

TASMANIAN

UNIVERSITY

STUDENT

ASSOCIATION

Insights on well-being and support among Honours, Graduate Certificate, Graduate Diploma and Masters by Coursework students

TUSAxUC Student Lead Research Project

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Executive summary

The postgraduate cohort is generally accepted to be diverse cohort with many students balancing more than just the role of a student. Given the diversity of conditions that postgraduate students operate under, the Tasmanian University Student Association (TUSA) aims to better understand the aspects of student experience that are important to the students for academic success. A clearer understanding of well-being, perceived needs and concerns are vital for the student association to provide relevant support to current and incoming students.

This report outlines a study that was conducted for Tasmanian University Student Association to establish an overall understanding of factors affecting postgraduate student experience at University of Tasmania. A survey was distributed to collect postgraduate student's feedback regarding their psychological well-being, adequacy of student support and the changes students have experienced that was brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey includes students in any level of postgraduate study, but this report focuses on the responses of Honours, Graduate Certificate, Graduate Diploma and Masters by Coursework students. Overall students experience slightly more positive emotions compared to negative emotions, and are satisfied with the level of support they receive. Current levels of support must be maintained to protect the wellbeing of students who experienced inappropriate behavior.

Students requested support for seeking employment.

TUSA can consider setting up peer support system for alleviating signs of poor well-being. It is recommended that further analysis is carried out to explore the relationship between the lacking type of student support and the related aspect of well-being.

Introduction

This report summarises a study as part of a student-led project for the Tasmanian University Student Association (TUSA) to establish a better understanding of the postgraduate cohort at University of Tasmania. The aim of the project is to produce evidence-based suggestion on ways the student association can support postgraduate students during their time at the university. A survey was distributed to students to complete during August- September of Semester 2, 2021. The survey collects information regarding student's background, recent well-being, the impact of COVID-19 on their studies and asks for feedback regarding their university experience. The report explores the prominent emotions experienced by students, perceived adequacy of student support and levels of student satisfaction in general. The impact of COVID-19 on student support is noted, but is not analysed for association with the factors mentioned. Lastly, a few recurring comments that respondents have for TUSA are noted, and is used to shape recommendations for future activities.

Background

A postgraduate student refers to an individual who is undertaking education higher than the undergraduate level. The average postgraduate student is more difficult to define than an undergraduate student as more postgraduate students come from a variety of backgrounds and hold more commitments than an undergraduate student (Cook et al., 2021). Knowing that, we can deduce that postgraduate students have different needs compared to undergraduate students to succeed in their courses. Additionally, support systems for postgraduates are less studied (Cluett & Skene, 2006). Hence, the Tasmanian University Student Association (TUSA) conducted a study to investigate the factors that have supported or hindered postgraduate in their studies.

In 2017, a study within the University of Tasmania was undertaken with the aim to better understand the postgraduate student experience (Crawford & Probert, 2017). This study can be

considered as a further exploration of the concerns raised in the study, expanding from the previous report. Research has reported worsening mental health for university/postgraduate students across the world, therefore it would be beneficial to have a better understanding of the current cohort of postgraduate student in order to better support them in the coming months (See Dhar et al., 2020; Odriozola-González,2020).

Well-being

Psychological well-being is an important component of the student experience as academic success is related to student's health and well-being. (Rosenthal et al., 2008). Academic satisfaction predicts psychological well-being (Franzen et al., 2021). By noting how participants feel about their course we can deduce students' satisfaction in their course and in turn, their overall psychological well-being. Therefore, research question 1 is: Are students feeling positive about their studies?

Study support

Research has found that campus facilities and student support is associated with student satisfaction (Siming, 2015). Postgraduate students may have different course structure and expectations compared to undergraduate students. Do respondents feel they are well-supported in a university setting? Considering the questions above, how satisfied are students are with their university experience so far?

Role of student association

According to the previous report the student association has low engagement with the cohort. Direct feedback from respondents would be the best way to identify issues that respondents deem important. Hence research question 3: Are there areas that students would like the student association to help them with?

Impact of COVID-19

COVID-19 pandemic not only resulted in changes in teaching and learning arrangements (Crawford et al., 2020), it has inadvertently lead to changes in financial situations and reduced opportunities for university students in Australia (Dodd et al.,2021). Understanding the changes that students experienced allows support systems to be set-up to help students cope with the changes. Research question 5:How has COVID-19 impacted student's studies?

Method

This section explains the development and distribution of the survey used in the study. Features of the sample are described, followed by a short description of data analysis methods used.

