaching and support systems, and clarity in policies and communication.



***“[I] can get overwhelmed and find it hard to reach out to staff (I do have an [AAP]). [I] find it hard to pace myself on assignments.”***



***“There aren’t enough previous exams, practice papers, given for students to properly prepare for exams or assignments. Doing these exams and assignments without guidance results in a big risk to the grade.”***

# Assessment Workload

“There was a course in the first week of the first semester which was held in six consecutive meetings/days where each meeting assigned at least four readings. It was very challenging to do the readings and meaningfully digest the knowledge from those readings with the quick turnaround. The assignment was then due two weeks after the last meeting. This whole setup surely didn't help me adjusting nicely to PhD life, more like a shock.”

Our respondents report that their academic workload is excessive, overlapping, and poorly coordinated across subjects. 48.5% indicated that they find their assessment load difficult to cope with. A prominent theme was that multiple assignments are often due simultaneously, sometimes during or immediately after mid-semester tests, which leaves insufficient time to prepare, rest, or produce high-quality work.

Intersecting individual factors also influenced how assessment workloads affected our respondents. Students in demanding courses such as Architecture and Public Policy highlighted long contact hours and minimal flexibility, exacerbating difficulties for those with neurodivergence, caregiving responsibilities, and employment.

The cost of living in particular adds additional pressure, as it is increasingly difficult to balance assessment-heavy periods with the employment hours required to pay for housing, bills and food.

# Adjusting to Studying at the University of Melbourne

“As an international student, adjusting to a different learning environment and habits was initially challenging.”

“When international students first come to study in a different country, I think it would be helpful to arrange a one-month short-term support course on academic skills or learning systems to help them integrate into the unfamiliar learning environment first.”

Over half of our respondents struggled with the academic, cultural, and technological aspects of transitioning to study from their previous activities, such as secondary school, employment or parenting. Furthermore, while we may expect graduate students to have an easier time transitioning back to university because they have studied before, 49.8% of our graduate respondents also reported struggling. These results strongly suggest a failure to adequately support orientation and adjustment to study.

## International Students

Many international students reported challenges adjusting to independent research, digital tools, and learning academic writing skills such as referencing. They indicated that these struggles are compounded by language and cultural barriers, and financial stress, often creating anxiety and self-doubt.

## Returning to Study

Students coming from the workforce or returning to study after years away also face difficulties adjusting to study, including learning or relearning academic skills, and balancing study with personal professional commitments. These responses shared a sense of surprise at the difficulty and abruptness of the transition, combined with a sense that their previous experiences of study or the workforce were not adequate in themselves.



***“The transition between being a working adult to starting university has been difficult. Relearning the skills that studying requires was an unexpected hurdle.”***

## Struggling Families

Furthermore, many students are parents, who face a unique set of problems in their transition to university, especially during the cost-of-living crisis when they might be the sole provider for their family. In 2025, UMSU Welfare began providing free nappies for students who are parents to help address this need. Through our conversations with parents and the responses to our survey, we see the need for better and more accessible ongoing support in the form of an Academic Adjustment Plan for students with children.

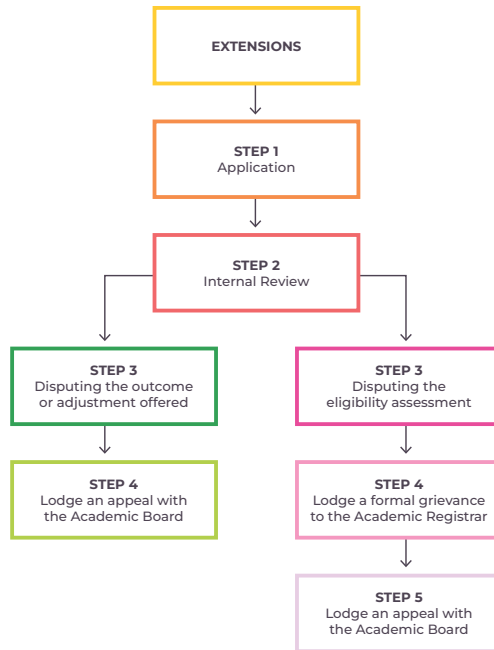
**“The Union Mart has helped me a lot during these difficult times. I cannot imagine life without it. Specially, the reserve fund at Union Mart has helped me with the stress and financial pressure of being a parent. Please always keep it the same.”**

