



2023

La Trobe
University
Student Union

Run by Students, For Students

Student
Placement
Poverty



From the President



Trust, communication, respect and understanding are fundamental when a student prepares for a work placement. We need to have confidence in our university's staff and systems to provide quality, fulfilling and challenging work placements, and in the organisations we are placed in. For many of us, a work placement is our first experience of work, formal responsibility and working alongside colleagues. We have to get this right.

However, the results of our research amongst members and fellow students is troubling. Students have told us some real horror stories about their experience with La Trobe and their matched organisations. We're hearing money, travel, wellbeing, relationships and health are all adversely affected during work placements and La Trobe needs to hear this too.

We know work placements are invaluable to our study, personal growth and preparedness for the workplace. But La Trobe has

to approach our placements in a holistic way, not merely a tick box exercise for companies who need free labour. La Trobe must have a partnership with students and we must be at the table when processes about us are developed. We are not a focus group, an add on, and we're not the junior partner.

As the largest student representative body at La Trobe University, La Trobe Student Union has the knowledge and trust from students to help improve work placements for future students. We are ready to work on improving work placements and finding appropriate workplaces to get the best outcomes.

Furthermore, La Trobe needs to have a more student-centric and holistic review on placements. Rather than only focussing on organisational structure, there needs to be a spotlight on students' wellbeing and financial support needed.

Burnout is an all too real experience that negatively impacts a student's learning ability. This is why La Trobe University needs to take further preventive measures, so students don't burnout before their careers begin.

A handwritten signature in white ink that reads "Monika Galovic". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'M'.

Monika Galovic
LTSU President 2023





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1,886 hours of unpaid work is a lot. The placement team needs to be helpful and organised but the uni forgets we are paying for a service, and at the moment the students needs are currently met last.”



Executive Summary

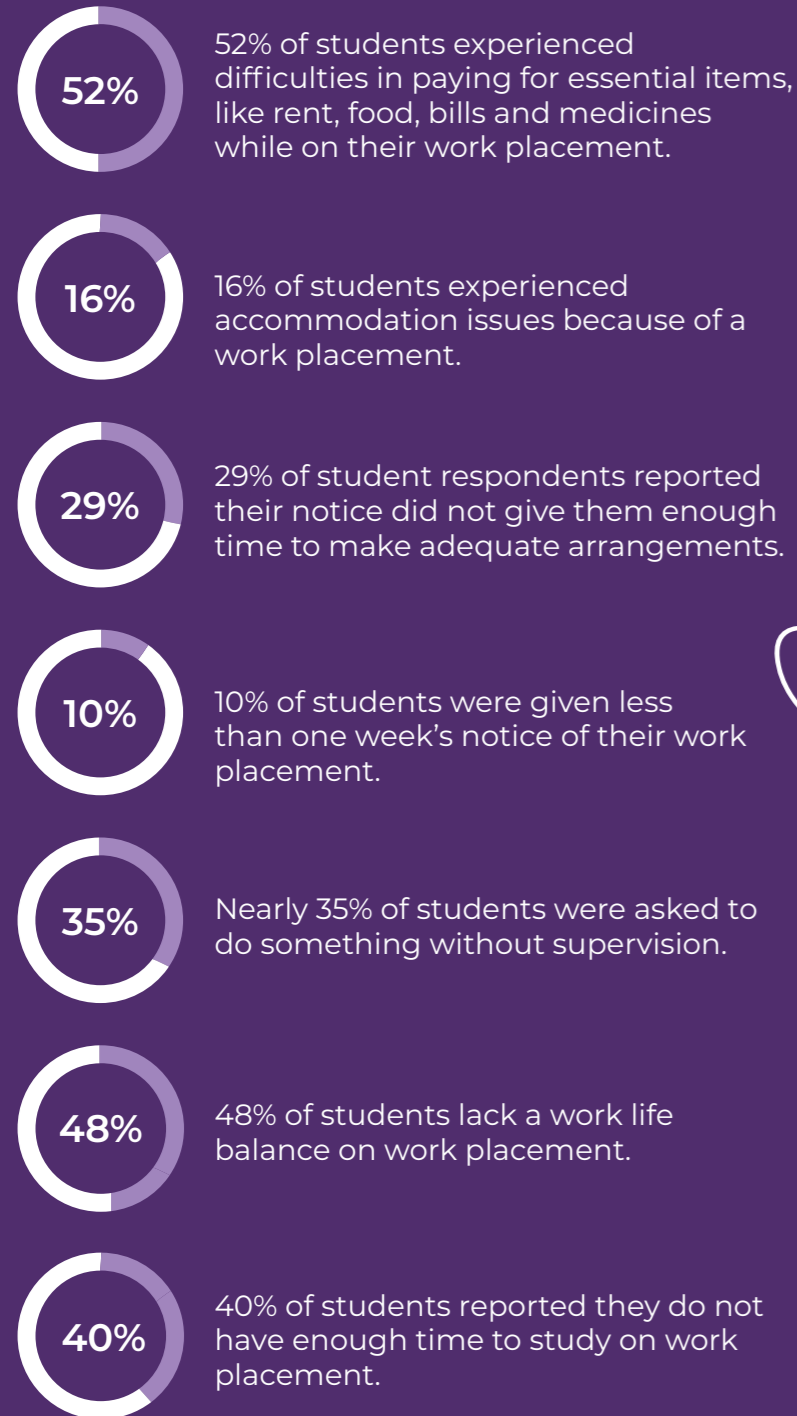
Many students at La Trobe University Bundoora have consistently highlighted the challenges work placements have on their studies, finances, relationships and wellbeing.

In 2022 and 2023, La Trobe Student Union's (LTSU) Advocacy team saw a rapid rise in students accessing the service about their work placements. As the largest representative body for La Trobe University students representing over 20,000 members and students, the LTSU has also received continual feedback about work placements and their standards, processes and communications, and the workplaces they were assigned.

La Trobe University's initiated a review of student work placements this year (2023), however there was minimal engagement with the LTSU.

Given the lack of engagement from La Trobe University with students on this essential component to their degree, and the growing urgency of inadequate and varied student work placements; the LTSU initiated research to demonstrate the challenges facing its members and students more widely. The results from this research are included in this report.

Key Findings



Of the 534 responses to our survey, 52% of students told us they experienced difficulties in paying for essential items, like rent, food, bills and medicines while on their work placement. 16% of students further experienced accommodation issues because of a work placement.

The LTSU asks La Trobe University to investigate ways to assist students with the financial burden of work placements. Options could be direct payments and scholarships, subsidised immunisation, travel vouchers (including monthly myki passes), supermarket gift cards to assist with groceries, an agreement with providers that parking is free, or by contributing to the current Universities Accord with the recommendation to reimburse students for placement.