Research Design

This study used a quantitative survey to gather feedback and information regarding student well-being. Questionnaire was first developed by Crawford and Probert (2017). The authors identify areas of concerns, produce relevant items in the survey and made modifications as per the suggestions of others. The survey used in this study contains four sections; Section 1 collects personal information such as gender, marital status, area of study and motivations for taking their course. This is to account for the differences in background present in the sample, so that plans for change is targeted to the students that require them. Section 2 contains questions that asks participants to rate their recent state-of-mind and current methods for seeking support on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (7). This is to identify aspects of student life that has the biggest impact on the respondent. Based on this information future activities can target areas that students struggle with, or improve access to effective support methods. Section 3 and 4 has questions that relate to quality of coursework and research experience respectively. This report only focuses on section 1-3. In the version of questionnaire used for this study, questions measuring the impact of COVID-19 on respondents' studies were added mainly in section 3. A few questions are edited for clarity after the feedback of the first few participants. This study has been approved by the University of Tasmania Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC).

Data collection

The survey is presented as an online webpage on REDCap, a platform for secure data collection. A consent and information sheet was presented at the start of the page with a downloadable version attached. Throughout the study period the team promoted the study by word of mouth. 10 days after the webpage went online several students promoted the survey to students on-campus by offering a ticket for a free donut if they completed the survey. Posters, indicating participants had a chance to win a \$30 gift

card, were posted on campus and student accommodations. The poster was also shared in TUSA's postgraduate forum on Facebook. A link to the survey was included in a bulk email to all postgraduate students.

Sample

Students who are currently enrolled to complete an Honours, Graduate Diploma, Graduate Certificate, or Masters by Coursework course provided by UTAS is eligible to participate in the survey. This includes domestic and international students, regardless of which campus they are based at or if they are completing their course as distance/offshore students. 40 out of the 63 participants identify as female, 21 identify as male, 1 prefer not to say, and one identify as non-binary. Age ranges from 19 to 68, where mean age is 30.9. 59 percent of participants are domestic students. 24 percent of participants are married and 30 percent are in a relationship. 69 percent of participants did not complete their previous studies at UTAs. Majority of participants (64%) are based in Sandy Bay or Hobart City campus.

Analysis

Data is extracted from REDCap and transferred into an Excel workbook. Either Jamovi 1.6.16 or SPSS is used to conduct data analysis. Only data from selected questions are explored. Sample means and standard deviation are used to describe the distribution of the data. Sample means are compared between groups with t-tests or ANOVA analysis. Recurring themes in qualitative data are mentioned and ranked based on frequency.

Some demographic information is condensed for simpler analysis. Student status is condensed from 3 options into 2 options only - domestic or international student. Marital status is condensed into 3 options – married, in a relationship or not in a relationship.

Findings

	\bar{x}	SD
Fulfilled	2.55	1.21
Fearful	4.29	1.65
Doubtful	4.32	1.56
Helpful	2.39	1.33
Isolated	4.58	1.61
Exhausted	3.71	1.67
Cynical	4.37	1.55
Inefficient	4.53	1.54
Excited	3.02	1.54

Findings are presented in order of appearance of the questions on the survey, and is grouped according to themes.

Emotions

Participants were asked to rate the extent in which their studies made them feel a specific emotion on a 7-point Likert scale. Lower scores indicate stronger agreement with the statement, with 4 as a midpoint.

Table 1. Mean and standard deviations of postgraduate students' emotions

There is a strong positive correlation between feeling doubtful and feeling inefficient ($r= 0.74$); moderate correlation between feeling fearful and doubtful ($r=0.66$) and feeling doubtful and isolated ($r=0.65$).

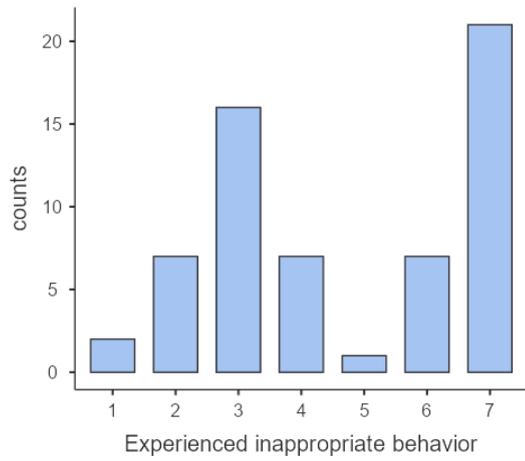
Student support

Mean scores from items measuring types of academic support such as *Networking with industry*, *Writing skills* and *Managing my time well* range from 2.94 to 3.82. There is no difference in study support between domestic and international students ($p=0.428$) nor across different courses ($p=0.216$).

