

# **COVID-19 Student Experiences Survey**



**SYDNEY  
UNIVERSITY  
LAW SOCIETY**

## Acknowledgements

*We acknowledge the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land that the University of Sydney is built upon, the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation. We acknowledge that this was and always will be Aboriginal Land and are proud to be on the lands of one of the oldest surviving cultures in existence. We respect the knowledge that traditional elders and Aboriginal people hold and pass on from generation to generation, and acknowledge the continuous fight for constitutional reform and treaty recognition to this day. We regret that white supremacy has been used to justify Indigenous dispossession, colonial rule and violence in the past, in particular, a legal and political system that still to this date doesn't provide Aboriginal people with justice.*

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# Overview

## Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report was to gather information on the experiences of students at the University of Sydney Law School. It sought to gather information on the economic, academic and mental wellbeing experiences of students during the COVID-19 crisis. This information was sought for various reasons:

- To assist SULS in exercising its duties by clarifying students' needs during the COVID-19 outbreak
- To assist SULS in advocating for students' interests in response to policies implemented in response to the COVID-19 crisis by the University, the Faculty and government
- To record the experiences of students during the COVID-19 outbreak for posterity

## Methods and Scope

The content of this report is based on data gathered by SULS in the form of a survey of its members administered by way of a Google Form taking responses over a three-week period from 19 April to 10 May 2020. The survey was advertised in the Society's weekly email newsletter, the SULS Weekly, and by social media posts on its facebook page, as well as by informal communications in various facebook groups (administered by SULS and otherwise) established for communication within current cohorts of degrees at the Sydney Law School .

The survey attracted 212 responses. All responses to the survey were anonymous due to the sensitive nature of some of its questions, and all questions were optional — accordingly, not all questions attracted a response from each student. As of the most recently published enrolment figures, the University of Sydney Law School has a total enrolment of 2,339.<sup>1</sup> The sample size was therefore approximately 9.15% of the population of enrolled students (with minor variations for questions that were left unfilled by some participants).

The questions were grouped into four sections: demographic information, economic experiences, academic experiences and mental wellbeing experiences. Each section was mostly composed of closed-ended questions which gave yes/no options on factual questions and a range for subjective questions (disagree, somewhat disagree, neutral, somewhat agree, agree). Each section (excluding demographic information) also contained an open-ended question that allowed students to nominate experiences they thought relevant which were not captured by any of that section's closed-ended questions. 22 respondents submitted such responses in the economic experiences section, 43 submitted such responses in the academic experiences section, and 13 submitted such responses in the mental wellbeing experiences section. Additionally, the academic experiences section contained an open-ended question asking respondents to describe specific courses of action that they

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<sup>1</sup> *Annual Report* (University of Sydney Annual Reports, 2018) 14

<<https://www.sydney.edu.au/content/dam/corporate/documents/about-us/values-and-visions/University%20of%20Sydney%202018%20Annual%20Report.pdf>>.

believed the university should take or refrain from taking in order to improve the quality of education during the COVID-19 crisis. This question attracted 79 responses, meaning 36.92% of respondents opted to respond to it.

## Demographics of Participants

The first section of the survey was a series of questions that sought to establish the demographic categories of students according to the following areas:

- Gender identity
- Degree and cohort
- Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander status
- International or domestic student status
- Acknowledged as financially disadvantaged or not acknowledged as financially disadvantaged
- Working to support themselves or not working to support themselves
- Disability status
- English as a Second Language (ESL) or not ESL
- Carer responsibilities or no carer responsibilities
- LGBTQIA+ status

Due to insufficient numbers of responses, the survey could not gather reliable data on the experiences of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students, nor of students with a cognitive or physical disability or non-binary gender identifying students.

The demographic data received was as follows:

<b>Gender identity</b>	Female	143
	Male	66
	Non-binary	2
<b>Degree and cohort</b>	JD I	22
	JD II	20
	JD III or later	29
	LLB I	29
	LLB II	26
	LLB III	31
	LLB IV	19
	LLB V or later	18
	Non-JD Postgraduate	16

<b>Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander status</b>	Not Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	208
	Aboriginal	2
<b>LGBTQIA+ status</b>	Not LGBTQIA+	163
	LGBTQIA+	40
<b>International or domestic student status</b>	Domestic student	158
	International student	53
<b>Financial disadvantage status</b>	Not acknowledged as financially disadvantaged	166
	Acknowledged as financially disadvantaged	45
<b>Self-supporting or not</b>	Working to support themselves	124
	Not working to support themselves	87
<b>ESL status</b>	Not ESL	153
	ESL	58
<b>Physical or cognitive disability</b>	No physical or cognitive disability	195
	Physical or cognitive disability	15
<b>Carer responsibilities</b>	No carer responsibilities	190
	Carer responsibilities	20

# 1. Economic Experiences

## Outline

This section surveyed students' experiences of the economic impact of COVID-19. Participants were asked nine yes-no questions which asked whether they had experienced various circumstances relating to their economic situation during the COVID-19 crisis. In addition, they were asked to rank four affirmative statements on a five-point scale ranging from "disagree" to "agree". Finally, participants were asked an open-ended question, inviting them to submit information about their economic experiences that had not been addressed by other questions. The purpose of these questions was to allow estimation of the prevalence of these experiences in the community of students at the University of Sydney Law School. The reported percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number and the demographic correlations from participants of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent and from participants with a physical or cognitive disability have not been independently considered due to the insufficient number of responses received, however their responses were considered within the general figures for each question.

The questions in this section sought information in several specific areas, including employment and job security, the effect of social distancing measures, cost of living and access to essentials and students' attitudes to present economic circumstances. Of the participants, 63% indicated that they had lost employment and 30% of participants indicated that a family member upon whom they depend on for financial support had lost employment. 41% of participants anticipated they would lose employment as the situation develops, while 35% were unsure and 24% did not anticipate such a loss of employment. Furthermore, 21% of participants had an offer for future employment or engagement rescinded. 36% of participants had voluntarily forgone work in order to socially distance, and 55% had not been allowed to work from home by their employer. 43% of participants had encountered difficulties funding their cost of living as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, and 47% had been affected by shortages of supply for essential goods. 82% of participants agreed or somewhat agreed that they anticipated difficulty finding employment in the next 24 months due to the state of the economy, while 76% agreed or somewhat agreed that they were concerned by the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on their or their family's finances. 63% agreed or somewhat agreed that they felt a need to seek further employment to safeguard their finances, and 50% of participants felt their employer had made a reasonable effort to maintain their employment during the COVID-19 crisis.

Furthermore, participants used the open-ended question at the end of the section to bring particular attention to anxieties relating to clerkships and grad roles, financial barriers to accessing disabilities and mental health services, inadequate recognition of needs arising from changed economic circumstances by the University and Faculty and particular financial burdens for international students caused by sudden changes in living arrangements.

In all of this, financially disadvantaged participants, participants with carer responsibilities and international students were consistently impacted to a greater extent by the issues questioned in this section than their peers.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Readers should be advised that the sample size of participants with carer responsibilities, at 20 participants, was lower than other demographics.

## Results

### *Employment and Job Security*

Participants were asked to answer yes or no to the question “have you lost work at your regular place of employment as a result of the COVID-19 crisis?”<sup>3</sup> Of the 205 students that responded to this question, 63% had lost employment, and 37% had not lost employment. Male students were slightly more likely to have lost employment, at 74%, versus 58% for female students. Different cohorts reported different rates of having lost employment, with JD students and LLB IV having lost employment at rates slightly below-average (57%, 60% and 52% for JD I, II and III respectively, 58% for LLB IV), while most LLB cohorts lost employment at slightly above-average rates (65% for LLB I, 70% for LLB III and 71% for LLB V). Non-JD postgraduate and LLB II skewed the furthest from the average, with only 38% of non-JD postgraduate students losing employment and 85% of LLB II students losing employment. Participants with carer responsibilities were also slightly more likely to have lost employment, at 74%, while international student participants were slightly less likely to have lost employment at 52%. On the whole, however, a majority of participants from almost every demographic had lost employment, with only non-JD postgraduate students having not lost employment.