Our research also found that students were given limited notice about their work placement. Most students were given between just one to three weeks' notice of their work placement. 29% of student respondents reported their notice did not give them enough time to make adequate arrangements. 10% of students were given less than one week's notice.

Students further reported they were not satisfied with the time La Trobe University took to respond to their requests. This was a significant source of stress and affected students' mental health. Students additionally reported that placement had an unreasonable impact on their wider responsibilities such as caring, education and their studies.

Students, however, reported work placements were an exceptional opportunity to apply skills learned in class that would positively impact their careers. Although, almost a third of students were asked to do something outside of their scope of practice. Nearly 35% of students were asked to do something without supervision. Importantly, most students felt safe on placement.

Recommendations

Through the LTSU's research, Advocacy service and student feedback, the LTSU asks the university to commit to the following:

- 1 For all student placements to be fully funded as they would be for any other job
- 2 La Trobe University students and the LTSU are at the planning, process design, delivery and evaluation of placement programmes
- 3 La Trobe University should provide every student on placement across all study areas, with an orientation pack that includes key information about work placements such as actions and duties a student is expected to complete
- 4 Students must be given a minimum of eight weeks' notice of placement
- 5 La Trobe University provides a guarantee that students are not expected to travel further than one hour from their home to complete the work placement

- 6 Student work placement issues are responded to by the relevant La Trobe University party within one business day if not sooner
- 7 The university audit placement supervisors to ensure their training, standards and management is uniform





The build up, expectations and sheer number of hours of placement is just huge, including shift work full time. I've done multiple shifts where I finish at 9:30pm and am back at 7am the next morning and it's not sustainable."



Introduction

With university fees rising, and every day costs higher than ever, students cannot be expected to work for free. The heart of the Universities Accord is equality in higher education. Working for no salary is not equal.

It is clear from listening to students that unpaid work placement has an unfair impact on student wellbeing, health, mental health and studies. The LTSU has conducted extensive research by engaging with the LTSU's members through workshops, surveys and the Advocacy service.

La Trobe University was founded with a strong student union to amplify student voices for change and positive outcomes. This is reflected regularly by student surveys that demonstrate La Trobe University outperforms as a place where students are respected and satisfied. Feedback states the university generally supports students as they partake in life altering study positively impacting their economic and health outcomes, as well as their families' lives.

"In particular, La Trobe University has been a route for many students who are the first person in their family or community [to enter university]."

La Trobe University has long championed students entering higher education. In particular, La Trobe University has been a route for many students who are the first person in their family or community. Yet, like many large bureaucracies, the university places undue burdens on students as they navigate the complex systems that govern how students' study.

Methodology

The LTSU listened to students through their membership, workshops, surveys and Advocacy Service. The student union is trusted by students and has a distinct opportunity to voice students' issues. The LTSU can raise student issues and experiences when students understandably may not want to speak directly to the university. The LTSU's unique position as a voice of the students presents an opportunity for the university to pause and help us to create a better opportunity for students, especially those on work placement, representing the university as they continue with their academic journey.

The LTSU created a 36-question survey that received 534 responses, two workshops with approximately 20 students who shared their experience of work placements and input from the Advocacy service. Our research focused on four distinct areas informed by our elected student representatives:

1. Preparedness and orientation
2. Student experience
3. Learning opportunities
4. Support and supervision



This research has given the LTSU a distinctive opportunity to elevate student experiences of placement with the aim of presenting its findings and recommendations as an accurate portrayal of student experience.

La Trobe University launched a review of student work placements in 2023, but engagement with the LTSU has been minimal. The LTSU review, in comparison, is student-centric that aims to highlight overlooked issues that are important to students.

“Engagement with the LTSU has been minimal.”

The university's approach to the review of work placements has been academic, jargon-heavy, and staff-focused, devoid of meaningful student engagement. This approach creates unnecessary barriers to students who would struggle to approach the university for help, especially those from different communities or home countries.

Our survey and workshops represented students across all

“The university's approach creates unnecessary barriers ... especially [for] those from different communities or home countries.”

university campuses and age groups. Responses were, however, heavily focused on the Bundoora campus with students primarily aged between 18–24 (62%) and 25–34 (29%).

The majority of respondents were in their second and third year of an undergraduate degree and had completed one or two placements. Students represented several study areas within the university. There was a core focus on students studying allied health, especially social work, speech pathology, nursing and midwifery. Of these degrees, 57 survey responses came from Bachelor of Nursing students, 19 from Bachelor of Psychological Science students, 18 from Bachelor of Nursing and Midwifery and 14 from Master of Teaching students, as well as other degrees.

“**The LTSU found students on work placement during COVID-19 restrictions had a profoundly negative experience.**”

About two thirds of respondents were domestic students and a third were international students. Two thirds of respondents were women and a third were men. 1% identified as non-binary and another 1% as gender non-conforming. 54% of students who answered our survey were mature aged students.

The LTSU found students on work placement during COVID-19 restrictions had a profoundly negative experience. This is likely due to placements largely being online as well as placements being delayed. While it is important for La Trobe University and the LTSU to hear the experience of students on placement during COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions, the LTSU has chosen to not include their experiences in this report due to the uniqueness of the circumstances, the understanding that these restrictions may never be

repeated, and that the university had limited options during this time.

As the democratic student representative body for over 20,000 members, the LTSU is an integral amplifier of student voices and student experiences. Major programs affecting students should not be made without a student voice. This includes work placements, First Nations, disability inclusion, safety initiatives, La Trobe’s City of the Future, plans for the Agora and placement.

La Trobe students and LTSU elected Office Bearers should be working in partnership with the university to make student experiences of placement better and be involved at the planning, process design, delivery and evaluation stages of placement programmes.

This report is designed to enhance La Trobe University’s own efforts to investigate student experience of placement and redesign the process to improve outcomes and impact.



1 Preparedness and orientation

Our research presented a key theme on how prepared students were for work placement. This included any orientation or information sessions given to students beforehand. The core issue for students was the time dedicated to preparation for work placement. In workshops, preparedness was a key source of anxiety. Students worried that they would be given a placement in an undesirable or unfamiliar location, far from their home. This was often a location with poor transport links or a work placement focusing in an undesirable subject area which would impact future career options.

“Preparedness was a key source of anxiety.”

