

COVID-19 Wellbeing Concerns

July 2020



The global COVID-19 pandemic dramatically transformed the tertiary education sector in a short period of time and UNSW along with other Universities had to take tough measures to prevent the spread of the virus. Transitioning to online learning, the closure of non-essential campus facilities and services, and ban on overseas UNSW travel had a significant impact on student experience and wellbeing.

The Student Wellbeing Community of Practice (CoP), held Faculty Discussion Groups throughout March, April and June of 2020 to understand the specific wellbeing concerns of UNSW students from different Faculties and Campuses in this new learning environment.

The following document outlines some of the wellbeing concerns that are common across all the Faculties and Campuses along with specific concerns that have been raised by different Faculties. The document also contains some great initiatives that have popped up in response to COVID-19 that will help maintain student wellbeing in the coming months.

It is our hope that this information will help the University gain a better understanding of the distinct effects COVID-19 is having on student and staff wellbeing across UNSW's diverse Faculties and Campuses. We believe it to be beneficial to consider these factors when planning for next Term to provide our students with a better learning and wellbeing experience.

Regards,

Student Wellbeing Community of Practice (CoP), Education Focused Community

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Common Concerns: Students

Student wellbeing concerns in the evolving COVID-19 situation:

Students with limited internet access:

- Unable to access important course content
- No alternate means of learning
- Anxious about their academic performance

International students:

- Feel their voices aren't being heard
- Concerned about visa situation
- Lack of financial support from Australian government
- Financial support from family may be limited as result of COVID's economic impact
- Those who are still staying in Australia feel worried about family back home

Studying at home:

- Can be challenging to find quiet place to study at home
- Difficult for those with caring responsibilities
- Learning difficulties are harder to manage away from the University
- Domestic and emotional abuse concerns

Sense of social isolation:

- Students can feel anxious about asking for help
- Some find it difficult to connect online
- Language barriers for international students

Employment prospects:

- Anxiety about career prospects and the future job market in a post-COVID environment



Common Concerns: Staff

Staff wellbeing concerns in the evolving COVID-19 situation that impact their role as educators:

Class digitalisation:

- Rapid digitalisation of classes placed strain on teaching staff, contributing to sense of exhaustion
- Challenging for teaching staff to provide additional support for students required at this time

Precarious employment status for Early Career Academics and Contract Staff:

- Funding cuts have led to precarious employment status for many early career academics and staff on fixed-term contracts
- Exacerbates stress and anxiety among these staff
- Many hold key education roles as tutors and lecturers

Working from home:

- Particularly challenging for staff with family commitments
- Challenging to deliver lectures and tutorials from home

Re-designing assessments:

- Many courses have needed to change assessment design and delivery
- Additional workload on course convenors, which affects their ability to fulfil other responsibilities including pastoral support.



Constructive Initiatives

Positive initiatives currently supporting student wellbeing & online learning:

Self-Management Moodle Resource:

The Healthy Universities initiative have developed a *Self-Management for Effective Learning Moodle* resource to help support student wellbeing.

Regular meetings with student representatives:

The Medicine Faculty has been holding weekly meeting with student representatives and key Faculty staff. This also provides an important opportunity for students to communicate with the Faculty.

Course Convenor email updates:

Students tend to be more responsive to emails sent by course convenors than generic university-wide correspondence. Synthesising and relaying key university announcements has helped course convenors ensure their students remain up to date with relevant changes and performs an important pastoral care function.

Asynchronous teaching resources:

Teaching staff across the university have been developing asynchronous teaching resources to enable students to be more flexible with their learning. This has been particularly welcomed by students with caring responsibilities.

YouTube video demonstrations:

The Physics School has been utilising its YouTube channel to upload teaching and demonstration videos.

Student wellbeing workshops for staff:

The Faculty of Engineering hosted a series of workshops for RU Ok Day on student wellbeing and how academics can better respond to students in distress.

Workshops on online learning for staff:

The Engineering Schools of SPREE and CHEM hosted internal workshops on online learning before the start of T2 to provide teaching staff with discipline-specific tools and support. Educational Technologists within the Engineering Faculty have also been running 1-1 sessions with first-time teaching staff ahead of T2.