Participants were then asked to answer yes or no to the question “has a family member whom you depend on for financial support (eg; food expenses, accommodation) lost work as a result of the COVID-19 crisis?”<sup>4</sup> Of the 205 participants that responded to this question, 30% responded yes and 70% responded no. The only significant demographic correlation on this question concerned students who are currently (or, in the past five years, have been) acknowledged as financially disadvantaged: At 52% responding “yes”, this demographic was the only one which was more likely than not to have had a family member upon whom they depend for financial support lose employment. This is likely reflective of the fact that means-testing of young people includes assessment of parental income and family assets, meaning the parents and family members of survey participants who have been acknowledged as financially disadvantaged for the purposes of means-tested programs are more likely to be employed in economic sectors that are vulnerable to employment shocks.

Next, participants were asked to answer yes or no to the question “are you anticipating a loss of employment or further loss of employment as the situation develops?” Of 202 participants that responded to this question, 41% responded “yes”, 35% responded “unsure”, and 24% responded “no”. Responses were generally consistent between cohorts, however, LLB V students were significantly more likely than average to anticipate losing employment, at 66%, while LLB III and non-JD postgraduate students were significantly less likely to anticipate losing employment, at 27% and 21% respectively. Despite this, these cohorts were more likely than average to be unsure about their chances of losing employment, at 57% and 43% respectively. Once again, financially disadvantaged participants were more likely to respond “yes” to this question at 53%, however, for the rate of “no” responses was close to average at 26% and the rate of “unsure” responses was below-average at 21%. This indicates that this demographic was not any more pessimistic about their employment stability than other demographics, but viewed the likelihood of losing employment with more certainty. Participants with

<sup>3</sup> “Lost employment” was defined as losing hours or shifts, as well as being laid off.

<sup>4</sup> Participants were not asked to identify whether they depended on a family member for financial support, nor whether the family member upon whom they depend was unemployed prior to COVID-19, so a number of negative indications may have come from participants to whom the question did not apply.



carer responsibilities were also more likely to respond “yes” at 56%, but at 39% “unsure” and only 6% responding “no”, they were by far the least likely demographic to anticipate no change to their employment status.

Lastly, on the topic of employment and job security, participants were asked to answer yes or no to the question “have you had an offer of future employment or engagement (eg; a clerkship or a job commencing next semester) rescinded on account of the COVID-19 crisis?”<sup>5</sup> Of the 201 participants who responded to this question, 21% responded “yes” and 79% responded “no”. While it was predicted that LLB V and JD III students would be most likely to respond “yes” due to the presumed higher rates of employment-seeking at the end of a student’s degree, curiously, these cohorts were at opposite extremes of results: JD III students were the least likely to respond “yes”, at only 10%, while LLB V students were the most likely, at 29%. Beside this, all other demographics produced similar proportions.

### *Effect of Social Distancing*

Participants were asked to answer yes or no to question “have you voluntarily forgone work in order to socially distance yourself?” Of the 202 participants who answered this question, 36% responded “yes” and 64% responded “no”. Most cohorts had close to or slightly above-average “yes” responses, however, JD III and LLB IV were below-average, with 17% and 21% respectively responding yes in these cohorts.

Next, participants were asked the question “has your workplace allowed you to work from home?” Of 196 responses, 45% responded “yes” and 55% responded “no”. International students were slightly less likely to have been allowed to work, at 34% versus 48% for domestic students. Likewise, only 36% of financially disadvantaged students were allowed to work from home, compared with 47% of non-financially disadvantaged students.

For the last question, in relation to the effect of social distancing, participants were asked “if you have carer responsibilities, have your responsibilities increased during the crisis (eg; as a result of children or young siblings staying home from school)?”<sup>6</sup> Of the 174 responses, 20% responded “yes” and 80% responded “no”. Female participants were slightly more likely to respond yes to this question, at 24%, and men less likely, at 10%. Students from cohorts that would be expected to have older students were slightly more likely to respond “yes” (albeit with inconsistencies between cohorts), at 36% for non-JD postgraduate students, 29% for JD II students, 28% for JD I students and 27% for LLB V students, compared to 17% for LLB I students, 15% for JD III students, 14% for LLB III students, 13% for LLB IV students and 9% for LLB II students. ESL participants were also more likely to respond “yes”, at 28%. Predictably, participants who had indicated they have carer responsibilities in the demographic section of the survey were the most likely to report increased carer responsibilities, at 85% responding “yes”.

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<sup>5</sup> As with previous questions, the high-response rate suggested that many participants to whom this question applied responded “no” rather than leaving the question unfilled, meaning the proportion of students who had an employment offer prior to COVID-19 who then had that opportunity rescinded is unclear from these results.

<sup>6</sup> While the slightly lower response rate indicated that more participants skipped this question if it was not relevant to them, these results are likely still skewed by responses from participants with no carer responsibilities, as only 20 students identified themselves as having carer responsibilities in response to the demographic questions.

### *Cost of Living and Access to Essentials*

In this section, participants were asked to answer the question “have you encountered difficulties funding your cost of living as a result of the COVID-19 crisis (eg; lost employment compromising your ability to pay rent)?” Of the 206 participants who answered this question, 43% responded “yes” and 57% responded “no”.

Responses to this question were noticeably divided between postgraduate and undergraduate students, with all LLB cohorts responding “yes” at below-average rates (37% of LLB I, 42% of LLB II, 33% of LLB III, 21% of LLB IV and 39% of LLB V), and all JD and non-JD postgraduate students responding “yes” at above-average rates (65% for JD I and JD II, 48% for JD III, 44% for non-JD postgraduate). This is likely reflective of the presumed fact that postgraduate students are more likely to be financially independent and/or living out of home, and accordingly have more substantial costs of living than undergraduates.

<b>Fig 1.1</b>	<i>Have you encountered difficulties funding your cost of living as a result of the COVID-19 crisis? (Eg; lost employment compromising your ability to pay rent)</i>	
<i>Please select your degree/cohort</i>	No	Yes
JD I	35.00%	65.00%
JD II	35.00%	65.00%
JD III or later	51.72%	48.28%
LLB I	62.96%	37.04%
LLB II	57.69%	42.31%
LLB III	66.67%	33.33%
LLB IV	78.95%	21.05%
LLB V or later	61.11%	38.89%
Non-JD postgraduate	56.25%	43.75%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>56.80%</b>	<b>43.20%</b>
		<i>n=206</i>

The other question in this section asked participants to respond yes or no to the question, “Have you been affected by shortages of supply for essential goods (eg; hygiene products, non-perishable foods)?”<sup>7</sup> Of the participants, 47% of participants responded “yes”, while 53% responded “no”. Financially disadvantaged students were slightly more likely to respond “yes” at 61%. Likewise, students with carer responsibilities were more likely to respond yes at 70%.

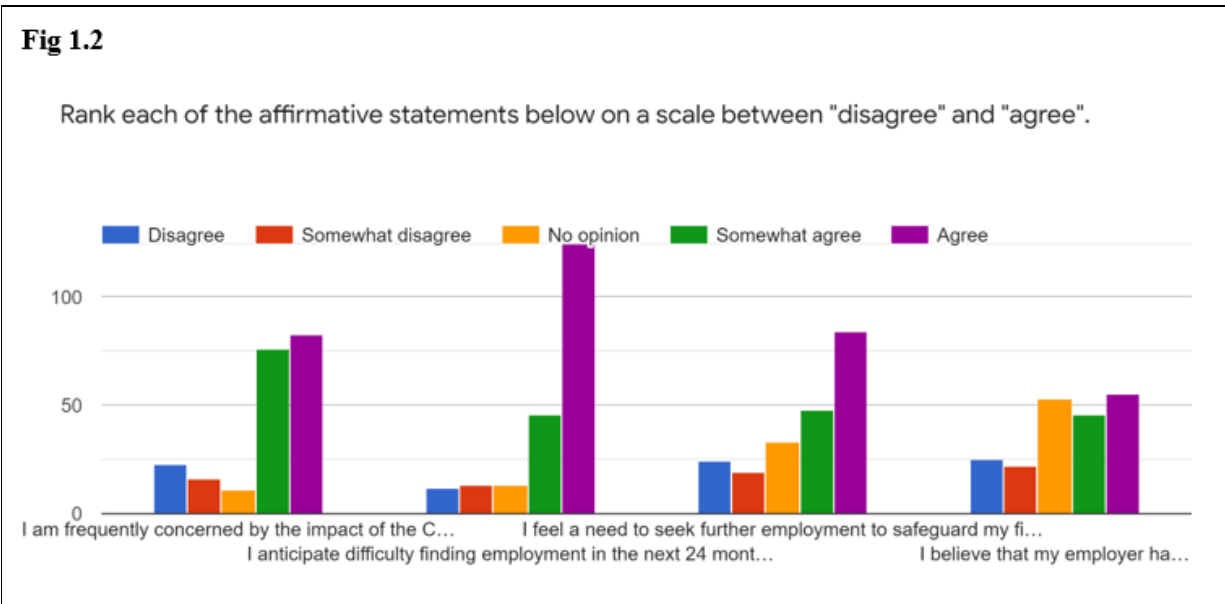
<sup>7</sup> This question was drafted in the earlier stages of the COVID-19 outbreak, however the survey was not administered until late April to early May, by which time supply shortages ceased to be felt as acutely as they had before.