**“I am a PhD student and a mother of two young children. I am currently facing financial hardship, as I have to cover full childcare costs without any subsidy in order to continue my studies. This makes it difficult to pay my bills. I would like to work to support my family, but I am unable to do so due to childcare responsibilities.”**

# Special Consideration

## Extensions and Special Consideration

Special Consideration<sup>5</sup>, under the Assessments and Results Policy, is a policy at the University of Melbourne that provides a one-off adjustment to an assessment task to students who have been impacted by extenuating circumstances. The assessment adjustments may include a deferred exam, an extension on the assignment deadline, special arrangements for assessment or even re-weighting for small assessments. The following figure prepared by UMSU Advocacy<sup>6</sup> shows the Special Consideration procedure.



More detail on Special Consideration can be found on the University's Special Consideration website<sup>7</sup>.

5 "Special Consideration : Current Students : The University of Melbourne." Students, 16 Aug. 2024, students.unimelb.edu.au/your-course/manage-your-course/exams-assessments-and-results/special-consideration.

6 "Special Consideration." Unimelb.edu.au, 2025, umsu.unimelb.edu.au/support/advocacy/special-consideration/. Accessed 14 Nov. 2025.

7 "Special Consideration : Current Students : The University of Melbourne." Students, 16 Aug. 2024, students.unimelb.edu.au/your-course/manage-your-course/exams-assessments-and-results/special-consideration.

**“I have been consistently sick lately with several assessments due. It has been extremely stressful to think about whether my medical certificates will be accepted in time and how I am going to complete my assignments, as well as my regular uni work, as well as catch-up work with only very few days of extension.”**

Our respondents viewed the current extension and special consideration processes, notably the short 3-day policy in some faculties, as inflexible and anxiety-inducing. Delays in response times and documentation burdens were highlighted as particularly stressful. While the University’s progress towards the implementation of a 3-day document-free extension policy across all faculties is commendable, this approach remains too generalised. It does not fully account for varying workload intensity, assessment weightings, and barriers to obtaining documentation.

**“The four business day application timeframe is ridiculous, I have no idea how they expect anyone going through something traumatic or distressing to complete an application in that time. Not to mention that University GP services have a wait time of at minimum two weeks so providing documentation in a timely manner is just completely inaccessible for those who depend on the Unimelb Health Service.”**

# Changes to University Special Consideration Policy in 2025

Starting in 2025, the University implemented a change to the Special Consideration policy, under which students will no longer be able to see their original mark before deciding whether to accept or decline a replacement exam. If a Special Consideration application is approved, a student's original grade is withheld, marked with an 'S' grade, until they either sit the replacement exam or decline it. Declining the replacement exam will then release their original grade, while failing to attend the replacement exam without declining it will result in a zero for that assessment.

Similar to discussions regarding these changes in 2019, the impetus appears to be a suspicion that students are abusing the Special Consideration process to improve their grades. However, the evidence does not substantiate this claim. In 2018, when the Special Consideration Practice Leaders conducted an audit of special consideration applications, of the 152 labelled as 'suspect', only 8 were deemed fraudulent.<sup>8</sup>

Given that 95% of 'suspect' application claims were unsubstantiated, the changes made to the Special Consideration policy are both extreme and unfounded. Rather, as our data shows, these changes negatively impact students who are doing the right thing, causing distress, anxiety, and thereby likely impacting those students' ability for academic achievement. Moreover, these changes demonstrate a lack of trust in students' integrity and assume that the students and the university are fundamentally opposed, a sentiment that is unlikely to produce good educational results.

**“These changes, and the University of Melbourne’s entire treatment of students more generally, highlight a systemic distrust of student’s intentions, and perpetuates alienation and disenfranchisement in students.”**  
**– Anonymous response to the UMSU Special Consideration Survey, 2019**

8 <https://umsu.unimelb.edu.au/pageassets/about/news-and-media/publications/Special-Consideration-Report-2019-.pdf> p 8

# Awareness of the Changes to the Special Consideration Policy

Some 54% of our respondents reported being unaware of the changes to the Special Consideration policy. This suggests that most students were not adequately informed about the policy update, which is especially worrying given the impact it could have on both students' grades and their wellbeing. Given that exams had already concluded for Semester 1 of 2025 when we conducted our research, this indicates that many students may have first found out about the policy changes only by encountering them firsthand.