Students who responded to the survey recorded they were given on average one to three weeks' notice of their work placement. Most students found this wasn't enough notice and didn't allow

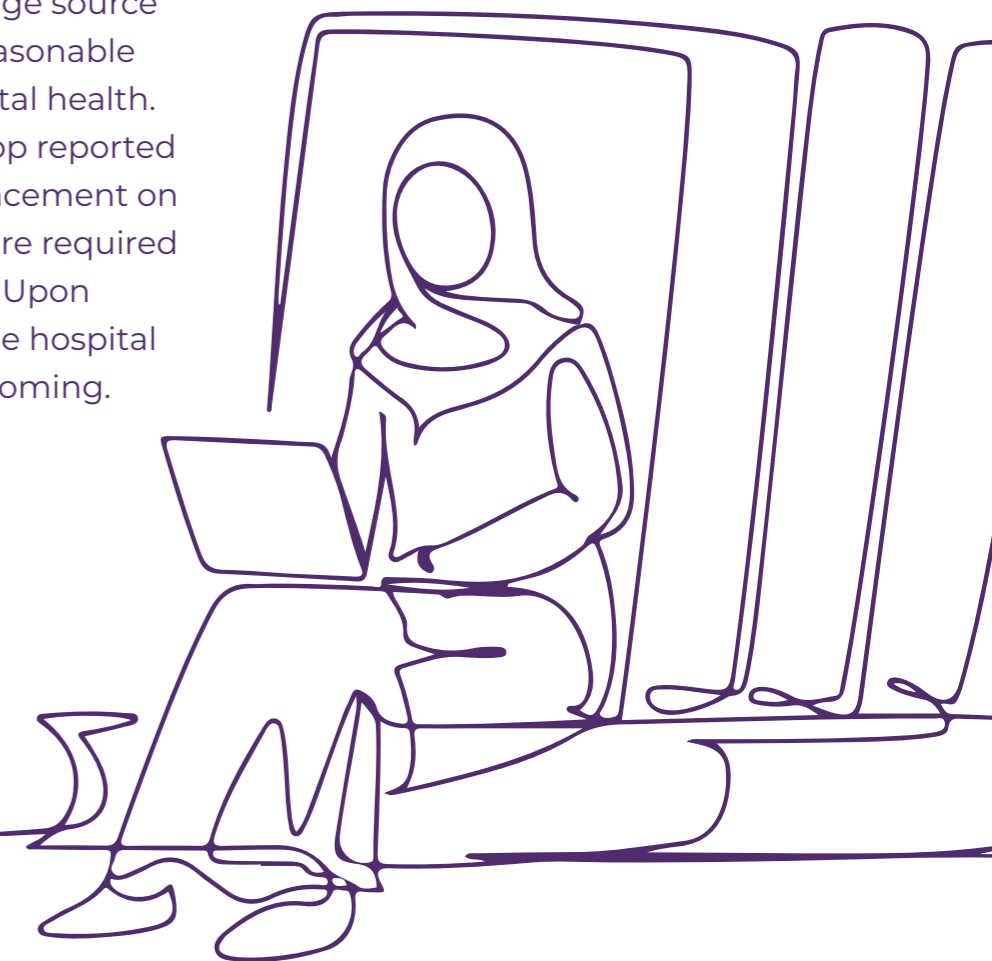
“10% were given less than a week's notice on where they would be required to attend.”

them to speak with their employer (if they were working) to establish how they would manage both working a paid job and engaging in placement. There are only so many hours in a day and some students would spend the hours of 9am – 5pm engaging in placement and then spend another 3-4 hours in the evening earning money to continue to study. Some students reported that they would forgo employment so they could complete placement as juggling both paid work and placement was too hard and left them burnt out. When asked if they had received adequate information and guidance before starting a work placement, 29% of students who answered our survey responded no.

However, while many students are given between one to three weeks' notice, 29% of student respondents reported that their notice was not enough time for them to make adequate arrangements and 10% of respondents were given less than a week's notice on where they would be required to attend.

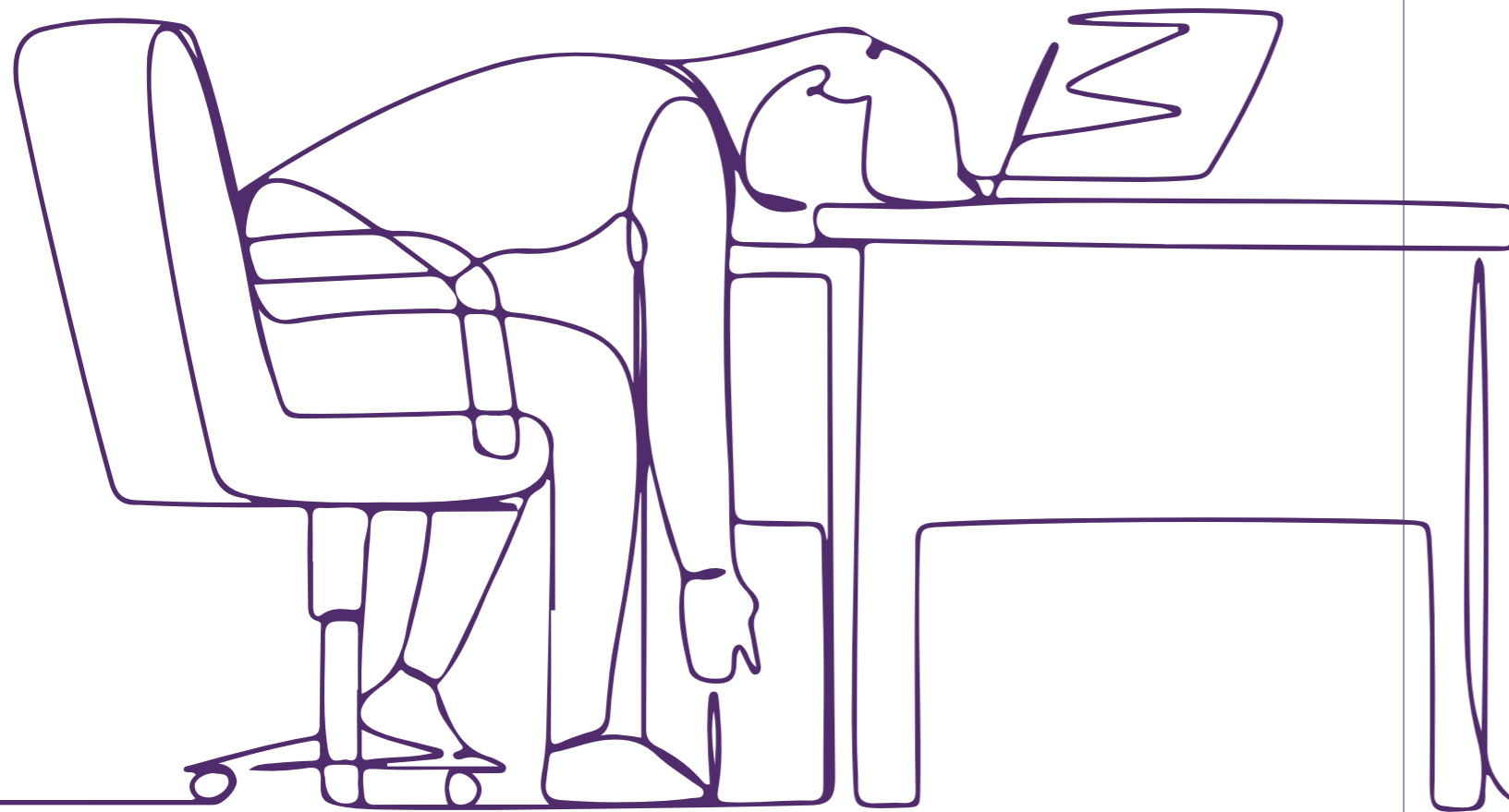
The issue of when students were receiving notice of their work placement also highlighted very poor communication from the university. Students reported they were not satisfied with the time it took La Trobe University to respond to requests. This was a huge source of stress, placing an unreasonable impact on students' mental health. One student in a workshop reported they were told of their placement on the Friday before they were required to start the next Monday. Upon arriving the next week, the hospital did not know they were coming.