SACS Learning & Career resources and consultations:

The Student Academic and Career Success team have developed a Moodle page containing resources to support student learning and their transition to a career post-uni. This includes new resources discussing how to navigate the recruitment process during and post COVID-19. They are also offering 1-1 consultations with a SACS facilitator.

Measures for Consideration



Measures for consideration:

Additional non-teaching weeks for staff:

Allocating additional non-teaching weeks for staff to prepare online teaching content and attend to administrative duties would help to ease the pressure on staff and enable them to better prepare for online classes in T2. The ANU paused classes for a week in March to facilitate the transition to online learning and the University of Newcastle added a non-teaching week in April.

Support for casual and fixed-term contract staff:

Clear and consistent information about the employment status and future prospects of casual and contract staff will provide clarity for these staff, many of whom perform key education roles, and help alleviate stress and anxiety during this uncertain time.

Pause course redevelopment:

During the turbulence of COVID-19 it could be helpful to pause course redevelopment activities and allow staff to focus their attention on the transition to online teaching.

UNSW Canberra

UNSW Canberra is based at the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA). It provides a unique university experience for both Defence and civilian students. The campus, which boasts the highest teacher-to-student ratio in Australian higher education, has approximately 1300 undergraduate students, 1650 postgraduate coursework students and 400 higher degree research (HDR) students.

The vast majority of undergraduate students are trainee officers (TOs) employed by the Australian Defence Force. Many of the TOs are highly focused on obtaining a degree purely to further their Defence careers, rather than to apply the knowledge and skills gained, which means that lack of motivation is sometimes an issue. However, since they are being paid to study, 100% lecture/tutorial attendance is expected.

At UNSW Canberra, minority groups in the undergraduate cohort include women in engineering, civilians in a predominantly military class, first-in-family students (who are over-represented at UNSW and at UNSW Canberra in particular), overseas students (who are under-represented at UNSW Canberra in comparison to UNSW Sydney), and mature-aged students (currently serving officers with extensive life experience).

STUDENT WELLBEING concerns in the evolving COVID-19 situation:

- Canberra experienced a horror summer prior to the COVID-19 crisis, with bushfires, choking smoke haze and a severe hailstorm meaning that students and staff had already had a stressful start to the year.
- Almost all of the TOs live in campus accommodation, making social distancing difficult. They have also been restricted to the Canberra region, meaning that most have been unable to return home to spend time with loved ones.
- Without the structure of military training and regular face-to-face lecture/tutorial attendance, less motivated TOs may be struggling academically, which may increase their levels of distress.
- While TOs and mature-aged Defence students have a stable income, some civilian undergraduate and HDR students have lost their income from casual work which could potentially cause them a great deal of stress.

STAFF WELLBEING concerns that impact their role as educators:

Operating budgets frozen:

- While UNSW Canberra's financial situation is insulated by the Defence Agreement, the campus will be impacted by central budget measures in response to COVID-19.
- All schools have had their 'operating' budgets frozen.

UNSW Clinical Schools

UNSW Medicine operates Clinical Schools across nine campuses in NSW, including four Sydney-based Clinical Schools (Prince of Wales Clinical School, St George and Sutherland Clinical School, St Vincent's Clinical School, and South Western Sydney Clinical School) and five campuses hosting the Rural Clinical School (Coffs Harbour, Port Macquarie, Albury, Griffith and Wagga Wagga).

These Clinical Schools often have a higher staff-to-student ratio which affords students the opportunity to interact with staff and tutors more readily.

The high workload of the medicine program can place students under a great deal of pressure and can be particularly challenging when coupled with additional stressors. All programs offered at the Clinical Schools include a clinical component where students undertake part of their training in hospital.

STUDENT WELLBEING concerns in the evolving COVID-19 situation:

- Clinical Placements have ceased for Phase 2, and some Phase 3 placements have been disrupted.
- Moving to online learning has changed the dynamics of group work. Some students are finding this change difficult to navigate.