*Attitudes to Economic Circumstances*

Students were asked to rank each of the following affirmative statements on a five-point scale ranging from “disagree” to “agree”:

- I am frequently concerned by the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on my or my family's finances.
- I anticipate difficulty finding employment in the next 24 months due to the state of the economy.
- I feel a need to seek further employment to safeguard my finances.
- I believe that my employer has made a reasonable effort to maintain my employment during the COVID-19 crisis.

The purpose of these questions was to assess the prevalence of concerns that were speculated to arise in light of the economic conditions caused by the COVID-19 outbreak. These questions were also designed to provide a more holistic view of students’ attitudes and confidence toward present economic conditions, than can be discerned in the responses to previous questions in this section.



Of the 209 participants who answered this question, 82% responded affirmatively by indicating that they “agree” (60%) or “somewhat agree” (22%) with the statement, “I anticipate difficulty finding employment in the next 24 months due to the state of the economy”, while 6% indicated “no opinion”, 6% indicated “somewhat disagree”. Cohorts later in their degree were predicted to be more likely to respond affirmatively, however this was only true of LLB V (where 89% of respondents responded “agree” and 11% responded “somewhat agree”, with no neutral or negative responses). JD III was slightly less likely than average to respond affirmatively, with 54% responding agree and 21% responding somewhat agree. Most demographics had similar rates of affirmative responses, with the breakdown of “agree” and “somewhat agree” responses varying while the sum

of these responses remained around 80%. Overall, this question received the most affirmative responses of the four questions in this section.

The question with the next-highest rate of affirmative responses was “I am frequently concerned by the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on my or my family’s finances”. 76% of participants responded affirmatively, with 40% responding “agree” and 36% responding “somewhat agree”, while 5% indicated “no opinion”, 8% indicated “somewhat disagree” and 11% indicated “disagree”. Financially disadvantaged students were slightly more likely to respond affirmatively, at 89% (47% responding “agree” and 42% “somewhat agree”). Participants with carer responsibilities had the highest rate of affirmative responses to this question at 95% (60% “agree” and 35% “disagree”), and the remaining 5% indicated that they “somewhat disagree”. This is possibly because participants with carer responsibilities are more likely to have dependants or to be the main income-earners in their household.

After this, the next-most agreed statement was “I feel a need to seek further employment to safeguard my finances”. Of the 208 responses, 63% were affirmative (40% “agree” and 23% “somewhat agree”), while 16% indicated “no opinion”, 9% indicated “somewhat disagree” and 12% indicated “disagree”. Once again, financially disadvantaged students were more likely to respond affirmatively at 80% (58% “agree” and 22% “somewhat agree”).

The statement with the lowest rate of affirmative responses was “I believe that my employer has made a reasonable effort to maintain my employment during the COVID-19 crisis”. Of the 201 responses, 50% were affirmative (27% “agree” and 23% “somewhat agree”), while 26% indicated “no opinion”, 11% indicated “somewhat disagree” and 12% indicated “disagree”. These proportions varied slightly across demographics, but remained roughly consistent.

### *Statements from Students*

The last question about economic experiences was an open-ended question inviting supplementary information about their economic experiences.

A particular area of concern for many students was the effect of COVID-19 on the availability of clerkships and grad roles, reporting this as a source of anxiety for later-year students:

“The uncertainty surrounding clerkships, internships and graduate positions is at the forefront of a lot of IV and V year students' minds. This translated to anxiety and pressure on top of the existing pressures from law school.”

“I have a grad job offer commencing next year but am concerned about it still being available to me.”

“The uncertainty of what the next 12 months looks like employment wise has caused me a lot of anxiety. While I have work now I am worried about next year when I graduate.”

Similarly, one participant reported a higher burden of unpaid work relating to work-from home arrangements:

“I had to do quite a few hours of unpaid work to research WFH tools to persuade my employer to keep employing me and other employees from home.”

Another significant area of concern was the University and Faculty’s flexibility in accommodating the changed living circumstances many students have faced during the COVID-19 crisis:

“The Law School’s guide that full-time students should not work more than one day per week is naïve and only serves to amplify the distance between those who are financially independent and those who have family or other support. This is even more pronounced during a crisis as is occurring now.”

“I believe that people having to move homes and take up extra carer responsibilities should be accepted in Special Considerations. My application was declined despite a huge change in my circumstances.”

Likewise, some participants called attention to particular financial burdens faced by students with disabilities and students who require mental health services:

“I don’t think people are aware of the economic consequences of COVID for people with disabilities who don’t qualify for governmental support because they can work over 15 hours a week, now that they are working no hours a week. The costs of living with a disability persist regardless of employment and the restrictive access to governmental support means people with disabilities are hit even harder in this pandemic, in ways that are somewhat invisible”

“Not being able to access mental health services as they are not allowed to be claimed with a medicare rebate if done remotely has been tough: I can’t access therapy due to financial obstacles, which have been exacerbated by my loss in work. I have used CAPS in the past, but have not had supportive experiences.”

Furthermore, participants noted financial difficulties specifically faced by international students due to unexpected changes in living arrangements this semester, as well as concerns of discrimination in the job market:

“We had to pay for the visa of [a family member] to stay with us so someone can help care for my child and to prevent [the family member] from getting sick on the way back to my home country. There are also no flights out and my country’s borders are closed. She initially was to stay for only 2.5 months but now we applied for her to stay 6 months. It was very expensive, including the medical fee (nearly \$1000).”

“As an international student who has been renting an apartment and went back to my home country before the virus outbreak, I didn’t anticipate that I couldn’t come back to Australia and did not have any chance to rearrange my renting. Therefore, I have to keep paying the rent for my apartment because all my stuff are there and I could not find anybody to rent it. This is a big financial loss for me as it is just vacant now.”

“I am worried that as an international student, I will be further disadvantaged and marginalised in the job market in Australia due to economic downturn.”

“International students paid nearly 50,000 AUD tuition fee annually. On top of that, we have to pay the rent, food, utility bills, textbooks, and many more. Out of so many different stimulus packages and relief measures, international students have literally no protection or support at all.”

The latter student went on to note that the response by political leaders in this country made international students feel unvalued: “It is very disappointing and greatly reduces my willingness to remain in this country.”

## 2. Education Experiences

### Outline

This section surveyed the participants' academic experiences, and collected information about the impact of COVID-19, how supported students felt in light of this disruption, as well as what measures they believed would be effective in improving the quality of education during COVID-19. Reported percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number, and demographic correlations for Aboriginal people and those with a physical or cognitive disability were not independently considered due to low sample size (however responses from these students have been calculated in the broader figures).