***“I hope the University realises that we are here to learn and that their job is to facilitate that as much as possible and not to treat the students with the same suspicion as a thief.”***

***– Anonymous Response to the UMSU Special Consideration survey 2019***

## Clarity of Special Consideration Policies

**“It doesn’t make sense. Particularly, the change around attendance special consideration requests. Four business days is not a lot of time, considering how busy people are with uni and work, and also the fact that it’s impossible to find a bulk-billing GP these days.”**

When asked whether they found the University’s policies around Special Consideration easy to understand, only about 32.7% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed. Some 28.8% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 27.9% disagreed or strongly disagreed. The current application portal is part of a legacy system and must be replaced by a new form or portal based on a modern cloud application. The process must be simple and accessible so that all students, especially those in a state of distress, are able to fill out the Special Consideration application without difficulty.

**“There should be more consideration for PhD students too and extensions of scholarship stipends if we are impacted by health matters.”**

# Impact on Grades as Result of the Changes to the Special Consideration Policy



***“I don’t want to be gambling with my marks that will determine my career and future.”***

When asked if they believed the changes to the Special Consideration Policy had a negative impact on their grades, 43.7% of our respondents agreed or strongly agreed. Of the respondents who had been aware of the changes prior to completing our survey, 52.3% believed their grades had been impacted. Taken together with the previous 2018 Special Consideration Practice Leaders data, where only 5.26% of suspect applications were deemed fraudulent, these data show the unnecessarily punitive effect these policy changes have on academic outcomes for students who engage with the system in good faith.



***“The policy changes have significantly affected those who are struggling and only just scraping through with marks around 50. What’s the point of special consideration if students can’t even see whether they’ve passed or not? They have no way of knowing if they should decline the special exam.”***



***“It would probably be fairer if the higher results were accepted, rather than the final ones, as it would be unfair for students in difficult circumstances to be offered another exam only to receive a worse mark than they initially had because of that.”***

# Impact on Mental Health as a Result of the Changes to the Special Consideration Policy

**“I am neurodivergent (diagnosed ADHD + undiagnosed other stuff) and I find it hard to gauge how well I’ve done on exams. Problem is that I need the break between semesters, so I want to avoid unnecessary special exams. But I don’t want to fail because I declined a special exam when I actually needed it.”**

When asked whether the changes to the Special Consideration Policy had resulted in a negative impact on their mental health, 33.5% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed. Only 17.3% of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed. Given the strain under which University mental health services currently operate (as will be discussed in later sections of this report), any policy changes which adversely impact student mental health should be seriously reconsidered.

## Other Considerations

**“Students need to know their initial result before apply[ing for] special consideration instead of spending another 16k to redo a subject. The latest Special Consideration actually creates a subtle mental health issue for the students.”**

The University must urgently reform their Special Consideration processes to ensure that administrative systems do not penalise students in crisis. The four-business-day application window is unrealistic and inequitable, particularly for students experiencing trauma, illness, or mental distress.

Many rely on University Health Services (CAPS), where wait times for appointments can make it impossible to obtain documentation within the mandated timeframe. Further compounding these stressors, seasonal periods of illness tend to coincide with the University's examination period in June and November. Therefore, any new application process must be designed with accessibility and compassion at its core, to enable every student, regardless of their mental or physical health, to apply for and receive fair consideration without unnecessary barriers or stigma.

“**It does not take into consideration that obtaining documents takes time and money. Most health professionals have week-long waits for appointments, and the larger clinics with multiple doctors can cost over \$150 for an appointment.**”

Additionally, under the current policy, students who elect to take a replacement exam are effectively forced to remain in Melbourne until the exam is complete, often several weeks after the official exam period. These circumstances can prevent international and interstate students from returning home when they initially planned. This delay imposes additional financial and emotional burdens, as students are forced to extend their accommodation and living arrangements.