STAFF WELLBEING concerns that impact their role as educators:

Additional clinical responsibilities:

- Academics with clinical qualifications have been informed that they may need to reduce their teaching hours to support the pandemic response in hospitals

Reassigning clinical placements:

- Education support assistants for Phase 2 and 3 students are finding it stressful trying to reassign clinics on short notice and provide students with alternate clinical options.

Meeting frequency:

- Daily meetings between education support assistants adds further load to already full schedules
- Challenging for staff to find time to fulfil their teaching responsibilities.

UNSW Art & Design

UNSW Art & Design offers broad range of creative courses and experiences for students. Given the practical aspect of many courses and specialisations on offer, students often rely heavily on access to studio spaces, technologies and equipment.

UNSWAD's Masters programs attract a diverse body of students from a range of cultural, educational and socio-economic backgrounds and work experiences.

STUDENT WELLBEING concerns in the evolving COVID-19 situation:

- No access to studio spaces and expensive equipment makes it challenging for students to complete practical components
- Insufficient bandwidth and storage space on personal computers to accommodate large graphic and video files required for some A&D specialisations.
- Not all students have access to powerful computers required for specialised software programs such as Adobe CC, Maya.
- A significant number of Masters' students are still in China as a result of COVID-19 border controls and feeling a sense of isolation.
- Difficulty accessing materials and equipment for their projects in T1 as they cannot visit retail outlets, nor do they have access to the 'materials exchange' program on campus.
- Media Arts Honours students have expressed their concern about producing a 'best of the best' work expected for exhibition in the Annual.
- Students are worried about their progression of their degree – E.g. The internship component of the Masters of Curating and Cultural Leadership program has been suspended due to COVID19.

STAFF WELLBEING concerns that impact their role as educators:

Fatigue:

- Last few years intensive for A&D staff, many of whom have developed new course offerings for the revised programs, rewritten existing courses, undertaken digital uplift in their courses and translated classes into the T3 format.
- Rapid class digitalisation under COVID-19 has compounded sense of fatigue, impacting ability to provide additional pastoral support to students often required at this time.

Faculty of Medicine

The Faculty of Medicine offers undergraduate and postgraduate coursework programs. These programs are highly competitive and attract students from across Australia and the international community.

The undergraduate Medicine program includes clinical training, which becomes more intensive as students' progress through their degree. These clinical trainings are undertaken in metropolitan and rural hospitals.

UNSW Medicine has a Student Wellbeing Advisor and Student Wellbeing Action Group (SWAG) to support and assist medicine students at all stages in their course who experience difficulties of a personal, psychological, psychiatric or medical nature.

STUDENT WELLBEING concerns in the evolving COVID-19 situation:

- Students remain uncertain about how courses will be delivered digitally over T2 and T3 and the impact this will have on their studies.
- Students who have been deployed in hospitals are raising concerns about their safety, particularly regarding their access to PPE.
- The Medicine Faculty is hosting weekly meetings with student representatives. These meetings provide an important platform for two-way communication between staff and students; enabling the faculty to provide updates on their COVID-19 response and offering students an opportunity to express their response to such changes. These meetings are helping students to feel informed and engaged in the decision-making process.

STAFF WELLBEING concerns that impact their role as educators:

Class digitalisation:

- Rapid class digitalisation has placed considerable strain on teaching staff and contributed to a sense of stress and exhaustion.
- Challenging for staff to teach to the best of their ability and provide the additional support required for students during this challenging time.

Faculty of Science

UNSW Science graduates more than 1,600 students each year across a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programs. Undergraduate and postgraduate coursework programs tend to have large classes and often include a laboratory component.

The Faculty has a diverse student intake representing more than 100 countries from around the world. Given the large international student population, the Faculty has a number of support systems in place to assist students integrate into a new learning environment.