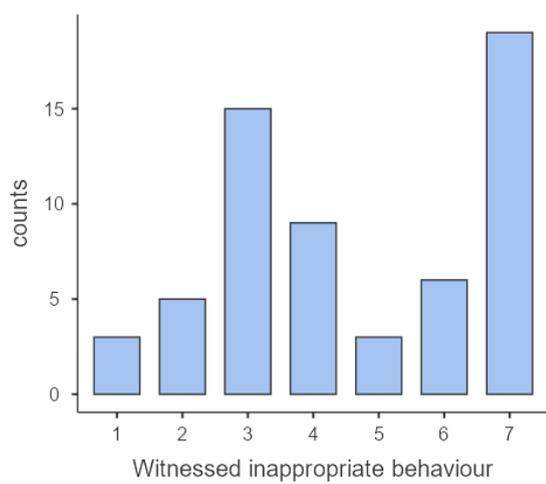
Threat to positive student experience

Experiencing, observing or second-hand encounters of discomforting or inappropriate behaviors from authority figures were identified as a concerning matter in the previous report.

Experienced inappropriate behaviour



Witnessed inappropriate behaviour



Heard accounts of inappropriate behaviour

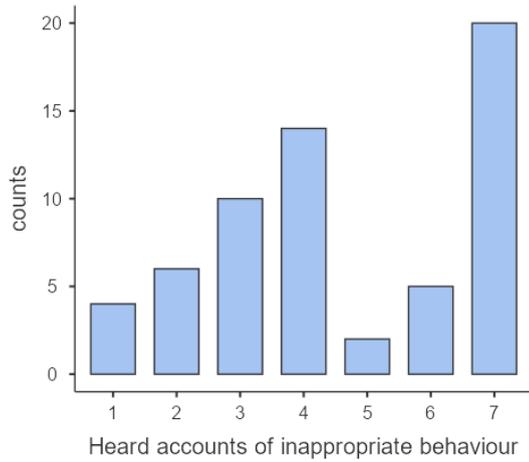


Figure1. Counts of experienced inappropriate behaviour.

The most common response is that students did not experience any discomforting or inappropriate behaviors from authority figures. However, 41 percent of respondents indicate some level of agreement to personally experiencing such behavior. Respondents who had rated “Strongly Agree” to experiencing discomforting behavior tend to be young females in Masters degrees.

Student experience at UTAS

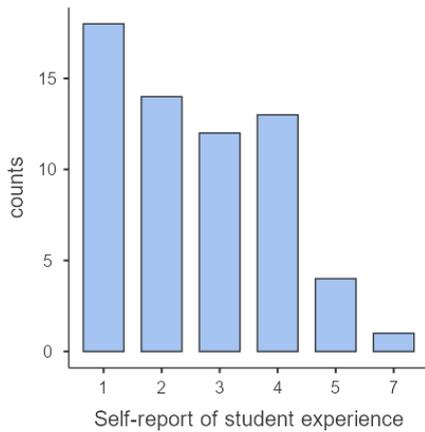


Figure 2. Counts for overall rating of student experience.

Analysis of the responses for *How would you rate your experience with the University?* has shown that 51 percent of respondents rated their experience at UTAS as “Good” or “Very Good”. There is no significant difference in ratings of overall student experience at UTAS regardless of different genders, marital status, prior working experience or student status.

Impact of COVID-19 on accessibility of resources

	Library access	IT resources	Health, welfare services meet needs	Access to learning resources
Mean	2.61	2.59	3.08	2.83
Standard deviation	1.35	1.27	1.51	1.43

Out of the 4 types of resources, respondents had satisfactory access to IT resources, but health and welfare services were not as good. Overall, respondents seem to indicate that they do not have trouble accessing resources.

Qualitative analysis.

As there are not many responses and most of them are not in depth, the responses were ranked based on frequency.

What helps you to finish your degree on time?

1. More time or more time management skills (15 references)
2. More flexibility in selecting when to complete units (7 references)
3. Staff support (3 references)

What can the student union do to assist with skills for employment?

1. Unsure (12 references)
2. Workshops; for example, resume writing course or job fairs (5 references)
3. More services in Launceston, and targeted study skills (1 reference each)

Note that there are requests for assistance that is not directly linked to studies, such as having a doctor on campus.

Discussion and recommendations

This section expands on the themes mentioned in the finding sections and provides suggestions for further action for TUSA.