Overall, it was found that the majority of students had difficulty accessing online classes consistently. One-third of students, particularly JD I students, JD II students and participants with carer responsibilities, responded that they did not have access to a work environment suitable for online classes and exams. The most commonly cancelled units were OLE In-country units and Master's-level electives, which left students feeling that they were unable to specialise in subjects of interest due to a lack of alternative arrangement. A majority of participants felt that COVID-19 had negatively impacted their study, and most participants attributed this to the difficulty of at-home study. Students remained largely satisfied with the online content provided by Sydney Law School, however, participants were divided about the changes to grading announced by the University. In an open-ended question, students expressed that other key areas of concern were inconsistency in the engagement and communication offered by different lecturers, inadequate adjustment of coursework to reflect hardship during COVID-19, and a lack of support for specific demographics. In terms of support, most students felt unsatisfied with the University's support and unheard by the University's administration. Students felt most satisfied with the level of support offered by lecturers and tutors.

The last question in this section asked students to offer potential courses of action that they believed the University should take to improve their academic experience. Responses commonly recommended changes to the structure and marking of classes and exams, an increase in the accessibility, clarity of information and support given by university administration, the adoption of an opt-in pass/fail grading system and a decrease in tuition fees to reflect the quality of education during COVID-19.

### Results

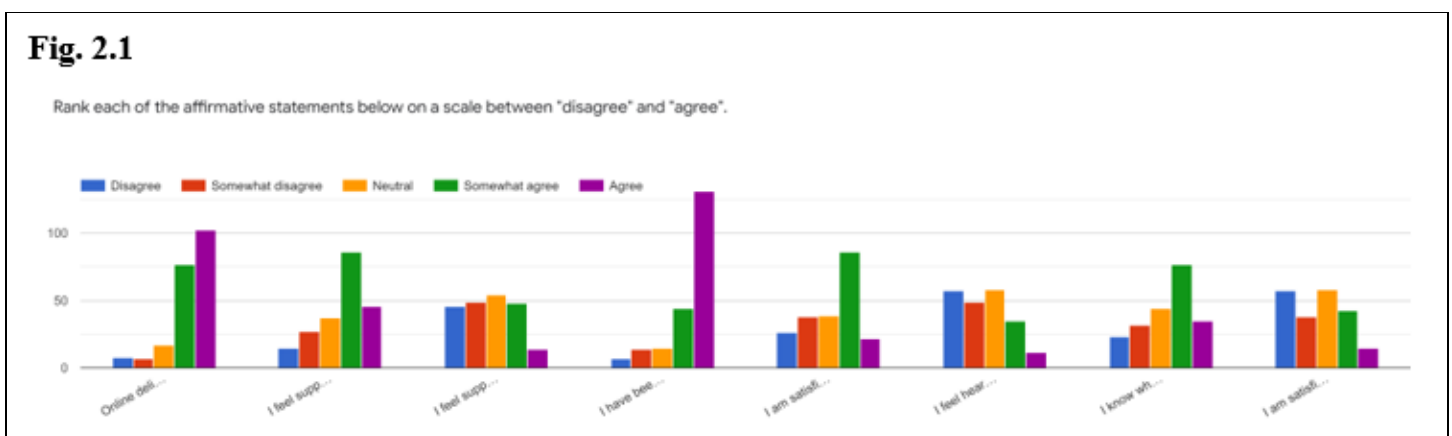
#### *COVID-19 and its Impacts on Learning*

The section that surveyed the participants' academic experiences began with three closed-ended questions and one open-ended question that aimed to grasp how, and to what extent, participants' learning had been affected by COVID-19. The results showed that 15% of participants had experienced a cancellation of at least one of their units of study. When asked to identify these units, the students who opted to respond (14% of the total participants) indicated that the most commonly cancelled units were Master's-level electives and Open Learning Environment (OLE) In-country units. In terms of online access of classes during COVID-19, it was found that 55% of students had experienced issues accessing online classes, possibly due to unreliable internet access, differences in time zones (these were given as examples), or other reasons. Additionally, 30%

of participants responded that they did not have an in-home location that was suitable for online classes, quiet, and unlikely to be interrupted. On the whole, the most common problem experienced by participants was unstable access to online classes, followed by concerns surrounding environments unsuitable for learning, as well as the cancellation of units.

### *Participants' Thoughts about Changes to their Academic Experience*

Participants were then asked four questions about their attitudes surrounding study during COVID-19. The answers were given on five-point scales, with participants indicating how strongly they agreed with a given statement by selecting 'disagree', 'somewhat disagree', 'neutral', 'somewhat agree', or 'agree'. In response to the statement, "Online activity has detrimentally impacted the quality of my education this semester", most students concurred with the statement: 48% agreed and 36% somewhat agreed. Further, 61% of students agreed that they had been struggling to learn and study effectively at home, with 21% somewhat agreeing, and only 3% disagreeing with the sentiment. Although the vast majority of students had experienced disruptions to their learning, only 30% of students expressed dissatisfaction with the online education content provided by Sydney Law School, with 50% indicating that they were satisfied, or somewhat satisfied. The most divisive statement amongst participants was 'I am satisfied with the changes to grading this semester which have been announced by the university', following the recent announcement of the Converted WAM (CWAM). 27% of participants answered that they disagreed with the changes, while 18% somewhat disagreed, 27% were neutral, 20% somewhat agreed and 7% agreed. Overall, a vast majority of participants (84%) had felt that COVID-19 had negatively impacted their educational experience, with 61% partly attributing their negative experiences to the difficulty of at-home study. However, students remained largely satisfied with the content provided by Sydney Law School. The most divisive statement in this section regarded the changes to grading during COVID-19, as although most students expressed dissatisfaction with the changes, a significant percentage remained neutral or felt positively about the revisions.



*Refer to Appendix A for the full list of questions in this section*

### *Support Systems*

Participants were then asked about how supported they felt by university administration and staff during COVID-19. These responses were again collected through an indication of how strongly participants agreed



with a given statement on a five-point scale. When presented with the statement ‘I know what support services are offered by my university’, 40% of students nominated that they somewhat agreed with the statement, whilst 26% answered that they disagreed or somewhat disagreed. Students felt most supported by their lecturers and tutors, as 21% agreed, and 40% somewhat agreed that their assistance during COVID-19 was satisfactory. In contrast, only 29% of students felt supported or somewhat supported by university administration. A similar level of dissatisfaction was shown when participants indicated how strongly they agreed with the statement ‘I feel heard by my university’. Half of the respondents disagreed with the statement, and only 6% agreed that their concerns had been sufficiently heard by the university. Thus, the results show that most students felt unsupported and unheard by the university, as although lecturers and tutors provided a satisfactory level of support, students were concerned about the lack of aid by university administration. Overall, this led to students feeling unsatisfied with the university’s support systems during COVID-19.

### *Other Areas of Concern*

In an open-ended question, participants also identified other key problems which they felt had hindered their academic experience.<sup>8</sup> 43 students chose to respond to this question. Respondents indicated that the main factors which had negatively impacted them during COVID-19 were: a lack of communication, inadequate adjustment of coursework, and insufficient support from the university. Students found that the amount of communication between students and lecturers varied across units. Frustration with some lecturers’ reliance on recorded lectures from previous years, alongside a lack of clarity about if, and how units would change, led to some participants feeling dissatisfied with the quality of online learning. The following comments are examples of this view:

“The lecturer... has made no communication with the class. He simply posted the recordings from last year. He did not even bother to post an announcement explaining this. This is completely unacceptable, and the Law School has not addressed this. I am paying full fees for a course which is not being taught at all.”

“One of my lecturers hasn’t communicated with students since classes went online, relying on recordings from past years. I’ve found everyone to be nice but the levels of communication and support have varied wildly across subjects.”

Additionally, a majority of students who responded to the question were concerned with the inadequate adjustments to coursework and exams during COVID-19. The cancellation of units, for example, was identified as an obstacle to students’ academic progression. Participants were specifically concerned with a lack of replacement courses and the cancellation of subjects that they wished to specialise in. As results from this survey have shown, Master’s level units were the most commonly cancelled units amongst respondents. One student recalled that a number of their Master’s level units had been cancelled ‘without warning, in the middle of semester and without replacement’. This student also expressed that the cancellation of certain units had ‘deprived us students of the opportunity to achieve a specialisation... we were ultimately forced to choose (and pay for) a unit as an alternative that we were neither interested in, nor would bring us anything for our future professional life.’ Other students also expressed similar sentiments:

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<sup>8</sup> Some submissions to open-ended questions as presented in this report have had minimal redactions to prevent identification of the participant.