“**Extremely unfair to students who need special consideration or those who are sick in the case of exams and are unable to perform at their best capability due to a sudden illness. Additionally, the “sit or fail” policy is sickening, pushing extra time to a student’s degree for circumstance which are not in their control. This also increases student loans, wringing more money out of students that will have to repeat a subject, having a major effect on their mental health.**”

**– Anonymous Response to the UMSU  
Special Consideration survey 2019**

## Loneliness and Campus Life

Loneliness affected the mental health of 50.6% of our respondents. They reported that loneliness on campus can stem not only from academic demands impacting their ability to socialise, but also from homesickness, the struggles of living independently for the first time, and a sense of not belonging in a hostile environment.

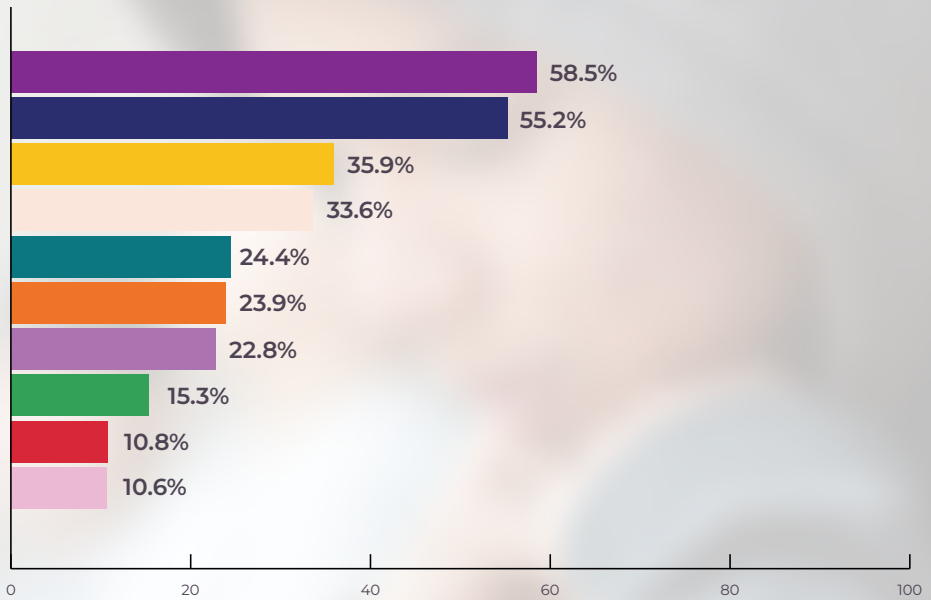
### Homesickness and Living Independently

Homesickness affected 35% of our respondents, while 26.7% found living independently difficult or very difficult. For domestic students, the cost-of-living crisis makes moving out and living independently increasingly stressful. For international students, homesickness can mean more than just missing their family, but missing cultural familiarity.

### Making New Friends and Feeling a Sense of Belonging on Campus

Our respondents also found it difficult to make friends on campus, with 47.8% of the respondents reported to be somewhat hard or very hard. Some 40.8% also struggled to feel a sense of belonging at university. Given the previous results illustrating the sense of distrust that the University holds towards students, it is not surprising that two fifths of our respondents felt like they didn't belong.

The table below lists ways our respondents reported making social connections on campus, and the proportions of our respondents who found each way useful. These figures highlight the key areas of focus for social and wellbeing initiatives at the University, particularly those led by UMSU. Clubs and Societies and Volunteering were the top two ways our respondents built friendships through UMSU.



- Club and Societies
- Hangout spots (e.g., Ida Bar, South Lawn)
- Melbourne University Sports
- Academic activities (e.g., group projects)
- UMSU department support services (e.g., Welfare Breakfast)
- Student theatre
- Volunteering (with UMSU, Welfare, or Union Mart)
- O Week Activities (e.g., Speedfriending)
- Autonomous spaces and collectives
- Events and activities (e.g., Tuesday bands)

These programs serve as spaces where students can develop a sense of belonging with likeminded people, while in the case of volunteering, also helping them contribute to the wider university community. As the above table demonstrates, Clubs and Societies and other UMSU initiatives are vital to assist students to make friends and feel a sense of belonging on campus. It is therefore imperative that UMSU receives adequate funding in order to continue delivering these initiatives.