“When students were receiving notice of their work placement also highlighted very poor communication from the university.”





As a student with a disability the social work department were not understanding of my disability.”



Nguyen, Bachelor of Nursing*

Nguyen uploaded the documents La Trobe university requested from her to their “InPlace” system. She did this before the required deadline. Some of the documents uploaded were only assessed and responded to by La Trobe university after the deadline. Subsequently, Nguyen was informed by the university that her documents were not acceptable. No explanation was given for their reasoning. At one point, Nguyen was only given a few hours to provide La Trobe university with one of the requested documents. This document related to immunisations which cost Nguyen significant expenditure and time.

During the process, Nguyen stated La Trobe university’s communication and engagement with her was extremely poor. At no point did a La Trobe university staff member call Nguyen and explain the situation. It was up to Nguyen to advocate for themselves and proactively contact the university.

**The student’s name has been changed for confidentiality.*

2 Student experience

Our research found the importance of work placement to practice what students had learned. Students want, and appreciate work experience before they graduate and join the workforce. However, due to their work placement, 10% of students reported they were unlikely to recommend La Trobe University to others as a place to study. Almost 9% reported they were very unlikely to recommend La Trobe University.

Work placement is indeed an important part of many degrees. However, when given an opportunity to rate their work placement experience, students gave placement a rating of 6.8 out of 10.

Most students would recommend their work placement to others. However, in the workshops, students reported feeling like “free labour”, and were directed to “do data entry” before starting work relevant to their degrees.

“10% of students reported they were unlikely to recommend La Trobe University to others as a place to study.”

When raising such issues with lecturers and tutors, students were met with resistance and an entrenched view that this approach was the only way. In an LTSU workshop, one nursing student explained they had raised an issue when directed to complete data entry as a work task. The student used the opportunity to explain to their lecturer that being unpaid was unfair and had a profound impact on their mental health. The lecturer responded that the situation was the same for themselves at university and the student had to get over it.

Almost 60 Bachelor of Nursing students and 20 Bachelor of Nursing and Midwifery students responded

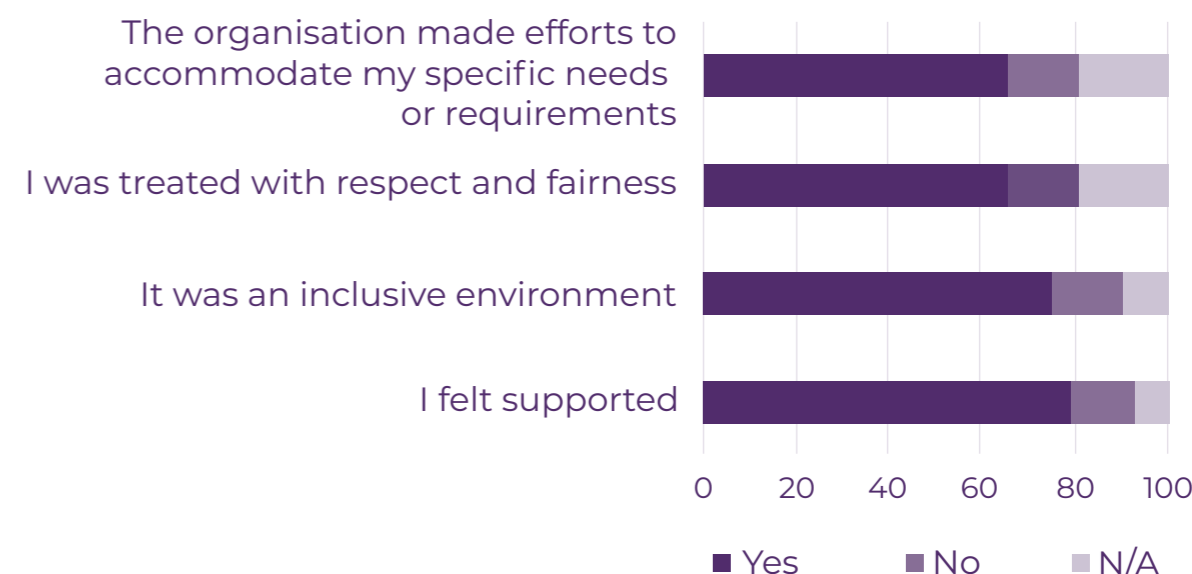
to our survey and represented a strong cohort in our workshops. From our research its clear that nursing students have a harder time at placement than other students and are overrepresented in our Advocacy Service data. It was explained at a workshop that students on placement in a hospital setting are exposed to higher levels of bullying and hazing from older staff members.

When asked about university systems (such as InPlace, PebblePad, LMS and WBL), around 10% of student found them difficult to use. 20% to 30% (depending on the system) reported the systems are easy to use (InPlace 28%, PebblePad 20%, LMS 30%, WBL 22%). However, students felt that

they could use the university systems for their own requirements, yet it was when academic, support staff and placement staff failed to upload key documents that was the issue.

A key theme that was explored in our research was the impact work placements had on students. Students reported their work placement had an unreasonable impact on their financial situation, their mental health, their education and studies, and their caring responsibilities.

On placement:



When specifically asked about the impact on their financial situation students reported that:

- ▶ 53% of students experienced difficulties in paying for essential items, like rent, food, bills and medicines.
- ▶ 48% reported that they had a lack of work life balance
- ▶ 40% reported that they did not have enough time for study
- ▶ 16% of students experienced accommodation problems because of work placement

In the survey students were asked how their work placement had an unreasonable impact on them.