“The cancelation of the mid year offshore units has significantly impacted a number of final year students progression, I will likely have to quit my job so I am able to burden the work load of an additional unit in my final semester as the faculty has failed to run any final year subjects during winter school despite professing to be supportive of students’ degree progression.”

“I was actually on exchange as part of Sydney Abroad and was due to finish my degree in May. Aside from telling us to come home, USyd were totally hopeless in terms of providing information. There has been no update as to whether the inclusion of my exchange units will be impacted.”

Students also felt that subjects and exams needed to be more flexible, as they felt that unstable internet access and changes to their environment had severely disadvantaged their results. One participant remarked that the insistence of presentations over Zoom ‘disadvantages people with spotty Internet’. Another stated that timed submissions for exams were unfair for those who had a volatile internet connection: ‘the law school is under the assumption that everyone is working in pristine sterile conditions where students can download, write and upload a 2.5hr exam’. Other participants expressed that standard format exams (as opposed to assignments or take-home exams) were incredibly difficult for people without a designated work space: “all my work has to be done from the couch in a house where others are also working from home... simply changing a written exam from written format to a word doc isn’t good enough”. Amongst unstable access to internet and work spaces unsuitable for exams, participants suggested that there be, “an option to hand write the exam, scan it and upload it” for those who felt more comfortable hand-writing or for those who had technical issues.

Finally, concern about insufficient support from the university was a recurring pattern in participants’ responses to this question. Notably, we have seen that most students feel supported by their lecturers and tutors during COVID-19, and this has been reflected in responses to this open-ended question. One participant stated that “the professors have been quite understanding of their students and I thank them for that”. However, responses concerning student support also expressed concern about the lack of overall accommodation for those with disabilities and carer responsibilities:

“I am a full time single mum...I have no quiet time until [the children] sleep, as I need to cook, clean, educate, feed and bathe them.”

“I receive disability adjustments for assessments and exams and the pandemic has meant they are not possible. Disability services and certain lecturers have not been accommodating to establish different adjustments to reflect online study delivery. I have not been supported or assisted by the law faculty or disability services. It has created a lot of stress and negatively impacted my study.”

Additionally, one student opined that the University had been insufficiently permissive of special consideration applications arising due to COVID-19 despite their commitment to the contrary in their no-disadvantage policy:

“I believe that people having to move homes and take up extra carer responsibilities should be accepted in Special Considerations. My application was declined despite a huge change in my circumstances.”

Therefore, in response to an open-ended question which asked participants to identify other areas of concern, students’ responses generally fell into three categories. These were: concern with inconsistent communication between lecturers and students, inadequate adjustments for cancelled units and for those who were disadvantaged during timed exams, as well as a lack of support for carers and people with disabilities.

### *Changes Recommended by Participants*

The final question in the academic experiences section aimed to gather what participants thought would be suitable courses of action for rectifying the concerns that they had identified in previous questions. This open-ended question was answered by 79 participants. Participants proposed potential changes which they felt would best support them during COVID-19 at both faculty and university levels. At the faculty level, students commonly suggested changes regarding the content and structure of classes and exams. A noticeable trend amongst responses is the concern regarding an over-reliance on recorded lectures in some units. Students noted that the reliance on recorded lectures from previous years resulted in 'passive learning', and generally resulted in a disengaged cohort. One student suggested that to ensure classes met a consistent standard of quality and engagement, Sydney Law School should ensure 'more uniformity about mode of teaching online', and that there be increased 'supervision from university administration'. Another participant added that instead of the exclusive use of recorded lectures, 'some thought could be given to a lecture/tutorial model', where an online lecture is posted and students are 'assigned to smaller groups in which actually discuss the material'. Students who had similar ideas agreed that the inclusion of live tutorials alongside lectures would allow classes to be more interactive and engaging, therefore increasing the quality of their online education. Additionally, multiple participants noted that during COVID-19, students felt increasing pressure to 'self-teach'. Therefore, additional materials, exam preparatory content, and online office hours dedicated to students' questions would alleviate the uncertainty of students. Another participant recommended that the university library should 'buy more e-copies of textbooks so students can access them at home', which would benefit those who cannot physically borrow from the library.

Another group of students made suggestions regarding changes to exams which would address privacy concerns, as well as people with a disability, unstable internet access, or an unsuitable work environment. In regard to privacy, six participants specifically mentioned that ProctorU should be banned as it is 'invasive software', and 'a source of concern for many'. One participant mentioned that they were concerned with privacy breaches on Zoom, and another student suggested that the university should 'avoid proctored exams' in general. Notably, there were no specific suggestions about alternative arrangements, but there was a consensus that the university should explore other options to uphold academic integrity during exams. In terms of the organisation of the exams themselves, results from previous questions in this section showed that students felt that timed exams which occurred over a few hours was disadvantageous for groups of students who did not have stable access to the online exams nor an adequate exam environment. In this question, one student also identified that these exams disadvantaged students in different time zones. To remedy this concern, five students stated that 24-hour take-home exams would adequately address the 'differing advantages and disadvantages faced by students', allow students to address technological problems, and would 'mitigate the complicity of the school in exacerbating systemic disadvantage'. Another student suggested that online exams should have suggested, but not mandated word counts. This was because in an exam with a mandated word count, 'students would be revisiting and editing work to be shorter, which they would not have to do in a normal exam'. The idea of flexibility extended to assignments and exam marking as well, with participants encouraging tutors to be more flexible with deadlines and lenient with marking during a stressful time.

At the university level, participants' responses suggested more communication from university administration, changes to grading, and changes to tuition fees. In terms of support, clarity and information from the university, one student noted that they had received 'no support from faculty administration' regarding their degree

progression, which culminated in ‘significant worry and stress’. Most responses in this category called for a general increase in the accessibility and amount of information from university administration. This also included the collation of information regarding what changes during COVID-19 meant for specific groups such as carers, students on scholarships and students who were interested in honours programs. Further, thirteen responses believed that the university’s transition to the CWAM was insufficient and suggested that the university adopt an opt-in pass/fail grading system. Students felt that the ‘practical operation [of the CWAM] was still unclear’, and that a pass/fail or a ‘WAM can only increase system’ would better address the difficulties of students. Finally, five participants recommended that the university should implement discounted tuition fees for all students. Responses in this category were similar in that they recognised tuition fees should reflect the decreased quality of education. One participant stated that ‘there is no question the quality of education provided via Zoom is incomparable to face-to-face teaching/learning’. Another participant shared the same view:

“All remaining units are offered in online mode. I was able to attend exactly one intensive face-to-face class. There is no longer access to important facilities such as libraries and classrooms. So while the administrative costs for the university are decreasing in this respect, they are increasing for us students, who now suddenly need all facilities, such as the Internet, at home.”

Therefore, to address the negative impacts of COVID-19 on their academic experience, students suggested changes which could be implemented both faculty and university-wide. On the whole, responses proffered eight common courses of action:

- Classes should utilise both lectures and tutorials to increase engagement.
- Tutors should provide additional resources and be more accessible/open to answering students’ enquiries.
- Exams should not be conducted using ProctorU/invasive software, and the university should explore other alternatives.
- Exams should be 24-hour take-home tasks and should be marked with more leniency.
- There should be clear and easily accessible communication from university administration as the COVID-19 situation changes.
- The university should lower tuition fees to reflect the decreased standard of education and access to amenities.
- The university should be more accommodating of special considerations applications arising out of circumstances caused by COVID-19.