# University Support Services

When asked which University services they were aware of, 74.7% of the respondents reported that they were aware of CAPS, the University's Counselling and Psychological Services, 62.4% were aware of MU Sport and/or Sports Clubs, 38.6% were aware of the Safer Community Program, and 35.4% were aware of the Mental Health Crisis Support Service. When further questioned whether they have used any of the services before, 63.1% of the respondents selected 'None of the Above'. The open responses suggest that inaccessibility, including limited appointments and confusing systems, may largely drive this extreme underutilisation.

## Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS)



***“There needs to be a reform of the CAPS system immediately. I had one appointment and have been unable to get one since, the lack of availability is challenging.”***

While most of our respondents were aware of CAPS, only 24.7% had been able to access its services. This is despite over 81.8% identifying academic pressures as a major stressor, which CAPS would be more equipped to understand and address than an external service. Our open responses contained consistent themes of long wait times, inability to book appointments, and difficulty using the system while suffering from psychological distress. While UMSU understands that the University has invested substantial resources into expanding the support offered through CAPS in 2025, our data indicates that the current capacity of CAPS is still insufficient to meet student demand.

Some reputational damage has already been done to CAPS in the form of the widespread perception that appointments are unavailable. This perception is damaging regardless of whether it is accurate or not, as students may be deterred from seeking support even if it is actually available.

“Additionally, the university should invest in CAPS and other psychology services. Getting an initial appointment is hard. Getting an initial appointment while dealing with mental health issues is impossible. You can only get appointments if you wake up before 9.30. My mental health was so bad, my friend had to drag me to CAPS because I couldn’t get an appointment myself. CAPS is a privilege given to people with an existing support system or those who are mentally healthier to be able to properly get things done.”

# Mindful Murdoch and Resilience-based Online Intervention at University of Technology Sydney

*Mindful Murdoch*<sup>9</sup> is a wellbeing initiative by Murdoch University created to help students manage stress, which we feel could be replicated at the University of Melbourne. It includes a toolkit with short, guided practices such as body scans, mindful seeing and 3-minute breathing space. It also includes on-campus sessions including yoga sessions and *Mindful Mondays*. This program integrates very well with broader university wellbeing services like counselling and other accessibility services.

A similar intervention could be effective at the University of Melbourne, because mindfulness has a strong empirical evidence base for reducing stress, improving attention and emotional regulation. Further, building an intervention like this into campus life, as was done with the Mindful Murdoch initiative, makes it more accessible for time-poor students. Relatively little is required in terms of outlay, making it potentially an extremely cost-effective measure for the University to implement.

The success of the *Mindful Murdoch* program at improving the overall mental wellbeing of students and forming meaningful friendships is something we should aim to replicate at the University of Melbourne.

“Activities focused around mental well-being such as painting/yoga etc. are really enjoyable and make a difference to students who otherwise don’t have access to those resources.”

9 “Mindful Murdoch.” MU - MyMurdoch, 2025, [www.murdoch.edu.au/mymurdoch/support-advice/health-wellbeing/mindful-murdoch](http://www.murdoch.edu.au/mymurdoch/support-advice/health-wellbeing/mindful-murdoch).

Along a similar vein, a study at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), titled *'Investigating ways to contextualising a mindfulness and resilience based online intervention for busy academics'*<sup>10</sup>, aimed to address time poverty by designing short practices with flexible scheduling in a six-week pilot with about 15 participants. This pilot program offered mindfulness practices including short body scans, mindful walking, mindful listening, and embedded resilience practice. This, on an overall basis, increased levels of mindfulness and resilience amongst participants.

This further shows that mindfulness programs like the UTS pilot and Mindful Murdoch could be beneficial not only for our undergraduate and coursework students but also for our PhD and Graduate Research students. Such initiatives could help reduce reliance of students on one-to-one counselling services, which would thereby help reduce the burden on CAPS, potentially lowering wait times for students in greater levels of distress.

“In terms of processes to support students struggling with distress secondary to academic stress or university processes, the university approach is to refer to the counselling services however when you go to book a counselling appointment there are never any appointments available; this feels then that there isn't any university support available.”

“More therapy dog events.”

10 Wells, Jonathan (Jonny). Investigating Ways to Contextualise a Mindfulness and Resilience Based Online Intervention for Busy Academics. 8 May 2025, [hdl.handle.net/10453/189032](https://hdl.handle.net/10453/189032). Accessed Oct. 2025.