My work placement had an unreasonable impact on:



- None of the above
- My family and/or relationships
- My caring and/or parental responsibilities
- My education and studies
- My money
- My mental health
- My physical health
- Other

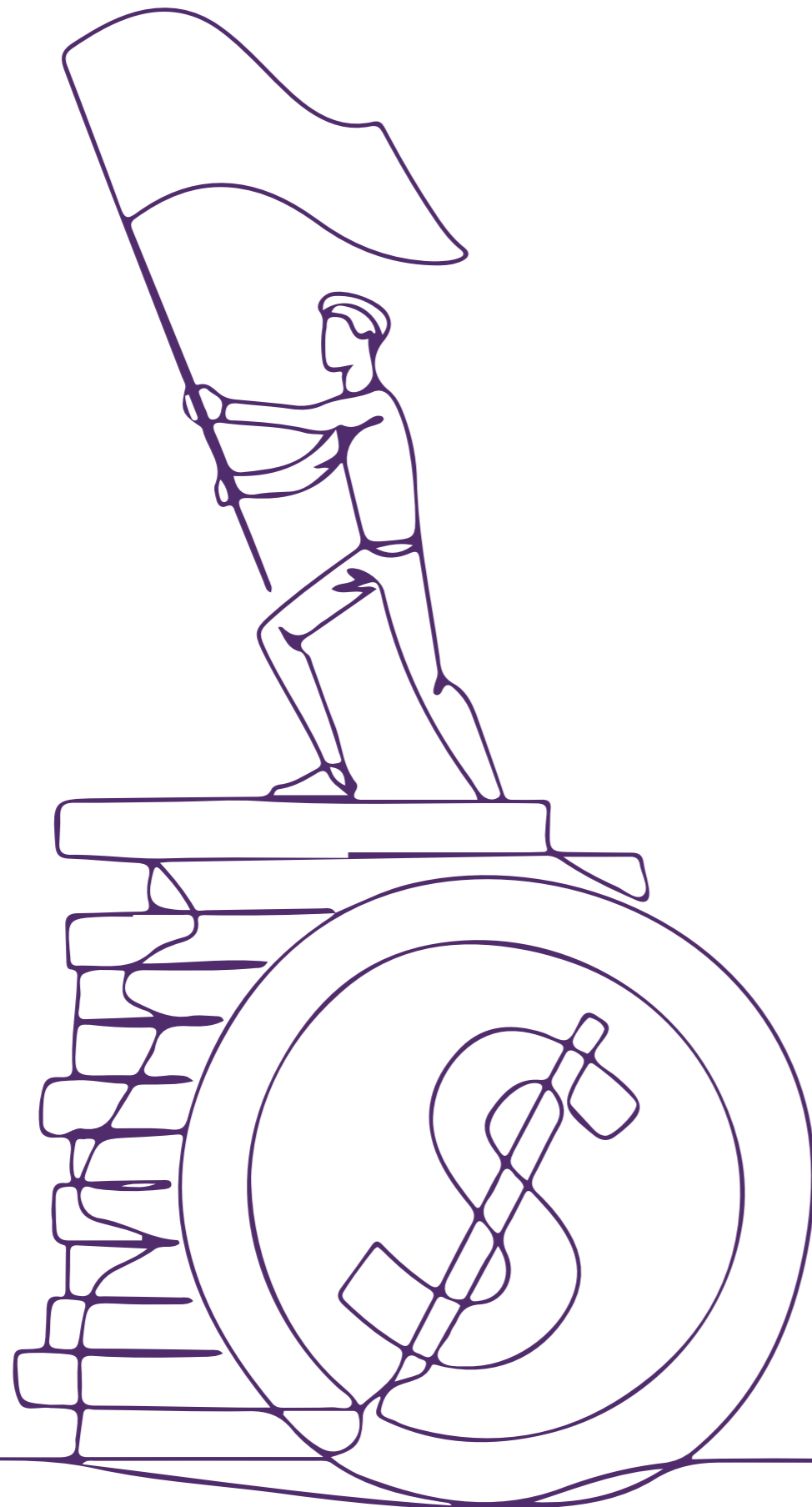
On work placement, students were required to pay for their own immunisation before work placement. For some students the expense of immunisation placed undue pressure on their financial situation, with one student explaining in a workshop they were forced to reduce their meals to two a day.

It is clear from the research findings that financial support is the leading issue for students on work placement. For a student travelling to work placement via public transport, they are required to pay a \$10 full fare or a \$5 concession fare. For a social work student conducting 500 hours of work placement a year, travelling 5 days a week is either a cost of \$700 for a full fare or \$350 for a concession.



It can be difficult not having an income for 3 – 6 weeks. Overall my placement will cost me \$3k to complete. Travel costs, uniform costs, vaccination costs came to \$1.5k before you even factor in loss of wages.”





“It is clear from the research findings that financial support is the leading issue for students on work placement.”

with groceries could be paid, and an agreement with providers that parking is paid.

The LTSU also found nursing students are the most likely to encounter hostile work environments on placement. In the data, nursing students are

I experienced the following due to my work placement:



The LTSU recommends that La Trobe University prioritise initiatives in which they can assist students with the financial burden of work placements. The priority should be fully funded work placements like any other job. Additionally, direct payments could be offered, immunisation and uniforms paid by the university or placement organisation. Travel vouchers (including monthly myki passes), supermarket gift cards to assist

over represented in negative experiences, often with supervising nurses and cliques of nurses targeting students on placement. At a workshop, a student informed our team that their supervisor told them not to pursue a career in nursing.

The LTSU recommend that the university audit placement supervisors to ensure the uniformity of student placement experiences.