### Other Demographic Correlations

An examination of responses by demographic showed that some groups found it more difficult than others to learn during COVID-19. In particular, when asked whether they had access to an in-home location that was suitable for online classes, 50% of those who had carer responsibilities responded ‘no’. When compared to people without carer responsibilities, of which only 28% responded ‘no’, the results show that there is a correlation between people who have carer responsibilities and difficulty accessing a suitable work space. Other groups which were linked with learning difficulties were JD I and JD II students. 64% of JD I and 45% of JD II students responded that they did not have an in-home location suitable for online classes. Considering that on average, 32% of people in each cohort did not have a suitable environment, JD I and JD II students were particularly affected by the move to online learning. Understandably, 82% of JD I students, 80% of JD II students, and 88% of Non-JD postgraduate students felt that they had been struggling to learn effectively at

home, in comparison to a 64% average for each year group. In response to the statement 'online delivery has detrimentally impacted the quality of my education this semester', the percentage of people who agreed in each cohort was, on average, 49%. However, this percentage was higher for JD I and JD II students (73% and 70% respectively). It must be noted that correlations between specific results and people of Aboriginal descent, as well as people with a physical or cognitive disability were not independently considered due to the small sample size for those demographics. The sample size of each demographic in this survey was too small to be representative of larger trends in these groups. As such, demographic correlations in the academic experiences section indicated that those with carer responsibilities, as well as JD I and JD II students, were more likely to not have a suitable work space for online learning. Additionally, JD I, JD II and Non-JD postgraduate students were more likely to struggle with online learning at home, and were more likely to feel negatively impacted by changes to learning during COVID-19.

### 3. Mental wellbeing experiences

#### Outline

This section surveyed the effect of COVID-19 on the mental wellbeing of participants. Participants were asked three yes-no questions designed to assess the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on access to mental health or counselling services, experiences of racial discrimination and risk of exposure to domestic abuse or violence. They were also asked to self-assess seven indicators of mental health as having decreased, no change or increased; as well as to rank five affirmative statements about the impact of COVID-19 on issues relating to their mental wellbeing on a five-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “agree”. Finally, they were asked an open-ended question inviting submission of information about their mental wellbeing not relating to the other questions. As with the previous sections, insufficient responses were received from participants of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent and from participants with a physical or cognitive disability to establish significant demographic correlations.

Generally, students' mental wellbeing was found to have deteriorated as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, and their exposure to circumstances that would harm their mental wellbeing was found to have increased. Responses showed extensive increases in indicators of troubled mental health, with between 65% and 85% of students reporting increases in every indicator. A particularly common stressor was anxiety over academic performance in Semester 1, with 67% of students responding “agree” and 22% responding “somewhat agree”, followed by anxiety over employment prospects, to which 57% responded “agree” and 25% responded “somewhat agree”.

Of the participants, 26% reported that their access to mental health or counselling services they had previously used had been compromised by the COVID-19 crisis. The real figure may be higher, assuming some respondents who did not use such services responded “no” rather than disregarding the question on access to mental health or counselling services. This is suggested by the response rate of 93% for this question. Furthermore, 34% of participants reported that they or a member of their community had been a victim of racial discrimination relating to the COVID-19 crisis. This experience was indicated by 67% of international students, and 63% of domestic students who spoke English as a second language. This result coincides with reports of racist rhetoric and instances of abuse, particularly targeted towards individuals of Asian descent.

#### Results

##### *Access to mental health services and counselling*

Participants were asked to respond yes or no to the following question: “Has your access to mental health or counselling services you previously used been compromised by the COVID-19 crisis?”<sup>9</sup> 26% of participants who answered this question responded yes, while 74% responded no. Demographic results showed that participants who identified as LGBTQIA+, financially disadvantaged participants and participants with carer

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<sup>9</sup> Participants had been instructed to skip any question that was not applicable to them earlier in the survey, however a high response-rate to this question implies that some participants who had not previously accessed such services responded.

responsibilities were more likely than other demographics considered in this report to have lost access to mental health or counselling services, with more than 35% of those demographic cohorts responding “yes”. Additionally, gender identity and whether the respondent worked to support themselves appeared to correlate to access mental health or counselling services, with only 15% of male participants having lost access compared to 31% of female participants. This discrepancy may be reflective of lower rates of engagement with mental health services by men.<sup>10</sup>

Additionally, only 19% of participants who do not work to support themselves losing access compared to 32% of participants who work to support themselves having lost access. Furthermore, while the responses did not appear to indicate a relationship between domestic or international student status and access to mental health or counselling services, one participant spoke to potential barriers to access for international students:

“Having been called to return home (overseas), I have not been able to access a 24-hour mental support healthline (since there is no such service offered in my home country and the only 24-hour mental healthline relates to suicidal calls which is not relevant to my issue of panic attacks and anxiety in the wee hours of the night.”

That participant went on to suggest the following solution:

“Perhaps, an online 24-hour support initiative would be extremely helpful to international students who have returned home (and even domestic students who feel uncomfortable speaking on the phone).”

Another student reported that while they were aware of the availability of virtual consultations with mental health practitioners, they did not feel that was an appropriate substitute for them: “I need to see someone in person so [I] have not sought an [virtual] appointment.”

### *Racial Discrimination*

Participants were asked to respond yes or no to the following question: “Have you or a member of your community been a victim of racial discrimination relating to the COVID-19 crisis?”. 34% of participants responded affirmatively.<sup>11</sup> As indicated above, domestic or international student status and ESL status appeared to correlate strongly with participants’ responses to this question, with the ratio of yes and no responses almost reversing for both categories (67% of international student participants and 63% of ESL students responding affirmatively). This data is congruent with reports of increases in racist attacks in 2020, with the Australian Human Rights Commission reporting that one-third of reports of racial discrimination between February and May were related to COVID-19.<sup>12</sup> One student elaborated in an open-ended question response, stating “I have experienced two incidents of overt racism during the pandemic.” Another student stated that “the copious anti-Asian racism perturbs me.”

<sup>10</sup> *Mental Health Services in Brief* (Report, October 2019), 9

<<https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/f7395726-55e6-4e0a-9c1c-01f3ab67c193/aihw-hse-228-in-brief.pdf.aspx?inline=true>>

<sup>11</sup> “Your community” was not defined, meaning participants may have had varying understandings of the question’s scope.

<sup>12</sup> Chin Tan, ‘Where’s all the data on COVID-19 racism?’, *Australian Human Rights Commission* (Web Page: 9 May 2020) <<https://humanrights.gov.au/about/news/opinions/wheres-all-data-covid-19-racism>>.

**Fig 3.1** *Have you or a member of your community been a victim of racial discrimination relating to the COVID-19 crisis?*

<i>Are you an international or domestic student?</i>	<i>Do you speak English as a second language?</i>	No	Yes
Domestic student	No	82.71%	17.29%
	Yes	36.84%	63.16%
<b>Domestic student Total</b>		<b>76.97%</b>	<b>23.03%</b>
International student	No	42.86%	57.14%
	Yes	29.41%	70.59%
<b>International student Total</b>		<b>33.33%</b>	<b>66.67%</b>
<b>Grand Total</b>		<b>66.50%</b>	<b>33.50%</b>
			<i>n=200</i>

### *Exposure to Increased Risk of Domestic Violence or Abuse*

Participants were asked to respond yes or no to the following question: “Has your or a family member’s risk of exposure to domestic abuse or violence been increased by the requirement to stay home?” 8% of participants responded affirmatively to this question. Due to the sensitive nature of the question, participants were not asked to provide further detail or to suggest why they believed themselves or a family member to face a higher risk of exposure to domestic abuse or violence. No information on this issue was provided through this survey section’s open-ended question. As such, it might be speculated that participants who responded affirmatively did so because they have previously experienced acts or threats of domestic abuse in their current living arrangement, or because they feel unsafe in their household for other reasons. If these explanations account for affirmative responses to this question, other areas of concern in this survey besides the participant’s mental wellbeing are likely to be impacted. Academic concerns are likely to be heightened by this risk, as the strain it might cause on the participant’s mental wellbeing would detriment their ability to work from home.