STUDENT WELLBEING concerns in the evolving COVID-19 situation:

- Mixed reaction to the pass/fail grading system: The change has provided relief to some students; however, high-achieving students have expressed their frustration about the change. It also appears that the change has demotivated some students who no longer feel it important to achieve good grades given it is not reflected in their WAM.
- Labs have ceased as a result of COVID-19 restrictions, which impacts a vast majority of courses offered within the Science Faculty.
- There is a sense among some students that course fees are too high given the lack of access to labs and face-to-face support.
- The transition of classes online and closure of labs has limited the opportunities for social interaction between students.
- The inconsistency of online teaching platforms across the Faculty which has an additional layer of complexity to the transition to online learning and caused confusion for some students.

STAFF WELLBEING concerns that impact their role as educators:

Information delay:

- Teaching staff within the Faculty have expressed their frustration at the delay in information coming from the university and Faculty heads.
- Difficult for staff to answer student questions and caused a high degree of stress for the teaching body.

Pass/fail grading system:

- It remains unclear why the pass/fail grading system was applied to courses that were originally designed for online delivery

UNSW Business School

UNSW Business School offers undergraduate and postgraduate courses across eight disciplinary Schools.

The UNSW Business School is among the top 50 Business School's worldwide and attracts a large body of international students. Over 40% of students enrolled in the Business School are international students.

The School's strong industry connections also provide students with valuable opportunities throughout their degree and following graduation, including professional development opportunities, industry networking events and international business case competitions. Over 16,000 students are enrolled in the School and class sizes tend to be large, especially at an undergraduate level.

STUDENT WELLBEING concerns in the evolving COVID-19 situation:

- The transition to online learning has reduced opportunities for students to engage with one another and contributed to a sense of social isolation for some students.
- The Business School attracts a strong body of international students, who face particularly acute challenges at this time. These include: isolation from loved ones during pandemic, financial precariousness and lack of access to government support, concerns about visa situation.

STAFF WELLBEING concerns that impact their role as educators:

Learning Outcomes:

- Teaching staff have also had to make difficult decisions about how to satisfy learning outcomes via online learning
- Changes to learning outcomes has contributed to a sense of anxiety among some students.

FASS

The Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences is home to four Schools that together offer over 45 undergraduate degrees, 27 postgraduate degrees and 35 subject areas.

Vibrant dialogue and debate are a key component of FASS programs, as facilitated by weekly tutorials.

Undergraduate Education and Social Work programs include practical components, offering students valuable hands-on experience in the workplace before graduation.

STUDENT WELLBEING concerns in the evolving COVID-19 situation:

- FASS programs benefit greatly from class discussion and debate, however, the transition to online learning has made it difficult for teaching staff to facilitate discussion and engage students effectively.
- It can be challenging for students to find quiet places to study at home. This is particularly true for students with children at home.

STAFF WELLBEING concerns that impact their role as educators:

Precarious employment status for Early Career Academics and Contract Staff

- University funding cuts have meant that employment futures have become precarious, leading to stress and anxiety among these staff.
- FASS relies heavily on early career academics and fixed-term contract staff for its education focused activities and it would be challenging for the faculty to provide quality education without their support and skills.

Nura Gili

Nura Gili is the Indigenous Programs Unit at UNSW. It provides support for Indigenous students and prospective Indigenous students, as well as housing the Indigenous Studies programs. It offers a Major, Minor, Honours and as PhD by Research in Indigenous Studies.

Indigenous Studies is a theoretically complex and continually developing field of inquiry which collects, develops and redistributes an ever-expanding corpus of knowledge about and for Indigenous peoples. Students learn to navigate and engage with this often politically and emotionally charged material. Carefully facilitated tutorials and seminars provide an essential space for students to practice and develop their ability to respectfully and productively discuss and debate Indigenous matters.

Students from a range of disciplines, including those outside the humanities, also enrol in Indigenous Studies course as General Education or Elective courses. Up to 80% of the student cohort in larger first-year courses is made up of Study Aboard and Exchange students.

INDIGENOUS STUDENT WELLBEING concerns in the evolving COVID-19 situation:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been identified as a vulnerable community to COVID-19. This can increase concerns that Indigenous students and staff have about their own health and the health of their families.
- A significant number of Indigenous students have returned to family homes outside Sydney as a result of COVID-19. There is a risk that the disruption to their studies and living arrangements will create additional challenges for their return to UNSW when restrictions are lifted.
- Students who have left Sydney to return home may experience difficulties securing quality internet access. This makes it difficult to undertake online learning.
- Students returning to a family home may face difficulties finding a quiet place to study. This is especially the case for students who have children or other caring responsibilities.