Case Study – Amelia

Amelia, Bachelor of Nursing*

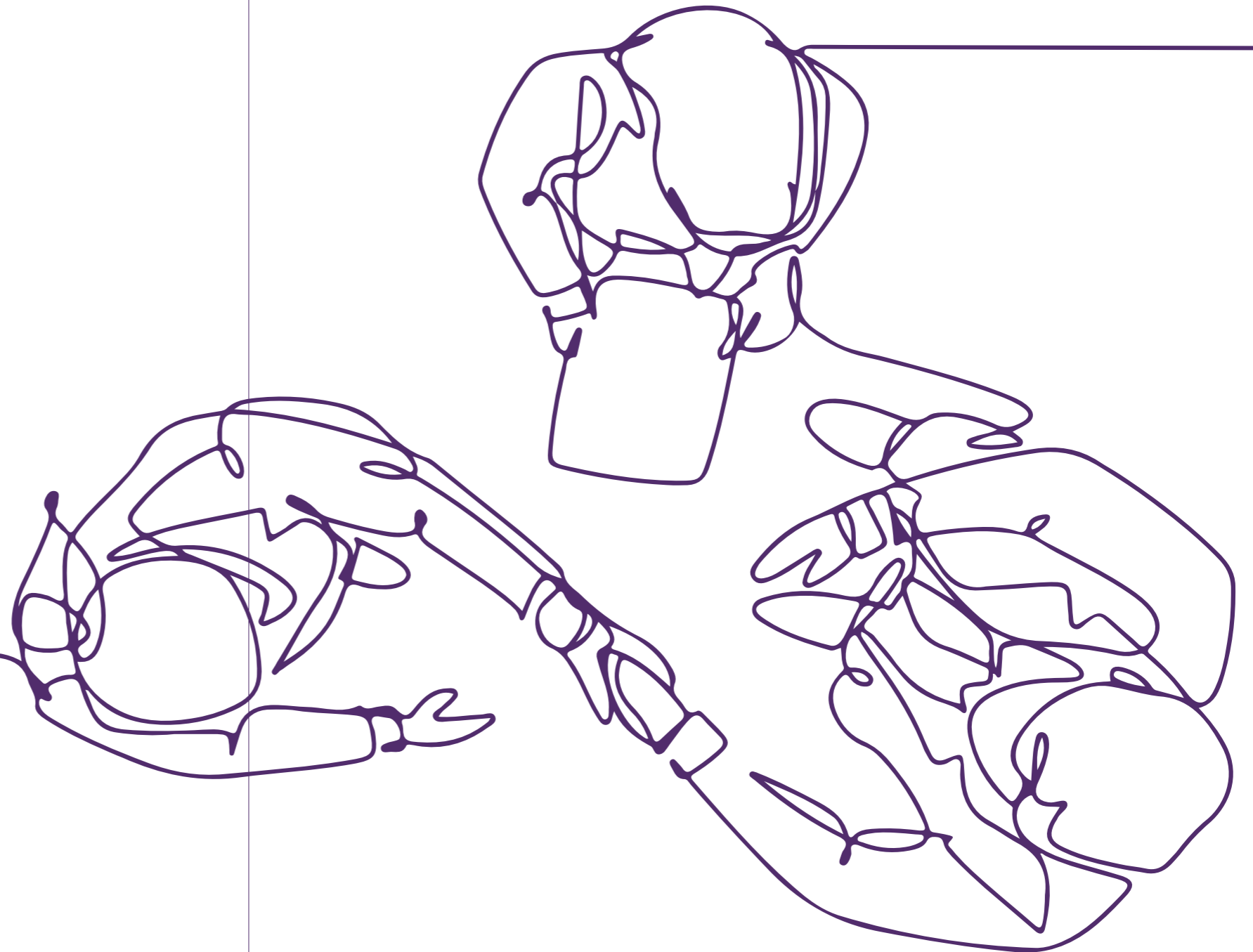
Amelia arrived for her first ever work placement to find the facility where she was placed, wasn't aware she was joining them. A La Trobe university academic staff member actually had to drive to the facility to address the issue. This resulted in Amelia and fellow students being sent home on their first day. They had to repeat the lost hours on a subsequent work placement.

Amelia's next work placement was supposed to be in an acute setting. Instead, she was placed into a non-acute environment which was not appropriate for the subject type.

Nursing teaching staff were allegedly concerned about the appropriateness of placements for that subject. The teaching staff stated they also they did not receive responses from La Trobe's placement team. The teaching staff asked their students to contact the LTSU's Advocacy Service for help.

When Amelia's issues were raised with the placement team, they responded that Amelia hadn't experienced 'the best service' they could provide and the La Trobe university staff co-ordinating Amelia's concerns is 'no longer employed'.

**The student's name has been changed for confidentiality.*



3 Learning opportunities

Students emphasised the significance of work placements to put into practice the skills acquired during their degrees. They found value in applying theoretical knowledge to real-world situations through engagement in a diverse array of tasks or projects, enhancing their overall learning journey.

However, in the survey, 47% of students noted only a moderate alignment between their career aspirations and the actual placement experience. A further 33% reported a strong alignment, indicating a meaningful connection between their educational pursuits and practical exposure. However, 10% of respondents, felt that their placement lacked alignment with their career goals.

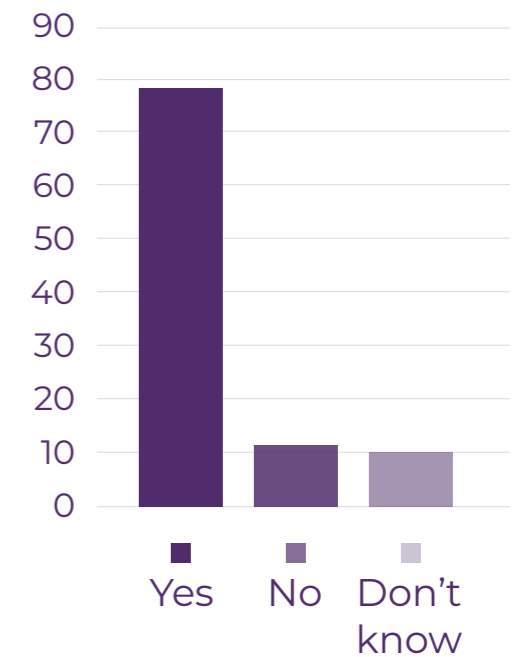
The LTSU advocacy service has also recorded a case study that highlights the issue of a student's experience on placement and how their delayed start had a negative impact on their studies and when

“Students found value in being able to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world situations through engagement in a diverse array of tasks and projects, enhancing their overall learning journey.”

they did go on placement, it did not align with what they had learnt in class, placing an undue burden on them as they were unable to demonstrate certain skills placing them at risk of failing.

A substantial majority, around 78% of students, expressed their placement experience played a pivotal role in refining their career interests and objectives. By actively participating in real professional scenarios, students were able to gain clarity and insight into their future career paths, solidifying their vocational aspirations and enhancing their overall academic journey. However, while 78% recorded work placement helped to clarify their career interests, around 10% did not.

Did your work placement help you clarify your career interests and goals?



Case Study — Alan

Alan, Bachelor of Human Services*

Alan couldn't undertake their first placement as La Trobe university wasn't able to find a suitable work placement to meet their needs.

As a result, Alan was a year late attending their first placement and experienced further delays getting a suitable placement arranged. Alan had to be proactive and effectively source their own placement, leaving him behind his peers. Alan couldn't take a necessary break over the summer and the work placement overlapped with the start of their next study year. Additionally, Alan required disability support to successfully complete the work placement, but this was not available over the summer months.

**The student's name has been changed for confidentiality.*



Other teachers recognise the impact of a 40 hour week unpaid placement, but my teachers said placement is not an excuse for poor time management and no extensions will be given."



4 Support and supervision

Support and supervision are vital to enable students to feel safe on work placement and ensure that they are given a safe and supportive environment in which to learn. The majority of students who completed our survey felt supported through their work placement and received regular feedback from their supervisor and colleagues.