### *Effect on Indicators of Mental Health*

Participants were asked to mark each of the following indicators of mental health as having decreased, no change, or increased:

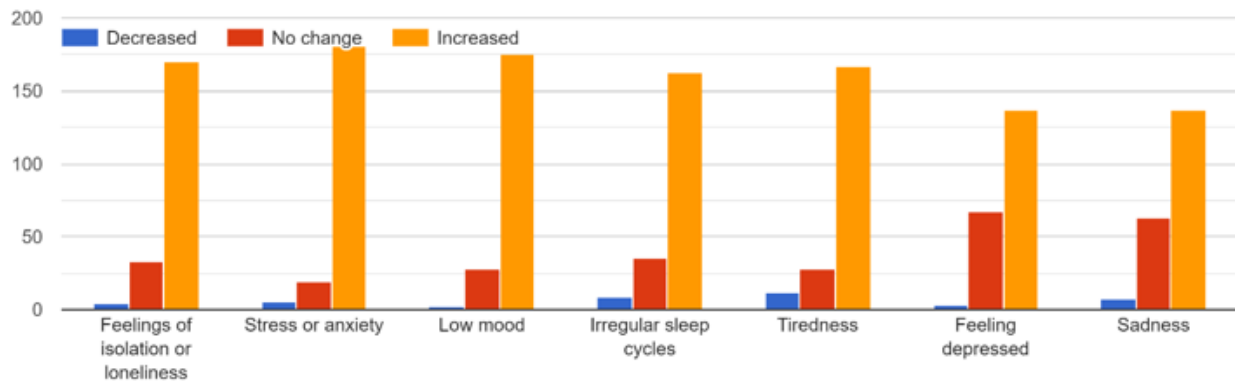
- Feelings of isolation or loneliness
- Stress or anxiety
- Low mood
- Irregular sleep cycles



- Tiredness
- Feeling depressed
- Sadness

**Fig 3.2**

Please indicate whether each of the following have increased, decreased, or remained the same during the COVID-19 crisis.



All indicators showed ubiquitous increases. Stress or anxiety had the highest rate of increase, with 88% of participants reporting an increase, 9% reporting no change, and 2% reporting a decrease. This was followed by low mood, with 85% reporting an increase, 14% reporting no change, and 1% reporting a decrease. Feelings of isolation or loneliness increased in 82% of participants, did not change in 16%, and decreased in 2%. Tiredness increased in 81% of participants, did not change in 14%, and decreased in 6%. Irregular sleep cycles increased in 79% of participants, did not change in 17% of participants, and decreased in 4% of participants. Depressed feelings increased in 66% of participants, did not change in 32%, and decreased in 1%. Likewise, sadness also increased in 66% of participants, did not change in 30%, and decreased in 3%. It should be noted that participants were not asked to show the degree of change in these indicators, so it might be assumed that all participants who reported an increase or decrease in any indicator experienced at least a level of change sufficient to be noticeable, though not necessarily sufficient to improve or deteriorate the participant's overall mental wellbeing.

Students at the end of their degree and JD I students were more likely to report increased feelings of stress and anxiety than their peers, with 96% of JD III students reporting an increase, 94% of LLB V students reporting an increase, and all JD I students surveyed reporting an increase. JD I students, LLB V students and non-JD postgraduates were more likely to report increased feelings of low mood than their peers, at 90%, 94% and 94% respectively. Those three cohorts were also most likely to report increased feelings of isolation or loneliness, at 91%, 94% and 88% respectively. Likewise, JD I and LLB I students were most likely to experience increased feelings of tiredness, at 91% and 90% respectively. This trend was consistent in irregular sleep cycles, which were also experienced by 94% of non-JD postgraduate participants. Increased experiences of depressed feeling were most common in JD II, LLB I and LLB V students (84%, 79% and 83%,

respectively) and least common in LLB II and LLB IV students (44% and 42%, respectively). Likewise, LLB I and LLB V were most likely to report increased feelings of sadness, at 83% for both cohorts.

The following demographics were more likely to experience increased stress or anxiety: LGBTQIA+ students (97%), students who are or have recently been recognised as financially disadvantaged (96%), ESL students (96%), students with carer responsibilities (95%) and international students (94%).

A number of comments were submitted by participants regarding their mental health via the section's open-ended question. Some participants elaborated on their personal experience of declining mental health during the COVID-19 crisis:

"I am constantly switching between either feeling EXTREMELY stressed or feeling completely nihilistic and like why am I studying if none of this matters?"

"I'm seeking professional help again due to COVID. Mental health completely plummeted. Days I can't get out of bed. Worst it's ever been and couldn't pinpoint exactly why, but that's how mental health works I guess."

Moreover, some participants spoke to the difficulty of monitoring their own state of mental wellbeing in light of frequent changes in COVID-19 conditions, or to have struggles with mental health recognised by others:

"I find it quite hard to gauge my wellbeing - it's been very up and down, so it's hard to say definitively."

"Difficult to categorise as disagree, no change, agree because has and continues to change as situation evolves"

"I don't think some tutors are aware of the extra toll this pandemic takes on people with pre-existing mental health issues, and perhaps need extra training taking this into account when liaising with students broadly and in one-on-one communications (like via email)"

### *Specific Stressors*

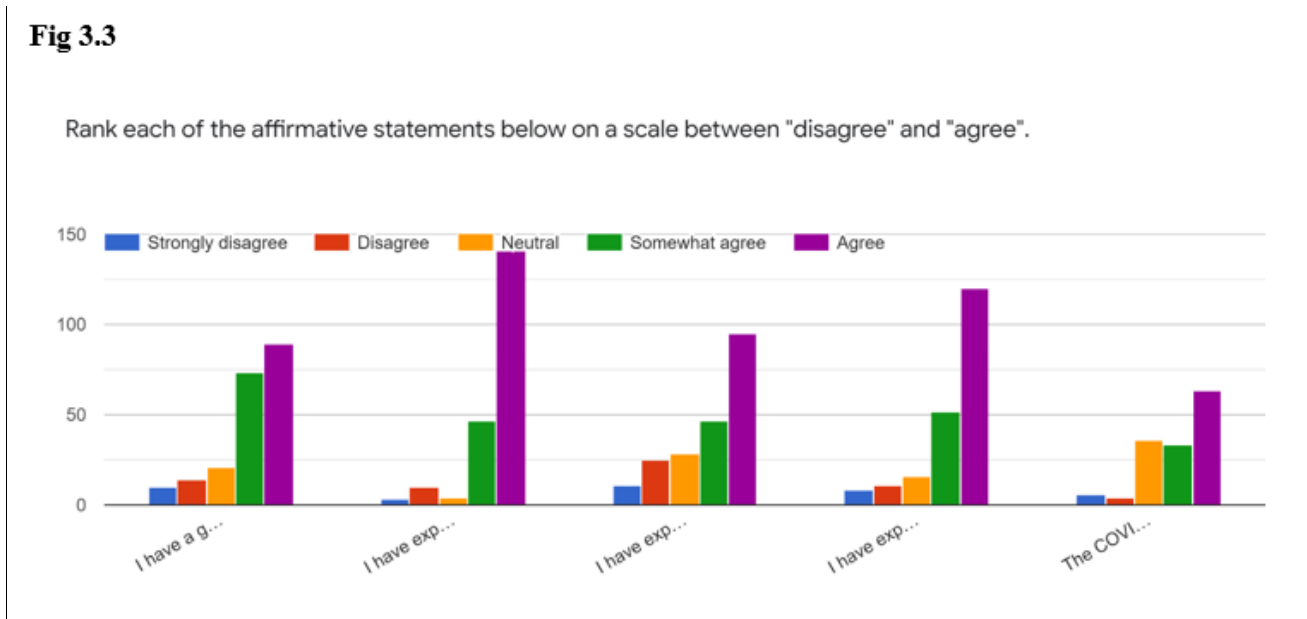
Students were asked to rank each of the affirmative statements below on a scale between "strongly disagree" and "agree":<sup>13</sup>

- I have a good support network of friends and family
- I have experienced anxiety about my ability to perform academically this semester
- I have experienced anxiety about my financial situation or home life because of the COVID-19 crisis
- I have experienced anxiety about my employment prospects because of the COVID-19 crisis
- The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated my mental health condition (leave blank if not applicable)

The purpose of these questions was to assess the degree to which participants experienced stress and strain on their mental wellbeing that were predicted to be induced by circumstances during the COVID-19 crisis. This

<sup>13</sup> An error in the survey substituted "disagree" with "strongly disagree" and "somewhat disagree" with "agree". The scale was meant to be: disagree - somewhat disagree - neutral - somewhat agree - agree.

section was also designed to gather information on the number of students who believed they had a good support network of friends and family, as it was believed that this information would be relevant when considering the degree of harm to one's mental wellbeing the other stressors posed.