## UMSU Services

When asked which UMSU services they were aware of, only 34.1% of the respondents had heard of UMSU Advocacy, 29.4% of the respondents had heard of SHRC (Sexual Harm Response Coordinator) Support, and 90.1% of the respondents had heard of Union Mart.

We must note that, as both this survey and Union Mart are conducted by UMSU's Welfare Department, sampling bias may account in part for the particularly high percentage of students aware of Union Mart. However, given that 75.3% of those surveyed in the 2025 UMSU Student Survey were also aware of Union Mart<sup>11</sup>, it is nevertheless an extremely well-known service. We can credit Union Mart's high visibility in part to its expansion across 2024-2025, its solid marketing, and to the fact that it provides life essentials in our current cost-of-living crisis. To illustrate, 78.2% of our respondents reported that they had used Union Mart.

UMSU Advocacy and SHRC have been gaining traction through the various workshops run by these services, but could benefit from further marketing and staffing support. Only 11.5% of our respondents reported that they had accessed Advocacy through the contact form. Some 7.5% reported that they used the self-help resources on the Advocacy website, 3.2% reported that they accessed support from SHRC (Sexual Harm Response Coordinator), and 10.6% preferred not to answer.

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<sup>11</sup> 75.29% of respondents in the 2025 UMSU Student Survey (N = 1744) reported being aware of Welfare's services, including Union Mart, a proportion only surpassed by Clubs and Societies (85.44%).

# Advocacy Service Caseload

Despite having less visibility than Union Mart, UMSU Advocacy and the SHRC are under a heavy caseload and significant demand. The UMSU Advocacy service received 1,945 new cases from November 17, 2024 to November 17, 2025. Distributed between just five Advocates, this makes for an average caseload of 389 per Advocate per year.

This clearly demonstrates that these services are essential to students navigating complex university systems. Especially given the lack of awareness regarding the recent Special Consideration policy changes discussed previously, the need for Advocacy's professional and expert guidance on University policy continues to grow.

It is therefore imperative that the University and UMSU invest in expanding both capacity and accessibility for these services to prevent burnout among staff and ensure that no student is left without timely support.



***“Give power back to academic staff  
to help their own students.”***

# Intersectionality

Student wellbeing challenges at the University of Melbourne are not experienced uniformly. They intersect across identity, background, and circumstance. Our data reveals distinct patterns among female-identifying and non-binary students, postgraduate students, international students, students with disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and students of colour, each facing unique stressors that demand tailored responses and/or programs.

## Female-identifying and non-binary students

Among female-identifying and non-binary students, 49% report loneliness as a factor affecting their mental health, and an alarming 80% cite academic stress as a key contributor. Additionally, 59% identify the cost of living as a major stressor, yet only 42% have been able to access Union Mart, UMSU's free essentials program. This disparity underscores the intersectional nature of student wellbeing, as given that 69% of our respondents identified as female, only 42% were able to access Union Mart. This demonstrates a point where financial strain, academic pressure, and social isolation compound to disproportionately impact marginalised genders.

## Postgraduate Students

Out of all postgraduate respondents, 42% report experiencing loneliness, while an overwhelming 77% cite academic stress as a major factor affecting their mental health. The cost-of-living crisis impacts 94% of postgraduates, and 50% identify employment issues as an additional source of distress. Further data from the 2025 UMSU Student Survey suggests that the lack of Myki concessions and inadequate university stipends contribute to cost-of-living pressures suffered by postgraduate students specifically.<sup>12</sup> Despite these pressures, only 47% have been able to access Union Mart, suggesting need for further expansion to reach these students.

## **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students**

Among all respondents identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, 63% report loneliness, 50% cite academic stress, and 63% are affected by the cost-of-living crisis. However, only 25% have accessed Union Mart.

## **International Students**

Of all 450 international student respondents, 42% report loneliness, 74% experience academic stress, 62% are impacted by the cost-of-living crisis, and 31% face housing issues, while only 47% have accessed Union Mart, despite the financial vulnerability of this cohort.

This reflects how visa restrictions, financial instability, and housing precarity intersect to heighten psychological distress amongst international students. There is a pressing need for targeted communication, financial relief, and culturally competent support to bridge this gap.