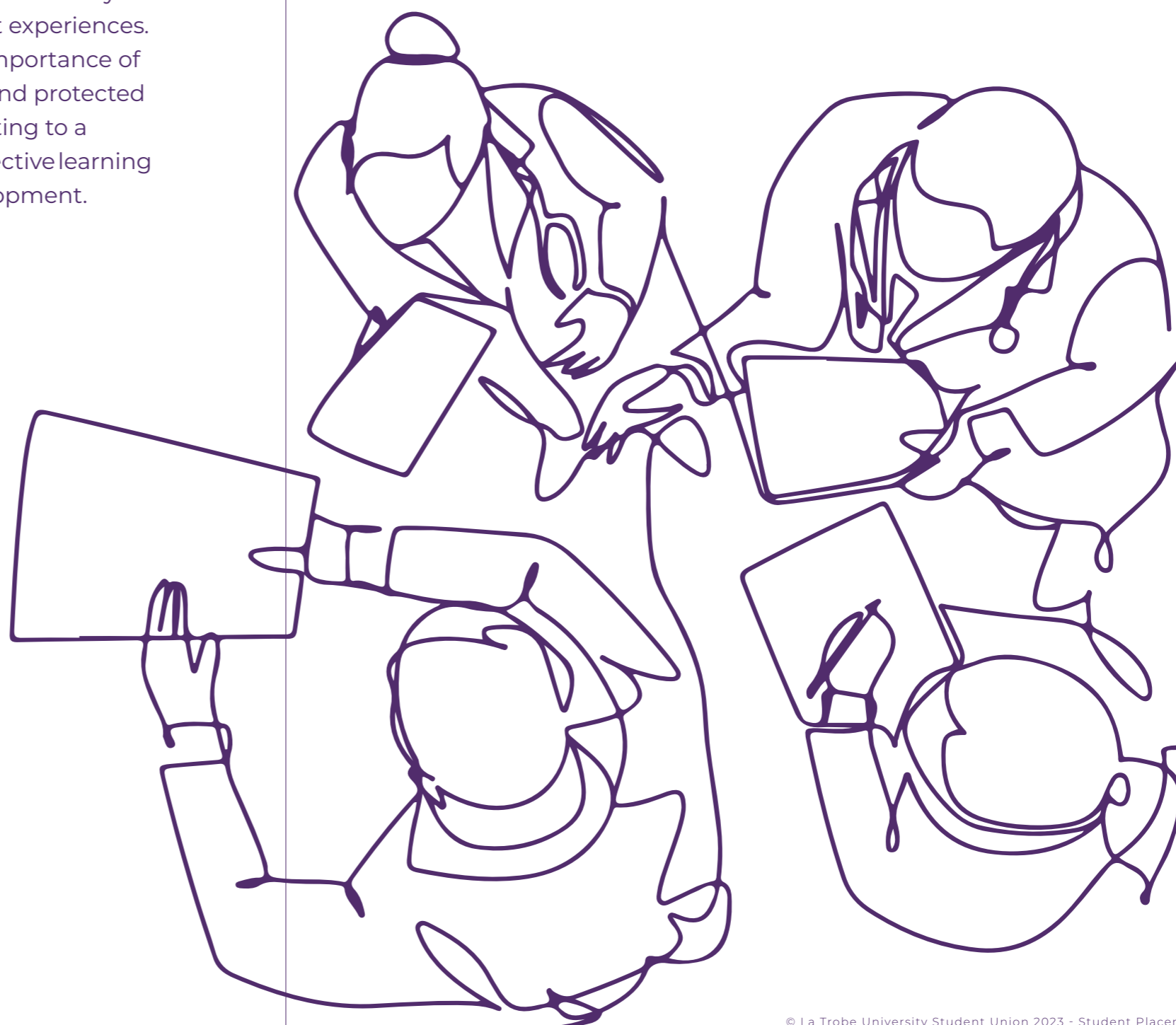
Importantly, 86% of students conveyed a strong sense of safety during their placement experiences. This underscores the importance of maintaining a secure and protected environment, contributing to a conducive space for effective learning and professional development.

“37% of students encountered situations where they were assigned tasks beyond the scope of their practice.”

Nonetheless, our research also brought to light areas of real concern. For instance, 37% of students encountered situations where they were assigned tasks beyond the scope of their practice. Furthermore, nearly 46% reported instances where they were expected to carry out activities without supervision.



“Placement isn’t paid so I could barely afford to pay rent. I couldn’t work for weeks so I lost all my shifts and income.”





The LTSU's Placement review, highlights what we have been seeing across Australia. Universities need to be giving greater financial and operational support."

– **Bailey Riley**
President, National Union of Students



Abshir, Master of Social Work*

Abshir felt discriminated against by La Trobe university in the process of allocation of his work placement. Abshir said La Trobe university significantly delayed sourcing and allocating his work placement.

Abshir required a high level of support. Even though he raised the issue with the university, he found the experience of dealing with the university distressing. Abshir was not given a timeframe for the university's response; and the university did not reach out to him to further explore the allegations, his concerns, or solutions.

The university eventually sent Abshir a reply directly to him, not through the LTSU's Advocacy service which Abshir had requested. The response did not acknowledge the underlying issues about Abshir's disability and the communication was inappropriate.

**The student's name has been changed for confidentiality.*

Key Considerations

1 Financial considerations

Work placements, especially unpaid ones, pose huge financial challenges for students. A salary for work placements must be adopted. Living expenses, immunisation, transportation costs, and potential relocation expenses are burdensome for students, severely impacting their overall experience.

2 Limited availability of placements

Securing a suitable work placement can be a significant challenge, especially in highly competitive fields. University placement teams have failed students when placing them in a timely and relevant manner, insisting students take the placement they are offered regardless of distance and relevance to the student, refusing to allow students to find their own.

Our research demonstrated that the majority of students are given between one - three weeks' notice 29% of student respondents reported that their notice was not enough time for them to make adequate arrangements, 10% of respondents were given less than a week's notice on where they would be required to attend.

3 Competitive nature of placements

Work placements in popular industries or prestigious organisations can be highly competitive. Students face stiff competition from other students vying for similar positions, making it challenging to secure their desired placement. Students were often told close to placement of where they would be required to go, placing significant strain on their other commitments.

4 Geographic constraints

Melbourne is a large city and rural Victoria is vast, some students face challenges if they are limited to a specific area for their work placement. Commuting to and from the workplace or finding suitable accommodation close to the placement site is demanding, especially if the placement is located far from where the student resides. Students were often told they would have to commute up to two hours to placement and two hours back without this issue being given significant attention from the placement team. Students were regularly told this was the only option.

5 Balancing work and study commitments

Work placements often require students to dedicate a significant amount of time and effort, which clashes with their academic commitments. Striking a balance between work responsibilities and academic workload can be challenging, leading to increased stress and pressure for students.