Of 207 participants who answered this question, 78% responded affirmatively by indicating that they agree (43%) or somewhat agree (35%) with the statement, "I have a good support network of friends and family", while 10% indicated neutral and 12% indicated negatively (7% disagree and 5% strongly disagree). This indicates that, on the whole, most respondents believed that they had a good support network, however, the parameters of the question did not give participants the opportunity to distinguish that support network in terms of its quality, reliability or composition. International students were more likely to respond negatively, with 18% responding disagree and 4% responding strongly disagree, suggesting as a demographic they were less likely to believe they had good support networks of friends and family. This may be because of the presumed likelihood that international students' families reside overseas. Similarly, of ESL participants, 13% responded disagree and 11% responded strongly disagree, suggesting they were more likely than other demographics to feel that they did not have a good support network of friends and family.

Out of all stressors, students were most likely to indicate anxiety about their ability to perform academically in Semester 1. Of the 205 participants who answered this question, 69% indicated they agree with the statement, "I have experienced anxiety about my ability to perform academically this semester" and 23% indicated they somewhat agree, amounting to 92% responding affirmatively. Only 2% indicated neutral, 5% disagreed and 1% strongly disagreed. JD I, JD II and LLB V students were most likely to agree with the statement (82%, 94% and 94%, respectively), while LLB II students and non-JD postgraduate students were most likely to disagree (12% and 13%, respectively, however, no participants from either cohort strongly disagreed).

Following anxiety relating to academic performance, anxiety about employment prospects because of the COVID-19 crisis was the next most indicated stressor. Of the 205 participants who answered this question,

59% indicated they agree with the statement, “I have experienced anxiety about my employment prospects because of the COVID-19 crisis” and 25% indicated they somewhat agree, amounting to 84% responding affirmatively. 7% indicated neutral, 5% disagreed and 4% strongly disagreed. Predictably, responses were skewed based on the participants’ academic cohort. LLB I, LLB II, LLB III and JD I students all indicated agree at below average rates of 28%, 48%, 48% and 45% (though it should be noted that only LLB I and JD I students strongly disagreed at higher rates of 10% and 9% respectively); while LLB IV, LLB V, JD II and JD III students agreed at above-average rates of 83%, 94%, 79% and 71% respectively. This suggests that students closer to applying for clerkships and graduate roles were more likely to experience anxiety about their employment, albeit with JD III students reporting less anxiety about this than LLB V students at only 85% of JD III students responding affirmatively versus 100% of LLB V students responding affirmatively. While the question stipulated that this anxiety related to the COVID-19 crisis, without figures from other years it is not possible to establish the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on students’ anxiety about their employment prospects (or any other issue for that matter). It might be speculated, however, that reports of lower graduate intakes reflecting deteriorating economic conditions and accounts of similar trends following the Global Financial Crisis had some effect on participants’ employment anxieties.<sup>14</sup>

Anxiety relating to participants’ financial situations or home lives were the next most indicated stressor. Of the 206 participants who answered this question, 46% indicated they agree with the statement, “I have experienced anxiety about my financial situation or home life because of the COVID-19 crisis” and 23% indicated they somewhat agree, amounting to 69% responding affirmatively. 14% indicated neutral, 12% disagreed and 5% strongly disagreed.

Finally, participants to whom the question applied indicated an appreciable impact on COVID-19 on their mental health condition. Of the 142 respondents, 44% indicated they agree with the statement, “the COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated my mental health condition” and 23% indicated they somewhat agree, amounting to 67% responding affirmatively. 25% indicated neutral, 3% disagreed and 4% strongly disagreed.

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<sup>14</sup> Hannah Wootton, ‘Graduate programs stall as virus hits lawyers’, *Australian Financial Review* (online, 30 April 2020) <<https://www.afr.com/companies/professional-services/law-firms-grapple-with-graduate-hiring-amid-covid-19-downturn-20200424-p54n3q>>.

# Appendix A: Survey Questions

## Demographic Experiences

- Please select the option that best reflects your gender identity.
- Please select your degree/cohort
- Do you identify as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?
- Are you an international or domestic student?
- Are you currently acknowledged as, or have you, in the last five years, been acknowledged as financially disadvantaged for the purposes of a scholarship, bursary or social security payment?
- Do you work to support yourself?
- Do you identify as LGBTQIA+?
- Do you speak English as a second language?
- Do you have a physical or cognitive disability?
- Do you have carer responsibilities? (Eg; carer of a person with a disability, responsibility for dependant children or young siblings, etc)

## Economic experiences

- Have you lost work at your regular place of employment as a result of the COVID-19 crisis? (Note: this includes losing hours/shifts as well as being laid off)
- Has a family member whom you depend on for financial support (eg; food expenses, accommodation) lost work as a result of the COVID-19 crisis?
- Are you anticipating a loss of employment or further loss of employment as the situation develops?
- Have you had an offer of future employment or engagement (eg; a clerkship or a job commencing next semester) rescinded on account of the COVID-19 crisis?
- Have you voluntarily forgone work in order to socially distance yourself? Has your workplace allowed you to work from home?
- Have you encountered difficulties funding your cost of living as a result of the COVID-19 crisis? (Eg; lost employment compromising your ability to pay rent)
- Have you been affected by shortages of supply for essential goods? (Eg; hygiene products, non-perishable foods)
- If you have carer responsibilities, have your responsibilities increased during the crisis? (Eg; as a result of children or young siblings staying home from school)
- Rank each of the affirmative statements below on a scale between "disagree" and "agree":
  - [I anticipate difficulty finding employment in the next 24 months due to the state of the economy.]
  - [I feel a need to seek further employment to safeguard my finances.]
  - [I believe that my employer has made a reasonable effort to maintain my employment during the COVID-19 crisis.]
  - [I am frequently concerned by the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on my or my family's finances.]

## Academic Experiences

- Have any of your units of study been cancelled? If yes to the above, please specify which unit
- Have you had any issues accessing online delivery of classes? (Eg; due to unreliable internet access, time zones)
- Do you have access to a location within your home that is suitable for online classes? (Ie; quiet, unlikely to be interrupted by members of your household, etc)
- Rank each of the affirmative statements below on a scale between "disagree" and "agree":
  - [Online delivery has detrimentally impacted the quality of my education this semester.]
  - [I feel supported by my lecturers and tutors]
  - [I feel supported by university administration.]
  - [I am satisfied with the online educational content provided by the Sydney Law School.]
  - [I feel heard by my university]
  - [I know what support services are offered by my university]
  - [I have been struggling to learn and study effectively at home]
  - [I am satisfied with the changes to grading this semester which have been announced by the university.]
- Are there any specific courses of action that you believe the university should take or refrain from taking in order to improve the quality of education during the COVID-19 crisis?
- Do you have any information you would like to share pertaining to your academic experiences which does not fall under one of the previous questions?

## Mental Wellbeing Experiences

- Has your access to mental health or counselling services you previously used been compromised by the COVID-19 crisis?
- Have you or a member of your community been a victim of racial discrimination relating to the COVID-19 crisis?
- Has your or a family member's risk of exposure to domestic abuse or violence been increased by the requirement to stay home?
- Please indicate whether each of the following have increased, decreased, or remained the same during the COVID-19 crisis.
  - [Feelings of isolation or loneliness]
  - [Stress or anxiety]
  - [Low mood]
  - [Tiredness]
  - [Feeling depressed]
  - [Sadness]
- Rank each of the affirmative statements below on a scale between "disagree" and "agree".
  - [I have a good support network of friends and family]
  - [I have experienced anxiety about my ability to perform academically this semester.]
  - [I have experienced anxiety about my financial situation or home life because of the COVID19 crisis]

- [I have experienced anxiety about my employment prospects because of the COVID-19 crisis
  - [The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated my mental health condition (leave blank if not applicable)]
- Do you have any information you would like to share pertaining to your mental wellbeing which does not fall under one of the previous questions?