## **Students with Disability**

Among 52 students with disabilities, 63% experience loneliness, 85% report academic stress, and 62% are affected by the cost-of-living crisis. Yet only 29% have accessed Union Mart.

This clearly demonstrates how systemic barriers to accessibility, coupled with financial and academic pressures, exacerbate mental health challenges for students with disabilities. The University must invest in inclusive design, accessible academic adjustments, and proactive welfare outreach.

## Students of Colour

Of 356 respondents identifying as people of colour, 52% experience loneliness, 19% report discrimination, 79% cite academic stress, 29% face housing issues, and 60% are affected by the cost-of-living crisis while only 47% have accessed Union Mart.

These findings underscore how racism, financial pressure, and academic expectations intersect to create unique barriers for students of colour. Addressing these inequities requires the University to strengthen anti-discrimination mechanisms, expand culturally safe support spaces, and ensure welfare accessibility without stigma.

## Intersectionality Conclusions

Across all demographics, the data shows a consistent theme of academic stress, loneliness, and financial strain contributing to students' psychological distress. Additionally, the rate of access to support services like Union Mart remains low in every cohort despite the cost-of-living crisis. However, when combined with additional intersecting stressors faced by students in every marginalised group as shown here, this could contribute to higher levels of psychological distress amongst these groups.



## Conclusion

Through this survey, students have told us clearly and consistently what harms their mental health and what would help, acting as a direct call to action. The core drivers of psychological distress were shown to be academic stress, financial pressure, and loneliness. These drivers are exacerbated by lack of access to care, confusing university policy and processes, and overburdened services.

UMSU Welfare proposes the priority actions summarised under Key Recommendations for Reform, informed by the results of our report and centring student voices.

Students are asking for fairness, transparency, and empathy, and for the University to recognise mental health as essential for academic success. University services and structures, especially CAPS and Special Consideration, are not fit for purpose in their present form.

UMSU Welfare therefore calls on the University to commit to a comprehensive wellbeing reform agenda: expanding mental health and financial services, restoring fairness to assessment, reversing the Special Consideration policy changes, and ensuring accountability and transparency in decision-making.

Reform must be guided by a simple principle: students deserve a system that does not harm their wellbeing. The University now has a clear choice: to continue contributing to the crisis, or to lead with courage, empathy, and purpose.

UMSU Welfare is ready to work alongside the University in making the University a better and more equitable place for all students.



# Methodology

## Question preparation

UMSU Welfare Office Bearers met with the 2025 UMSU President Joshua Stagg, 2024-2025 UMSU International President Jesslyn Andriono, and the following representatives from UMSU:

1. 2025 Education Office Bearers Sonika Agarwal, Rhea Sankar and Harrishman Shobanan
2. 2025 Women's Office Bearer Khwaish Jadeja
3. 2025 Queer Representative on Students' Council Semin (Sam) Park

In these meetings, we discussed the potential factors affecting the students' mental wellbeing. This helped us in drafting the initial set of questions for the 2025 Mental Wellbeing Survey.

After multiple rounds of drafts and feedback, we received approval from the UMSU Advocacy team. The survey questions were further refined by Belinda Dalton from the UMSU Communications and Design team and assessed for potential bias. The questions were then finalised.

## Data Collection

All responses to this survey were conducted through the survey tool, Survey Monkey. QR codes to the survey were shown at Union Mart, Welfare Brunches, on posters around campus, at other UMSU events and collectives, in the UMSU newsletter, on UMSU's social media and on UMSU's website home page.

## Duration

The survey opened on August 29 and closed on September 26 during Semester 2, 2025.

## Limitations

A limitation to note is that we experienced a time-limited technical error in sections with a series of ranking (Strongly disagree to Strongly agree) questions. While this error appeared, respondents could not select the option of the subsequent questions within the same section. These respondents flagged the problem in the long-text responses and therefore, we were able to account for them, and we were able to fix the error quickly. However, the possibility remains that we were unable to identify every response affected by the error, so we disclose it as a potential limitation.

## Data analysis

Simple descriptive statistics are provided by Survey Monkey.

For the Intersectionality data, we conducted simple analysis to compare response types within demographic categories. We sorted all data into those that identified as being of x demographic and those that did not. Then, for a given assessment of y value, we took 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 category.

A thematic analysis of qualitative data was conducted by Belinda Dalton.

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