UNSW Built Environment

UNSW Built Environment offers a range of design courses and experiences for students. Given the practical aspect of many courses, students are reliant on access to studio spaces, technologies and equipment. The student body is made up of a large proportion of international students.

STUDENT WELLBEING concerns in the evolving COVID-19 situation:

- Students have expressed that they have significant financial concerns including concerns about costs/tuition fees and job losses.
- Many BE students undertake design studio courses and students have expressed concern about the challenges of completing studio courses online and model making without access to the Digital Fabrication Lab.
- Students are concerned about the lack of access to/cost of specific software required for BE courses, and lack of access to lab computers and printing, as well as internet connectivity and speed issues.
- Students have expressed a lack of motivation and productivity, as well isolation from their peers and academic staff. We have also heard that group work is more difficult in an online environment.

Faculty of Engineering

UNSW has Australia's largest and top-ranking engineering faculty. The Faculty's strong industry links provide valuable research and professional development opportunities for students throughout their degree.

The Faculty attracts a many international students to its undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. Class sizes tend to be large, however, smaller labs and tutorials provide students with an opportunity to engage with one another, tutors and academics.

The Faculty's Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Committee considers student wellbeing within its focus.

STUDENT WELLBEING concerns in the evolving COVID-19 situation:

- Online classes have made peer-to-peer learning more difficult, with students less able to approach one another for help given the absence of face-to-face labs and tutorials.
- International students who have remained overseas during the COVID situation can find it difficult accessing certain online resources, such as the lack of YouTube access in China.
- Labs, group work and design projects are very difficult to do online.
- Difficulties accessing specialist computer software as some computers are not powerful enough to host programs or have unreliable internet connectivity.
- Difficulties working equations online.

STAFF WELLBEING concerns that impact their role as educators:

Unequipped to manage student wellbeing concerns

- Some staff feel that they have a lack of tools and support to effectively manage student wellbeing concerns

Workload

- Staff are exhausted after T1 and their attempts to transition courses online.
- Work-life balance has been difficult for staff during the transition to online learning, especially for staff with caring responsibilities.

Ongoing Discussions

The Student Wellbeing CoP is in discussion with the Faculty of Law and Faculty of Engineering regarding student wellbeing concerns resulting from COVID-19 and is eager to include these findings in an updated version of this document.

We recognise that the COVID-19 situation is rapidly evolving and that university response measures will similarly change and adapt over time. Consequently, we expect student wellbeing concerns to shift over the course of the year.

The CoP invites feedback on this document and welcomes further discussion.
Contact us via: <https://unsw.to/studentwellbeing>.

HIGHLIGHTS from preliminary discussions with the Faculty of Law:

Faculty of Law

- First year teaching groups are limited to 30 students to encourage stronger teacher-student relationships and promote vibrant peer relationships.
- Wellbeing lectures have been included into the first year program, coupled with a curriculum theme which includes self-responsibility and management.
- Students are encouraged to reflect on ethics in the legal profession throughout their degree, including a first year topic about self-identity and developing an ethical grammar of one's own, followed by a later year subject called 'Lawyers, Ethics and Justice.'
- A peer tutoring program has been running since 1996 which provides both personal and academic support for first year students.

Student Wellbeing CoP

The Student Wellbeing Community of Practice (CoP) aims to identify student wellbeing resources at UNSW, evaluate their practical application and scalability and provide recommended resources for incorporation of these tools into courses. Staff wellbeing is addressed by the CoP in the context of how such wellbeing matters affect the capacity for teaching staff to fulfil their role as educators and support student wellbeing.

Established in 2019 by Education Focused academics, the CoP includes members across eight Faculties and four campuses.

List of Members

Gavin Mount		CoP Academic Lead, School Humanities & Social Sciences, UNSW Canberra	
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