Providing peer support

Overall, postgraduate students are still feeling positive regarding their studies. Postgraduate students are also satisfied with their experience at UTAS. To ensure students remain positive about their studies, current levels of support should be maintained or enhanced. This may mean extending the same level of support students in Hobart campus receive to student in other campuses – for example, Launceston or Cradle Coast campus. It is important that students remain positive about their course since correlation between negative emotions is stronger than correlation between positive emotions. To increase the ease of ensuring students in all study modes can participate, it is recommended to TUSA to facilitate starting online peer support groups for students at similar stage of their courses. According to McLaughlin and Sillence (2018), hosting the support group on a casual platform such as Facebook Messenger could be effective. Students could select who they communicate with and receive information from. Students receive encouragement and acknowledgment for achieving course related milestones that other peer groups may not provide (McLaughlin and Sillence, 2018). This may help students reduce feelings of isolation and doubt. Students in a peer support group could be from different faculties. They may be less likely to make comparisons between themselves and their peers, that may be detrimental to their progress, if they are working in a different field (McLaughlin and Sillence, 2018).

Recommendation 1a: Facilitate formation of interdisciplinary support groups on a

platform suitable for students of different study modes.

Meanwhile, a better understanding of the factors that bring fulfilment or doubt to students would help. It would be helpful to compare the data with data from Question 18 - the ratings of stressors for students - to see if the stressors relating to the role of student affect their perception of their study.

Recommendation 1b: Conduct further analysis on current dataset to understand the relationship between stressors and measures of well-being.

Postgraduate students seem to agree that there is enough academic support provided to them. Access to learning resources also seem to be adequate. There was lower satisfaction in terms of access to health, welfare, and counselling service. Based on the comment of lack of doctors on campus, it is recommended that TUSA advocates for well-being services to be physically located close to each other in each campus.

It was unclear whether students who experienced discomfoting behavior receive enough support or not. Moreover, it is unclear whether the “Unclear” option in that question was because students are not sure if what they’ve witnessed can be considered inappropriate or not, or they consider the option as neutral ground. If it is the former, it is recommended to clearly establish boundaries for appropriate behavior, it needs to be clear to all staff and students. TUSA can consider reaching out to a sample cohort of female Masters by Coursework students for one-to-one interview to better understand their experiences. TUSA can then use the information to advise UTAS to follow a guideline to reduce incidents of discomfoting behavior.

Recommendation 2a: Investigate the nature of incidents of discomfoting behavior by conducting one-to-one interviews. Note the context of the incident, the way the matter is resolved and the student’s well-being after the incident.

On the other hand, given that ratings for overall experience at UTAS is still high, it can be assumed that students are satisfied with the aftermath of the incident they experienced. TUSA can provide students a safe space to be heard by establishing a role in the student association meant to receive complaints of discomforting behavior. The role is meant to be an empathetic figure as the student navigates the well-being services to achieve the outcome they wanted.

Recommendation 2b: Set-up an optional buddy system for students who report experiencing discomforting behavior. The buddy checks on the student's well-being for a certain period of time after the incident.

Importance of industry connections and employment opportunities

Based on the qualitative data the respondents' value activities that facilitate industry connection for employment. Holding several smaller, industry specialized job fairs may be an option. TUSA may work with each active academic student society to have a mini-job fair for students in that field. This might require a lot more resources than holding a single bigger job fair. Hence another option is for TUSA to collaborate with societies to run a mentoring program.

If the mentoring program is successful TUSA may consider working with UTAS to allow more flexibility for postgraduate units, given that time is a major concern for postgraduate students.

Recommendation 3: Organize job fairs that are specific to a field with student societies.

Conclusion

Postgraduate students with coursework are generally feeling positive regarding

their student experience at UTAS. Facilitating peer support may help postgraduate students cope with the negative emotions that arises from engaging with the coursework. The students have adequate access to academic support and resources. A better understanding of discomfoting incidents is needed to take corrective action but providing peer support may be able to temporarily protect a student's well-being. Postgraduate students wish to have more flexibility in their study and more guidance for employment.

Limitations

Not all data is analysed, as a result the observations drawn from the data may not be a comprehensive view of postgraduate student concerns. Many other aspects such as field of study, marital status and campus region affect student satisfaction, but was not tested for their effects in this report mainly due to the limited time available for data analysis. Marital status was not investigated as potential explanatory variable for student satisfaction across many variables because I do not think the proportion within the student population will have drastic changes in the next year or so. By ignoring these variables the opportunity to detect a feature of the subpopulation is lost. This report also does not examine the biggest change to student learning due to COVID-19 – change from on-campus classes to online classes. Hence, conclusions from this report cannot be strongly attributed as an impact of the pandemic.

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Conflict of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to report.

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