6 Adapting to workplace culture

Students often faced difficulties in adjusting to the professional environment and workplace culture during their placements. Each organisation may have its own unique work culture, norms, and expectations, which students need to quickly adapt to perform well.

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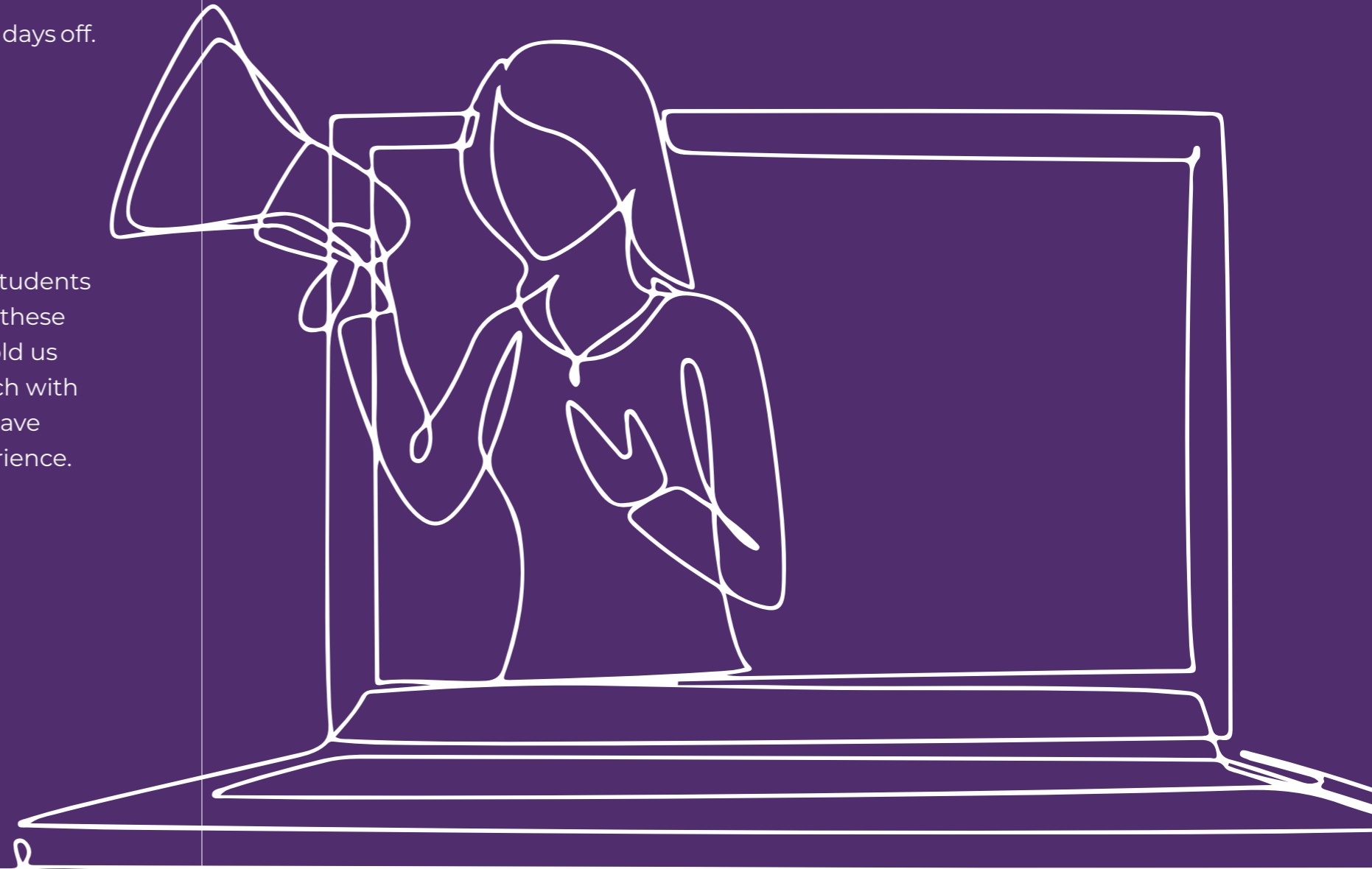
Lack of mentorship and guidance

Some students found that their work placements did not provide adequate mentorship and guidance. Without proper support from supervisors or mentors, students may struggle to navigate their roles, learn effectively, and make the most of their placement experience. Students want clear communication from La Trobe University on what type of activities they were expected to complete on placement, including clear policies on sick leave and when or if they could take days off.

8

La Trobe University Wellbeing staff and Ask La Trobe

La Trobe University Wellbeing staff and Ask La Trobe were often inadequate in responding to student emails and requests. Most students we spoke to shared their poor experience of asking for help from these departments and the University placement team. One student told us that they were waiting on average three days for a response, which with the impending deadlines of placement and the requirement to have timely response was not advantageous to their educational experience.



Conclusion

By working with students, the LTSU has been given the trusted opportunity to hear from their peers where placements have gone right, and crucially where work placement has gone wrong. It's clear students must be at the planning, delivery, and analysis of initiatives designed for them. This includes diversity programs, planning groups and consultations.

“It's clear students must be at the planning, delivery, and analysis of initiatives designed for them. This includes diversity programs, planning groups and consultations.”



Who We Are

The La Trobe University Student Union is the peak representative body for over 20,000 La Trobe University students at the Melbourne Bundoora campus. Our representation is led by and for students and also incorporates the ISC (International Students Collective) and MASO (Mature Age Students Organisation).

LTSU has shaped the University, supporting everything from new facilities such as the Sports Centre to Union Hall, providing vital services, tirelessly fighting for the rights of students at La Trobe, and more.

This report was student planned and led. Ross Dennis, an independent researcher, aided with the collection and analysis of data. The LTSU is the voice for students and will continue to advocate for a better experience for students and members.

www.latrobesu.org.au

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(03) 9479 - 2314

Established in 1967, the purpose of the LTSU is to advance the education of students of La Trobe University by:

- enhancing the learning experience of students while at the University;
- promoting the interests and welfare of students;
- representing students within and outside the University;
- co-ordinating and supporting the activities of students; and
- providing amenities and services for students, other members of the University community and the public.
- providing amenities and services for students, other members of the University community and the public.

Advocacy

The LTSU's Advocacy Service is there if students need help or support with issues that impact their University journey, Advocacy has their back!

We're free, independent of the University and available at all campuses.

An Advocate is a support person allocated to students to empower them to work with the Uni to find a solution.

www.latrobesu.org.au/advocacy

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Advocates will:

- Listen to students
- Not judge students
- Be respectful
- Always maintain privacy & confidentiality
- Inform students of their rights & responsibilities
- Explain the Uni's rules & processes







Run by Students, For Students

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